

Simply Irresistible

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Extract

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The night before Virgil Duffy's wedding, a summer storm pounded the Puget Sound. But by the next morning, the gray clouds were gone, leaving in their place a view of Elliot Bay and the spectacular skyline of downtown Seattle. Several of Virgil's wedding guests glanced up at the clear sky and wondered if he controlled Mother Nature the same way he controlled his shipping empire. They wondered if he could control his young bride as well or if she was just a toy like his hockey team.

While the guests waited for the ceremony to begin, they sipped from fluted champagne glasses and speculated as to how long the May–December marriage would last. Not long was the general consensus.

John Kowalsky ignored the buzz of gossip around him. He had more pressing concerns. Raising a crystal tumbler to his lips, he drained the hundred-year-old Scotch as if it were water. An incessant thud pounded his head. His eye sockets throbbed and his teeth ached. He must have had one hell of a good time last night. He just wished he could remember.

From his position on the terrace, he looked down on a cross-cut emerald lawn, immaculate flower beds, and sputtering fountains. Guests dressed in Armani and Donna Karan drifted toward rows of white chairs facing an arbor festooned with flowers and ribbon and some sort of pink gauzy stuff.

John's gaze moved to a cluster of his teammates looking out

of place and uncomfortable in their matching navy blazers and scuffed loafers. They didn't look like they wanted to be stuck in the middle of Seattle society any more than he did.

To his left, a skinny woman in a flowing lavender dress with matching shoes sat down at her harp, leaned it back against her shoulder, and began to pluck the strings just slightly louder than the noises rolling off the Puget Sound. She looked up at him and gave him a warm smile he instantly recognized. He wasn't surprised by the woman's interest and purposely let his gaze travel down her body, then back up again. At the age of twenty-eight, John had been with women of all shapes and sizes, economic backgrounds, and differing levels of intelligence. He wasn't averse to taking a swim in the groupie pool, but he didn't particularly like bony women. Although some of his teammates dated models, John preferred soft curves. When he touched a woman, he liked to feel flesh, not bone.

The harpist's smile grew more flirtatious, and John looked away. Not only was the woman too skinny, but he hated harp music just about as much as he hated weddings. He'd been through two of his own, and neither had been real blissful. In fact, the last time he'd been this hungover had been in Vegas six months ago when he'd woken up in a red velvet honeymoon suite suddenly married to a stripper named DeeDee Delight. The marriage hadn't lasted much longer than the wedding night. And the real bitch of it was, he couldn't remember if DeeDee had been all that delightful.

'Thanks for coming, son.' The owner of the Seattle Chinooks approached John from behind and patted him on the shoulder.

'I didn't think any of us had a choice,' he said, looking down into Virgil Duffy's lined face.

Virgil laughed and continued down the wide brick steps, the picture of wealth in his silver-gray tuxedo. Beneath the early afternoon sun, Virgil appeared to be exactly what he was: a member of the Fortune 500, owner of a professional hockey team, and a man who could buy himself a young trophy wife.

'Did you see him last night with the woman he's marrying?'

John glanced across his right shoulder at his newest teammate, Hugh Miner. Sportswriters had compared Hugh to James Dean in looks and reckless behavior on and off the ice.

John liked that in a man. 'No,' he answered as he reached beneath his blazer and pulled a pair of Ray-Bans from the breast pocket of his oxford shirt. 'I left fairly early.'

'Well, she's pretty young. Twenty-two or so.'

'That's what I hear.' He shifted to one side and let a group of older ladies pass on their way down the stairs. Being a practicing womanizer himself, he'd never claimed to be a self-righteous moralist, but there was something pathetic and just a little sick about a man Virgil's age marrying a woman nearly forty years younger.

Hugh poked John in the side with his elbow. 'And breasts that could make a man sit up and beg for buttermilk.'

John slipped the sunglasses up the bridge of his nose and smiled at the ladies who glanced back at Hugh. He hadn't been real quiet with his description of Virgil's fiancée. 'You were raised on a dairy farm, right?'

'Yep, about fifty miles outside of Madison,' the young goalie said with pride.

'Well, I wouldn't say that buttermilk thing too loud, if I were you. Women tend to get real pissed off when you compare them to cows.'

'Yeah.' Hugh laughed and shook his head. 'What do you think she sees in a man old enough to be her grandfather? I mean, she isn't ugly or fat or anything. In fact, she's real good-lookin.'

At the age of twenty-four, Hugh was not only younger than John but obviously naive. He was on his way to being the best damn goalie in the NHL, but he had a real bad habit of stopping the puck with his head. In view of his last question, he obviously needed a thicker mask. 'Take a look around,' John answered. 'The last I heard, Virgil's worth over six hundred million.'

'Yeah, well, money can't buy everything,' the goalie grumbled as he started down the steps. 'Are you coming, Wall?' He paused to ask over his shoulder.

'Nope,' John answered. He sucked an ice cube into his mouth, then tossed the tumbler into a potted fern, showing the same disregard for the Baccarat as he had shown for the Scotch. He'd put in an appearance at the party last night, and he'd shown his face today. He'd played his part, but he wasn't

staying. 'I've got one bitch of a hangover,' he said as he descended the stairs.

'Where are you going?'

'My house in Copalis.'

'Mr Duffy isn't going to like it.'

'Too bad,' was his unconcerned comment as he walked around the side of the three-story brick mansion toward his 1966 Corvette parked in front. A year ago, the convertible had been a present to himself after he'd been traded to the Chinooks and had signed a multimillion-dollar contract with the Seattle hockey team. John loved the classic Corvette. He loved the big engine and all that power. He figured once he got on the freeway, he'd open the Corvette up.

As he shed his blue blazer, a flash of pink at the top of the wide brick steps caught his attention. He tossed his jacket in the shiny red car and paused to watch a woman in a light pink dress slip through the massive double doors. A beige overnight case banged against the hardwood, and a breeze tossed dozens of dark corkscrew curls about her bare shoulders. She looked like she'd been shrink-wrapped in satin from armpit to midhigh. The large white bow sewn to the top of the bodice did little to hide her centerfold bosom. Her legs were long and tan, and she wore a pair of flimsy strapless high heels on her feet.

'Hey, mister, wait a minute,' she called to him in a slightly breathless, distinctly southern voice. The heels of her ridiculous shoes made tiny click-click sounds as she bounced down the stairs. Her dress was so tight, she had to descend sideways, and with each hurried step, her breasts strained and swelled against the top of the dress.

John thought about telling her to stop before she hurt herself. Instead he shifted his weight to one foot, folded his arms, and waited until she came to a halt on the opposite side of his car. 'Maybe you shouldn't run like that,' he advised.

From beneath perfectly arched brows, pale green eyes stared at him. 'Are you one of Virgil's hockey players?' she asked, stepping out of her shoes and leaning down to pick them up. Several glossy dark curls slid over her tanned shoulder and brushed the tops of her breasts and the white bow.

'John Kowalsky,' he introduced himself. With her full, kiss-me-daddy lips and tilty eyes, she reminded him of his grandfather's favorite sex goddess, Rita Hayworth.

'I need to get out of here. Can you help me?'

'Sure. Where are you headed?'

'Anywhere but here,' she answered, and tossed her overnight case and shoes on the floor of his car.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he slid into the Corvette. He hadn't planned on having company, but having Miss January jump in his car wasn't such a bad fate. Once she sat in the passenger's seat, he pulled out of the circular drive. He wondered who she was and why she was in such a hurry.

'Oh God,' she moaned, and turned to stare at Virgil's rapidly disappearing house. 'I left Sissy there all by herself. She went to get her bouquet of lilac and pink roses and I ran out!'

'Who's Sissy?'

'My friend.'

'Were you supposed to be in the wedding?' he asked. When she nodded he assumed she was a bridesmaid or some sort of attendant. As they sped past walls of fir trees, rolling farmland, and pink rhododendrons, he studied her out of the corner of his eye. A healthy tan tinted her smooth skin, and as John looked at her, he noticed that she was prettier than he'd first realized – younger, too.

She turned to face the front again, and the wind picked up her hair and sent it dancing about her face and straight shoulders. 'Oh, God. I've really messed up this time,' she groaned, drawing out the vowels.

'I could take you back,' he offered, wondering what had happened to make this woman run out on her friend.

She shook her head and her pearl drop earrings brushed the smooth skin just below her jaw. 'No, it's too late. I've done it now. I mean, I've done it in the past . . . but this . . . this beats all with a stick.'

John turned his attention to the road. Female tears didn't really bother him much, but he hated hysterics, and he had a real bad feeling she was about to get hysterical on him. 'Ahh . . . what's your name?' he asked, hoping to avoid a scene.

She took a deep breath, tried to let it out slowly, and

grabbed at her stomach with one hand. ‘Georgeanne, but everyone calls me Georgie.’

‘Well, Georgie, what’s your last name?’

She placed one palm on her forehead. Her sculpted nails were painted light beige on the bottom and white at the ends. ‘Howard.’

‘Where do you live, Georgie Howard?’

‘McKinney.’

‘Is that just south of Tacoma?’

‘Cryin’ all night in a bucket,’ she groaned, and her breathing quickened. ‘I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it.’

‘Are you going to get sick?’

‘I don’t think so.’ She shook her head and gulped air into her lungs. ‘But I can’t breathe.’

‘Are you hyperventilating?’

‘Yes – no – I don’t know!’ She looked at him with nervous, wet eyes. Her fingers began to claw at the pink satin covering her ribs, and the hem of her dress slipped farther up her smooth thighs. ‘I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it,’ she wailed between big, hiccuping breaths.

‘Put your head between your knees,’ he instructed, glancing briefly at the road.

She leaned slightly forward, then fell back against the seat. ‘I can’t.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘My corset is too tight . . . Good Lord!’ Her southern drawl rose. ‘I’ve done it up good this time. I can’t believe it . . .’ she continued with her now familiar litany.

John began thinking that helping Georgeanne was not the best idea. He pressed the gas pedal to the floor, propelling the Corvette across a bridge spanning a narrow strip of the Puget Sound, quickly leaving Bainbridge Island behind. Shades of green sped past as the Corvette chewed up highway 305.

‘Sissy is never going to forgive me.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about your friend,’ he said, somewhat disappointed to find that the woman in his car was as flaky as a croissant. ‘Virgil will buy her something nice, and she’ll forget all about it.’

A wrinkle appeared between her brows. 'I don't think so,' she said.

'Sure he will,' John argued. 'He'll probably take her someplace real expensive, too.'

'But Sissy doesn't like Virgil. She thinks he's a lecherous old leprechaun.'

A real bad feeling tweaked the back of John's neck. 'Isn't Sissy the bride?'

She stared at him with her big green eyes and shook her head. 'I am.'

'That's not even funny, Georgeanne.'

'I know,' she wailed. 'I can't believe I left Virgil at the altar!'

The tweak in John's neck shot to his head, reminding him of his hangover. He stomped on the brake as the Corvette swerved to the right and stopped on the side of the highway. Georgeanne fell against the door and grasped the handle with both hands.

'Jesus H. Christ!' John shoved the car into park and reached for the sunglasses on his face. 'Tell me you're joking!' he demanded, tossing the Ray-Bans on the dash. He didn't even want to think about what would happen if he were caught with Virgil's runaway bride. But then, he really didn't have to think about it too hard, he knew what would happen. He knew he'd find himself traded to a losing team faster than he could clear out his locker. He liked playing for the Chinook organization. He liked living in Seattle. The last thing he wanted was a trade.

Georgeanne straightened and shook her head.

'But you're not wearing a wedding dress.' He felt tricked and pointed an accusing finger at her. 'What kind of bride doesn't wear a damn wedding dress?'

'This is a wedding dress.' She grasped the hem and tried to yank it modestly down her thighs. But the dress hadn't been made for modesty. The more she tugged it toward her knees, the farther it slid down her breasts. 'It's just not a traditional wedding dress,' she explained as she grabbed the big white bow and pulled the bodice back up. 'After all, Virgil has been married five times, and he thought a white gown would be tacky.'

Taking a deep breath, John closed his eyes and ran a hand over his face. He had to get rid of her – fast. 'You live south of Tacoma, right?'

‘No. I’m from McKinney – McKinney, Texas. Until three days ago, I’d never been north of Oklahoma City.’

‘This just keeps getting better.’ He laughed without humor and turned to look at her sitting there as if she’d been gift wrapped just for him. ‘Your family is here for the wedding, right?’

Again she shook her head.

John frowned. ‘Naturally.’

‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

Jumping out of the car, John ran to the other side. If she was going to vomit, he’d prefer she didn’t do it in his new classic ’vette. He opened her door and grabbed her around the waist, and even though John was six foot five, weighed two twenty-five in his birthday suit, and could easily body-check any player against the boards, hauling Georgeanne Howard from his car was no easy task. She was heavier than she looked, and beneath his hands, she felt like she’d sealed herself up in a soup can. ‘Are you going to puke?’ he asked the part in the top of her head.

‘I don’t think so,’ she answered, and looked up at him with pleading eyes. He’d been around enough women to spot a house cat when one landed in his lap. He recognized the ‘love me, feed me, take care of me’ breed. They purred and rubbed, and other than making a man yowl, weren’t good for anything else. He’d help her get where she needed to go, but the last thing he wanted was the care and feeding of the woman who’d jilted Virgil Duffy. ‘Where can I drop you off?’

Georgeanne felt like she’d swallowed dozens of butterflies and had difficulty catching her breath. She’d cinched herself into a dress two sizes too small and could only suck air into the top of her lungs. She looked way up into dark blue eyes surrounded by thick lashes and knew she’d rather slit her wrists with a butter knife than get sick in front of a man so outrageously good-looking. His thick lashes and full mouth should have made him look a little feminine, but didn’t. The man exuded too much masculinity to be confused for anything but one hundred percent heterosexual male. Georgeanne, who stood five ten and weighed one hundred forty – on good days when she wasn’t retaining water – felt almost small next to him.

‘Where can I drop you off, Georgie?’ he asked her again. A

lock of rich brown hair curved over his forehead, drawing her attention to a thin white scar running through his left brow.

‘I don’t know,’ she whispered. For months now she’d lived with a horrible heaviness in her chest. A weight she’d been so sure a man like Virgil could make go away. With Virgil, she would have never had to dodge bill collectors or angry landlords again. She was twenty-two and had tried to take care of herself, but as with most things in her life, she’d failed – miserably. She’d always been a failure. She’d failed in school and at every job she’d ever had, and she’d failed to convince herself that she could love Virgil Duffy. That afternoon, as she’d stood before the cheval mirror studying her reflection, studying the wedding dress he’d chosen for her, the heaviness in her chest threatened to choke her and she’d known she couldn’t marry Virgil. Not even for all that wonderful money could she go to bed with a man who reminded her of H. Ross Perot.

‘Where’s your family?’

She thought of her grandmother. ‘I have a great-aunt and uncle who live in Duncanville, but Lolly can’t travel because of her lumbago, and Uncle Clyde had to stay home and take care of her.’

The corners of his mouth turned downward. ‘Where are your parents?’

‘I was brought up by my grandmother, but she took her final journey to heaven several years ago,’ Georgeanne answered, hoping he wouldn’t ask about the father she’d never known or the mother she’d seen only once at her grandmother’s funeral.

‘Friends?’

‘She’s at Virgil’s.’ Just the thought of Sissy made her heart palpitate. She’d been so careful to make sure everyone matched the lavender punch. Now coordinating dresses and dyed pumps seemed trivial and silly.

A frown bracketed his mouth. ‘Naturally.’ He removed his big hands from her waist and ran his fingers through the sides of his hair. ‘It doesn’t sound to me like you have a real firm plan.’

No, she didn’t have a plan, firm or otherwise. She’d grabbed her vanity case and had run out of Virgil’s house without a thought to where she was going or how she planned to get there.

‘Well, hell.’ He dropped his hands to his sides and looked down the road. ‘You might want to think up something.’

Georgeanne had a horrible feeling that if she didn’t come up with an idea within the next two minutes, John would jump back in his car and leave her on the side of the road. She needed him, at least for a few days until she figured out what to do next, and so she did what had always worked for her. She placed one hand on his arm and leaned into him a little, just enough to make him think she was open to any suggestion he might make. ‘Maybe you could help me,’ she said in her smoothest bourbon-soaked voice, then topped it off with a you’re-such-a-big-ol’-stud-and-I’m-so-helpless smile. Georgeanne might be a failure at everything else in her life, but she was an accomplished flirt and a bona fide success when it came to manipulating men. Lowering her lashes modestly, she gazed up into his beautiful eyes. One corner of her lips tilted in a seductive promise she had no intention of keeping. She slid her palms to his hard forearms, a gesture made to seem like a caress but that was purely a tactical maneuver to guard against quick hands. Georgeanne hated it when men pawed her breasts.

‘You’re real tempting,’ he said, placing a finger beneath her chin and lifting her face. ‘But you’re not worth what it’d cost me.’

‘Cost you?’ A cool breeze picked up several spiral curls and sent them dancing about her face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean,’ he began, then glanced pointedly at her breasts pressed against his chest, ‘that you want something from me and you’re willing to use your body to get it. I like sex as much as any man, but, honey, you’re not worth my career.’

Georgeanne pushed away from him and batted her hair from her eyes. She’d been in several intimate relationships in her life, but as far as she was concerned, sex was highly overrated. Men seemed to really enjoy it, but for her, sex was just plain embarrassing. The only good thing she could say about it was that it only lasted about three minutes. She raised her chin and looked at him as if he’d just hurt and insulted her. ‘You’re mistaken. I’m not that kind of girl.’

‘I see.’ He looked back at her as if he knew exactly what kind of girl she was. ‘You’re a tease.’

Tease was such an ugly word. She thought of herself more as an actress.

‘Why don’t you cut the bullshit and just tell me what you want.’

‘Okay,’ she said, changing tactics. ‘I need a little help, and I need a place to stay for a few days.’

‘Listen,’ he sighed, and shifted his weight to one foot. ‘I’m not the type of man you’re looking for. I can’t help you.’

‘Then why did you tell me you would?’

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t answer.

‘Just for a few days,’ she pleaded, desperate. She needed time to think of what to do now – now that she’d royally messed up her life. ‘I won’t be any trouble.’

‘I doubt that,’ he scoffed.

‘I need to get in touch with my aunt.’

‘Where’s your aunt?’

‘Back in McKinney,’ she answered truthfully, although she didn’t look forward to her conversation with Lolly. Her aunt had been extremely pleased with Georgeanne’s choice in a husband. Even though Lolly had never been so tactless as to come right out and say so, Georgeanne suspected that her aunt envisioned a series of expensive gifts like a big-screen TV and a Craftmatic Adjustable Bed.

John’s hard stare pinned her for several long moments. ‘Shit, get in,’ he said, and turned to walk around the front of the car. ‘But as soon as you get in touch with your aunt, I’m dropping you off at the airport or bus depot or wherever the hell else you’re going.’

Despite his less-than-enthusiastic offer, Georgeanne didn’t waste any time. She jumped back in the car and slammed the door.

Once John was behind the wheel, he shoved the Corvette into gear, and the car shot back onto the highway. The sound of tires hitting the pavement filled an awkward silence between them – at least it felt awkward to Georgeanne. John didn’t seem bothered by it at all.

For years she’d attended Miss Virddie Marshall’s School of Ballet, Tap, and Charm. Although she’d never been the most coordinated girl, she’d outshined the others with her ability to charm anyone, anywhere, any time of the day. But this day she

had a slight problem. John didn't seem to like her, which perplexed Georgeanne because men *always* liked her. From what she'd noticed of him so far, he wasn't a gentleman either. He used profanity with a frequency bordering on habitual, and he didn't apologize. The southern men she knew swore, of course, but they usually begged pardon afterward. John didn't strike her as the type of man to beg pardon for anything.

She turned to look at his profile and set about charming John Kowalsky. 'Are you from Seattle originally?' she asked, determined that he would like her by the time they reached their destination. It would make things so much easier if he did. Because he might not realize it yet, but John was going to offer her a place to stay for a while.

'No.'

'Where are you from?'

'Saskatoon.'

'Where?'

'Canada.'

Her hair blew about her face, and she gathered it all in one hand and held it by the side of her neck. 'I've never been to Canada.'

He didn't comment.

'How long have you played hockey?' she asked, hoping to drag a little pleasant conversation out of him.

'All of my life.'

'How long have you played for the Chinooks?'

He reached for his sunglasses sitting on the dash and put them on. 'A year.'

'I've seen a Stars game,' she said, referring to the Dallas hockey team.

'Bunch of candy-assed pussies,' he muttered as he unbuttoned the white cuff above his driving hand and folded it up his forearm.

Not exactly *pleasant* conversation, she decided. 'Did you go to college?'

'Not really.'

Georgeanne had no idea what he meant by that. 'I went to the University of Texas,' she lied in a effort to impress him into liking her.

He yawned.

'I pledged a Kappa,' she added to the lie.

'Yeah? So?'

Undaunted with his less-than-enthusiastic response, she continued, 'Are you married?'

He stared at her through the lenses of his sunglasses, leaving little doubt she'd touched on a sore subject. 'What are you, the friggin' *National Enquirer*?'

'No. I'm just curious. I mean, we will be spending a certain amount of time together, so I thought it would be nice to have a friendly chat and get to know each other.'

John turned his attention back to the road and began to work on his other cuff. 'I don't chat.'

Georgeanne pulled at the hem of her dress. 'May I ask where we're going?'

'I have a house on Copalis Beach. You can get in touch with your aunt from there.'

'Is that near Seattle?' She shifted her weight to one side and continued to yank at the hem of her dress.

'Nope. In case you hadn't noticed, we're headed west.'

Panic surged through her as they sped farther from anything remotely familiar. 'How in the heck would I know that?'

'Maybe because the sun is at our backs.'

Georgeanne hadn't noticed, and even if she had, she wouldn't have thought to judge direction by looking at the sun. She always messed up that whole north-south-east-west thing. 'I assume you have a phone at your beach house?'

'Of course.'

She'd have to make a few long-distance telephone calls to Dallas. She had to call Lolly, and she needed to phone Sissy's parents and tell them what had happened and how they could get in touch with their daughter. She also needed to call Seattle and find out where to send Virgil's engagement ring. She glanced at the five-carat diamond solitaire on her left hand and felt like crying. She loved that ring but knew she couldn't keep it. She was a flirt, and maybe even a tease, but she did have scruples. The diamond would have to go back, but not now. Now she needed to calm her nerves before she fell apart. 'I've

never been to the Pacific Ocean,' she said, feeling her panic easing a bit.

He made no comment.

Georgeanne had always considered herself the perfect blind date because she could talk water uphill, especially when she felt nervous. 'But I've been to the Gulf many times,' she began. 'Once when I was twelve, my grandmother took me and Sissy in her big Lincoln. Boy, what a boat. That car must have weighed ten tons if it weighed an ounce. Sissy and I had just bought these really cool bikinis. Hers looked like an American flag while mine was made of a silky bandanna material. I'll never forget it. We drove all the way into Dallas just to buy that bikini at J.C. Penney's. I'd seen it in a catalog and I was just dying to have it. Anyway, Sissy is a Miller on her mother's side, and the Miller women are known throughout Collin County for their wide hips and piano ankles – not very attractive, but a lovely family just the same. One time—'

'Is there a point to all of this?' John interrupted.

'I was getting to it,' she told him, trying to remain pleasant.

'Any time soon?'

'I just wanted to ask if the water off the coast of Washington is very cold.'

John smiled and cast a glance at her then. For the first time, she noticed the dimple creasing his right cheek. 'You'll freeze your southern butt off,' he said before looking down at the console between them and picking up a cassette. He popped it in the tape player and a wailing harmonica put an end to any attempt at further conversation.

Georgeanne turned her attention to the hilly landscape dotted with fir and alder trees and painted with smears of blue, red, yellow, and of course, green. Up until now, she'd done fairly well at avoiding her thoughts, afraid they would overwhelm and paralyze her. But with no other distraction, they rolled over her like a Texas heat wave. She thought about her life and about what she'd done today. She'd left a man at the altar, and even though the marriage would have been a disaster, he hadn't deserved that.

All of her things were packed into four suitcases in Virgil's Rolls-Royce, except the carry-on sitting on the floor of John's

car. She'd packed the little suitcase with essentials the night before in preparation for her and Virgil's honeymoon trip.

Now all she had with her was a wallet filled with seven dollars and three maxed-out credit cards, a liberal amount of cosmetics, a toothbrush and hairbrush, comb, a can of Aqua Net, six pairs of French-cut underwear with matching lace bras, her birth control pills, and a Snickers.

She had hit an all-time low, even for Georgeanne.



Flashes of blue and crystal sunlight, waving sea grass, and a salty breeze so thick she could taste it welcomed Georgeanne to the Pacific coast. Goose bumps broke out on her arms as she strained to catch glimpses of rolling blue ocean and foamy whitecaps.

The squall of seagulls pierced the air as John steered the Corvette up the driveway of a nondescript gray house with white shutters. An old man in a sleeveless T-shirt, gray polyester shorts, and a pair of cheap rubber thongs stood on the porch.

As soon as the car rolled to a stop, Georgeanne reached for the door handle and got out. She didn't wait for John to assist her – not that she believed he would have helped her anyway. After an hour and a half of sitting in the car, her merry widow had become so painful she thought she might get sick after all.

She tugged the hem of her pink dress down her thighs and reached for her overnight case and shoes. The metal stays in her corset dug into her ribs as she bent to shove her feet into her pink mules.

'Good God, son,' the man on the porch growled in a gravelly voice. 'Another dancer?'

A scowl creased John's forehead as he led Georgeanne to the front door. 'Ernie, I'd like you to meet Miss Georgeanne Howard. Georgie, this is my grandfather, Ernest Maxwell.'

'How do you do, sir,' Georgeanne offered her hand and looked into the aged face, which bore a striking resemblance to Burgess Meredith.

‘Southern . . . hmmm.’ He turned and walked back into the house.

John held the screen door open for Georgeanne, and she stepped inside a house furnished in plush blues, greens, and light browns, giving the impression that the view outside the large picture window had been brought into the living room. Everything appeared to have been chosen to blend with the ocean and sandy beach – everything but the black Naugahyde recliner patched with silver duct tape and the two broken hockey sticks placed like a sideways X above a packed trophy cabinet.

John reached for his sunglasses and tossed them on the wood and glass coffee table. ‘There’s a guest room down the hall, last door on your left. Bathroom’s on the right,’ he said as he crossed behind Georgeanne and walked into the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and twisted off the top. Raising the bottle to his lips, he leaned his shoulders back against the closed refrigerator door. He’d messed up big this time. He never should have agreed to help Georgeanne, and he for damn sure never should have brought her with him. He hadn’t wanted to, but then she’d stared up at him looking all vulnerable and scared, and he hadn’t been able to leave her on the side of the road. He just hoped like hell Virgil never found out.

He pushed himself away from the refrigerator and returned to the living room. Ernie had plopped himself down in his favorite recliner, his attention riveted on Georgeanne. She stood next to the fireplace with her hair all windblown and her little pink dress wrinkled. She appeared exhausted, but by the look in Ernie’s eyes, he found her more appealing than an all-you-can-eat buffet.

‘Is there a problem, Georgie?’ John asked, and raised the bottle to his lips. ‘Why aren’t you changing?’

‘I have a slight dilemma,’ she drawled, and looked at him. ‘I don’t have any clothes.’

He pointed with the bottle. ‘What’s in that little suitcase?’

‘Cosmetics.’

‘That’s it?’

‘No.’ She quickly glanced at Ernie. ‘I have underthings and my wallet.’

‘Where are your clothes?’

‘In four suitcases in the back of Virgil’s Rolls-Royce.’

It figured he would have to feed, house, *and* clothe her. ‘Come on,’ he said, then he set his beer on the coffee table and led her down the hall into his bedroom. He walked to his dresser and pulled an old black T-shirt and a pair of green drawstring shorts from the drawers. ‘Here,’ he said, tossing them on the blue quilt covering his bed before turning toward the door.

‘John?’

His name on her lips stopped him, but he didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to see that scared look in her green eyes. ‘What?’

‘I can’t get out of this dress by myself. I need your help.’

He turned to see her standing within a golden slice of sunlight spilling in from the window.

‘There are some little buttons at the top.’ She awkwardly pointed.

Not only did she want his clothes, she wanted him to undress her.

‘They’re really slippery,’ she explained.

‘Turn around,’ he ordered, a harsh edge to his voice as he stepped toward her.

Without a word, she turned her profile to him and faced the mirror above the dresser. Between her smooth shoulder blades, four tiny buttons closed the very top of the dress. She pulled her hair to one side, exposing baby-fine curls just below her hairline. Her skin, her hair, her southern accent, everything about her was soft.

‘How did you get into this thing?’

‘I had help.’ She looked at him through the mirror. John couldn’t remember a time that he’d helped a woman out of her clothes without taking her to bed afterward, but he didn’t intend to touch Virgil’s run-away bride any more than necessary. He raised his hands and tugged until one small button slipped from its slick loop.

‘I can’t imagine what they all must be thinking right now. Sissy tried to warn me against marrying Virgil. I thought I could go through with it, but I guess I couldn’t.’

‘Don’t you think you should have come to that conclusion before today?’ he asked, then moved his fingers lower.

‘I did. I tried to tell Virgil that I was having second thoughts. I tried to talk to him about it last night, but he wouldn’t listen. Then I saw the silver.’ She shook her head and a soft spiral of hair fell down her back and brushed across her smooth skin. ‘I’d chosen Francis I for my pattern, and his friends had sent a good amount,’ she said, all dreamy as if he knew what the hell she was talking about. ‘Ohhh – just seeing all those pieces of fruit on the knife handles gave me the shivers. Sissy thinks I should have chosen repoussé, but I’ve always been a Francis I girl. Even when I was little . . .’

John had very little tolerance for girly chitchat. He wished he had a tape player and another Tom Petty cassette. Since he didn’t, he tuned her out. More often than not, he was accused of being a real bastard, a reputation he considered an asset. That way he didn’t have to worry about women getting ideas about a permanent connection.

‘While you’re there, could you unzip me? Anyway,’ she continued. ‘I almost wept with joy when I laid eyes on the pickle forks and grapefruit spoons and . . .’

John scowled at her through the mirror, but she wasn’t paying any attention. Her gaze was directed downward toward the big white bow sewn on the front of her dress. John reached for the metal tab, and as he pulled, he discovered the reason Georgeanne had difficulty breathing. Between the gaping zipper of her wedding dress, silver hooks lashed together an undergarment John instantly recognized as a merry widow. Made out of pink satin, lace, and steel, the corset cut into her soft skin.

She raised a hand to the bow and clutched it to her large breasts to keep the dress from falling. ‘Seeing my favorite silver pattern went to my head, and I guess I let Virgil convince me that I just had prewedding jitters. I *really* wanted to believe him . . .’

When John finished with the zipper he announced, ‘I’m done.’

‘Oh.’ She looked up at him through the mirror, then quickly dropped her gaze. Her cheeks turned red as she asked, ‘Could you unfasten my ah . . . ah, thing partway?’

‘Your corset?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘I’m not a friggin’ maid,’ he grumbled, and lifted his hands once more to tug at the hooks and eyes. While he worked at the tiny fasteners, his knuckles brushed the pink marks marring her skin. A shudder racked through her as a long, low sigh whispered deep within her throat.

John glanced up into the mirror and his hands stilled. The only time he ever saw such ecstasy on a woman’s face was when he was buried deep inside her. A swift punch of lust hit him low in the belly. His body’s reaction to the bliss-filled tilt to her eyes and lips irritated him.

‘Oh, my.’ She breathed deep. ‘I can’t tell you how wonderful that feels. I hadn’t planned to wear this dress for more than an hour and it’s been three.’

His body might respond to a beautiful woman – in fact, he’d worry if it didn’t – but he wasn’t going to do anything about it. ‘Virgil is an old man,’ he said, not bothering to hide the irritation in his voice. ‘How in the hell did you expect him to pry you out of this?’

‘That was unkind,’ she whispered.

‘Don’t expect kindness from me, Georgeanne,’ he warned her, and yanked at several more hooks. ‘Or I’m bound to disappoint you.’

She looked at him and let her hair slide across her shoulders. ‘I think you could be nice if you wanted to.’

‘That’s right,’ he told her, and raised his fingertips to brush the marks on her back, but before he could soothe her skin with his touch, he dropped his hand to his side. ‘If I wanted to,’ he said, and moved from the room, shutting the door behind him.

When he walked into the living room, he instantly felt Ernie’s speculative gaze. John snagged his beer from the table, sat down on the couch across from his grandfather’s old recliner, and waited for Ernie to start firing his questions. He didn’t have to wait long.

‘Where did you pick up that one?’

‘It’s a long story,’ he answered, then explained the situation, leaving nothing out.

‘Good God, have you lost your mind?’ Ernie leaned forward

and about tipped himself out of the chair. ‘What do you think Virgil is going to do? From what you’ve told me, the man isn’t exactly the forgiving kind, and you practically stole his bride.’

‘I did not steal her.’ John raised his feet to the coffee table and sank deeper into the cushions. ‘She’d already left him.’

‘Yeah.’ Ernie folded his arms across his thin chest and scowled at John. ‘At the altar. A man isn’t likely to forgive and forget a thing like that.’

John rested his elbows on his thighs and raised the bottle to his lips. ‘He won’t find out,’ he said, and took a long swig.

‘You better hope not. We’ve worked too damn hard to get this far,’ he reminded his grandson.

‘I know,’ he said, although he didn’t need reminding. He owed a lot of who he was to his grandfather. After John’s father had died, he and his mother had moved right next door to Ernie. Every winter Ernie had filled his backyard with water so John would have a place to skate. It had been Ernie who’d practiced with John out on that cold ice until they were both frozen to the marrow of their bones. It had been Ernie who’d taught him how to play hockey, taken him to games, and stayed to cheer him on. It was Ernie who held things together when life got real bad.

‘Are you going to *do* her?’

John looked over at his wrinkled grandfather. ‘What?’

‘Isn’t that what you young fellas say these days?’

‘Jesus, Ernie,’ he said, though he really wasn’t shocked. ‘No, I’m not going to *do* her.’

‘I sure as hell hope not.’ He crossed one callused and cracked foot over the other. ‘But if Virgil finds out she’s here, he’ll think you did anyway.’

‘She’s not my type.’

‘She sure as hell is,’ Ernie argued. ‘She reminds me of that stripper you dated a while back, Cocoa LaDude.’

John glanced at the hallway, grateful to find it empty. ‘Her name was Cocoa LaDuke, and I didn’t *date* her.’ He looked back at his grandfather and frowned. Even though Ernie never said so, John had a feeling his grandfather didn’t approve of his lifestyle. ‘I didn’t expect to find you here,’ he said, purposely changing the subject.

'Where else would I be?'

'Home.'

'Tomorrow is the sixth.'

John turned his gaze to the huge window facing the ocean. He watched several white-tipped waves swell, then curl in on themselves. 'I don't need you to hold my hand.'

'I know, but I thought you might like a beer buddy.'

John closed his eyes. 'I don't want to talk about Linda.'

'We don't have to. Your mama's worried about you. You should call her more often.'

With his thumb, John picked at the label glued to the beer bottle. 'Yeah, I should,' he agreed, although he knew he wouldn't. His mother would bitch at him about his drinking and tell him that he was leading a self-destructive life. Since he knew she was pretty much right, he didn't need to hear it. 'When I drove through town, I spotted Dickie Marks coming out of your favorite bar,' he said, again changing the subject.

'I saw him earlier.' Ernie pushed himself forward and rose slowly from the chair, reminding John that his grandfather was seventy-one. 'We're going fishing, in the morning. You should get up and come with us.'

Several years ago, John would have been the first on the boat, but these days he usually woke up with a splitting headache. Getting up before dawn to freeze his butt off just didn't appeal to him anymore. 'I'll think about it,' he answered, knowing he wouldn't.

Georgianne fastened her maroon bra, reached for the T-shirt, and pulled it over her head. A Seahawks baseball cap, a stopwatch, an Ace bandage, and a good amount of dust rested on the dresser in front of her. Her gaze rose to the big mirror above the dresser and she cringed. Soft black cotton fit tight across her breasts but loose everywhere else. She looked like a fashion nightmare, so she tucked the T-shirt into the baggy drawstring shorts, which only accentuated her large breasts and behind – the two places she'd rather not emphasize. She yanked the shirt out until it fell to her hips, then she threw her shoes into the overnight case and grabbed her Snickers. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she peeled back the dark brown wrapper and

sank her teeth into the rich chocolate. A euphoric sigh escaped her lips as she chewed her candy bar. Lying back on the blue comforter, she stretched and stared up at the light fixture attached to the ceiling. Two dead moths lay in the bottom of the shallow white glass. As she devoured her candy, she listened to John and Ernie's muffled conversation through the wood door. Considering that John didn't seem to like her very much, she found it odd that the low timbre of his voice should soothe her. Perhaps it was because he was the only person she knew for miles, or maybe because she sensed he really wasn't a jerk as he pretended. Then again, the sheer size of the man would make just about any woman feel safe.

She scooted until her head rested on John's pillow and her feet lay across her wedding dress, which she'd thrown on the end of the bed. Polishing off the Snickers, she thought about calling Lolly, but decided to wait. She wasn't in a big hurry to hear her aunt's reaction. She thought about getting up but closed her eyes instead. She thought of the first time she'd met Virgil in the fragrance department at the Neiman-Marcus in Dallas. It was still hard to believe that just a little over a month ago she'd been working as a perfume girl, handing out samples of Fendi and Liz Claiborne. She probably wouldn't have noticed him if he hadn't approached her. She probably wouldn't have agreed to have dinner with him that first time if he hadn't had roses and a limousine waiting by the curb for her after work. It had been so easy to crawl inside that air-conditioned limo, out of the heat, humidity, and bus fumes. If she hadn't felt so alone, and if her future weren't so uncertain, she probably wouldn't have agreed to marry a man she'd known for such a short time.

Last night she'd tried to tell Virgil she couldn't marry him. She'd tried to call it off, but he hadn't listened to her. She felt horrible for what she'd done, but she didn't know how to fix it.

Letting go of the tears she'd held back all day, she quietly sobbed into John's pillow. She cried for the mess she'd made of her life, and the emptiness she felt inside. Her future loomed before her, terrifying and uncertain. Her only relatives were an elderly aunt and uncle who lived off Social Security and whose lives revolved around *I Love Lucy* reruns.

She had nothing and knew no one besides a man who'd told

her not to expect kindness from him. Suddenly she felt like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She'd seen every Vivien Leigh movie ever made, and she thought it a little eerie, and more than coincidental, that John's last name was Kowalsky.

She was scared and alone, but she also felt a sense of relief that she wouldn't have to pretend anymore. She wouldn't have to pretend to like Virgil's awful taste in clothes and the trashy things he liked for her to wear.

Exhausted, she cried herself to sleep. She hadn't realized she'd dozed off until she woke with a start, sitting straight up in bed.

'Georgie?'

One side of her hair fell over her left eye as she turned toward the sunlit doorway and looked into a face she was sure she'd dreamed off one of those studs calendars. His hands gripped the frame just above his head, and he wore a silver wristwatch turned so the face rested against his pulse. He stood with one hip higher than the other, and for several moments she stared at him, disoriented.

'Are you hungry?' he asked.

She blinked several times before it all came back to her. John had changed his clothes into a pair of worn Levi's with a shredded hole in one knee. A white Chinooks tank top stretched across his powerful chest, and fine hair shadowed his armpits. She couldn't help but wonder if he'd changed in the room while she slept.

'If you're hungry, Ernie's fixing chowder.'

'I'm starving,' she said, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. 'What time is it?'

John lowered one hand and glanced at his wrist. 'Almost six.'

She'd slept for two and a half hours and felt more tired than before. She remembered passing the bathroom earlier and reached for her overnight case on the floor next to the bed. 'I need a few minutes,' she said, and avoided looking at herself in the mirror as she passed the dresser. 'I shouldn't be too long,' she added as she approached the doorway.

'Good. We're about to sit down,' John informed her, although he didn't appear in a hurry to move. His shoulders practically filled the doorway, forcing her to stop.

‘Excuse me.’ If he thought she was going to squeeze past him, he’d better come up with a new plan. Georgeanne had figured out that game in the tenth grade. She felt a vague disappointment that John should belong to the caliber of sleazy men who thought they had the right to rub up against women and peer down their blouses, but when she looked up into his blue eyes, relief washed over her. A wrinkle appeared between his dark brows and he gazed at her mouth, not her breasts. He reached toward her and brushed his thumb across her bottom lip. He was so close, she could smell his Obsession, and after working with perfumes and colognes for a year, Georgeanne knew her fragrances.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, and turned his hand to show her a smudge of chocolate on his thumb.

‘My lunch,’ she answered, and felt a little flutter in her stomach. Looking up into his deep blue eyes, she realized that he wasn’t frowning at her for a change. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lip and asked, ‘Better?’

Slowly he lowered his arms to his sides and raised his gaze to hers. ‘Better than what?’ he asked, and just when Georgeanne thought he might smile and show her his dimple again, he turned and headed down the hall. ‘Ernie wants to know if you want beer or ice water with dinner,’ he said over his shoulder. The buns of his jeans were worn a lighter blue than the rest, and a wallet bulged one pocket. On his feet he wore a pair of cheap rubber thongs just like his grandfather.

‘Water,’ she answered, but would have preferred iced tea. Georgeanne made her way to the bathroom and repaired the damage to her makeup. As she reapplied her burgundy lipstick, a smile curved her lips. She’d been right about John. He wasn’t a jerk.

By the time she had arranged the curls about her shoulders and made her way to the small dining room, John and Ernie were already seated at the oak pedestal table. ‘Sorry I took so long,’ she said, noticing that they were so bad-mannered as to have begun without her. She sat across from John and reached for a paper napkin stuck in an olive green holder. She placed it on her lap, looked for her spoon, and found it on the wrong side of the bowl.

‘Pepper’s right there.’ Ernie motioned with his spoon to a red and white can in the middle of the table.

‘Thank you.’ Georgeanne looked at the older man. She didn’t really care for pepper, but after her first bite of creamy white chowder, it became obvious that Ernie did. The soup was thick and rich, and despite the pepper, it was delicious. A glass of ice water sat next to her bowl and she reached for it. As she took a sip, she glanced about the room and noticed the sparse decoration. In fact, the only other thing in the room besides the table was a large china hutch filled with trophies. ‘Do you live here year-round, Mr Maxwell?’ she asked, taking it upon herself to start the dinner conversation.

He shook his head, drawing her attention to his thinning white crew cut. ‘This is one of John’s houses. I still live in Saskatoon.’

‘Is that close by?’

‘Close enough to see my share of games.’

Georgeanne set the glass on the table and began to eat. ‘Hockey games?’

‘Of course. I see most of ’em.’ He turned his gaze to John. ‘But I could still kick myself in the ass for missing that hat trick last May.’

‘Quit worrying about it,’ John told him.

Georgeanne knew next to nothing about hockey. ‘What’s a hat trick?’

‘It’s when a player scores three goals in one game,’ Ernie explained. ‘And I missed that damn Kings game, too.’ He paused to shake his head, his eyes filling with pride as he gazed at his grandson. ‘That candy-assed Gretzky rode the pines for a good fifteen minutes after you checked him into the boards,’ he said, genuinely delighted.

Georgeanne didn’t have the faintest idea what Ernie was talking about, but getting ‘checked into the boards’ sounded painful to her. She’d been born and raised in a state that lived for football, yet she hated it. She sometimes wondered if she was the only person in Texas who abhorred violent sports. ‘Isn’t that bad?’ she asked.

‘Hell no!’ the older man exploded. ‘He went up against The Wall and lived to regret it.’

One corner of John's mouth lifted upward, and he smashed several crackers into his chowder. 'I guess I won't be winning the Lady Bying any time soon.'

Ernie turned to Georgeanne. 'That's the trophy given for gentlemanly conduct, but screw that.' He pounded the table with one fist and raised his spoon to his mouth with the other.

Personally, Georgeanne didn't think either of them was in danger of winning an award for gentlemanly conduct. 'This is wonderful chowder,' she said in an effort to change the subject to something a little less volatile. 'Did you make it?'

Ernie reached for the beer next to his bowl. 'Sure,' he answered, and raised the bottle to his mouth.

'It's delicious.' It had always been important to Georgeanne that people like her – never more than now. She figured her friendly overtures were wasted on John, so she turned her considerable charm on his grandfather. 'Did you start with a white sauce?' she asked, looking into Ernie's blue eyes.

'Yeah, sure, but the trick to good chowder is in the clam juice,' he informed her, then between bites, he shared his recipe with Georgeanne. She gave him the appearance of hanging on his every word, of concentrating on him fully, and within seconds, he dropped into the palm of her hand like a ripe plum. She asked questions and commented on his choice of spices, and all the while she was very aware of John's direct gaze. She knew when he took a bite, raised the beer bottle to his lips, or wiped his mouth with a napkin. She was aware when he shifted his gaze from her to Ernie and back again. Earlier, when he'd woken her from her nap, he'd been almost friendly. Now he seemed withdrawn.

'Did you teach John how to make chowder?' she asked, making an effort to pull him into the conversation.

John leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. 'No,' was all he said.

'When I'm not here, John goes out to eat. But when I am here, I make sure his kitchen is good and stocked. I like to cook,' Ernie provided. 'He doesn't.'

Georgeanne smiled at him. 'I truly believe that people are born either hating it or loving it, and I can just tell that you' –

she paused to touch his wrinkled forearm – ‘have a God-given talent. Not everyone can make a decent white sauce.’

‘I could teach you,’ he offered with a smile.

His skin felt like warm waxed paper beneath her touch, filling her heart with warm childhood memories. ‘Thank you, Mr Maxwell, but I already know how. I’m from Texas and we cream everything, even tuna.’ She glanced at John, noticed his frown, and decided to ignore him. ‘I can make gravy out of just about anything. My grandmother was famous for her redeye, and I’m not talking about a late-night flight, if you know what I mean. When one of our friends or relatives took their final journey to heaven, it was understood that my grandmother would bring the ham and redeye gravy. After all, Grandmother was raised on a hog farm near Mobile, and she was famous on the funeral circuit for her honeyed hams.’ Georgeanne had spent her life around elderly people, and talking to Ernie felt so comfortable she leaned closer to him and her smile brightened naturally. ‘Now, my aunt Lolly is famous as well, but unfortunately not in a flattering way. She’s known for her lime Jell-O because she’ll throw anything into the mold. She got really bad when Mr Fisher took his final journey. They’re still talking about it at First Missionary Baptist, which in no way should be confused with the First Free Will Baptists, who used to foot-wash, but I don’t believe they practice—’

‘Jeez-us,’ John interrupted. ‘Is there a point to any of this?’

Georgeanne’s smile fell, but she was determined to remain pleasant. ‘I was getting to it.’

‘Well, you might want to do that real soon because Ernie isn’t getting any younger.’

‘Stop right there,’ his grandfather warned.

Georgeanne patted Ernie’s arm and looked into John’s narrowed eyes. ‘That was incredibly rude.’

‘I get a lot worse.’ John pushed his empty bowl aside and leaned forward. ‘The guys on the team and I want to know, can Virgil still get it up, or was it strictly his money?’

Georgeanne could feel her eyes widen and her cheeks burn. The idea that her relationship with Virgil had been fodder for locker-room jock talk was beyond humiliating.

‘That’s enough, John,’ Ernie ordered. ‘Georgie is a nice girl.’

‘Yeah? Well, *nice* girls don’t sleep with men for their money.’

Georgeanne opened her mouth, but words failed her. She tried to think of something equally hurtful, but she couldn’t. She was sure a perfectly witty and sarcastic response would come to her later, long after she needed it. She took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. It was a sad fact of her life that when she became flustered, words flew from her head – simple words like *door*, *stove*, or – as was the case earlier when she’d had to ask John for help – *corset*. ‘I don’t know what I’ve done to make you say such cruel things,’ she said, placing her napkin on the table. ‘I don’t know if it’s me, if you hate women in general, or if you’re just terminally bad-tempered, but my relationship with Virgil is none of your business.’

‘I don’t hate women,’ John assured her, then deliberately lowered his gaze to the front of her T-shirt.

‘That’s right,’ Ernie broke in. ‘Your relationship with Mr Duffy isn’t our business.’ Ernie reached for her hand. ‘The tide is almost out. Why don’t you go on down and look for some tide pools near those big rocks down there. Maybe you can find something from the Washington coast to take back to Texas with you.’

Georgeanne had been raised to respect her elders too much to argue or question Ernie’s suggestion. She glanced at both men, then stood. ‘I’m truly sorry, Mr Maxwell. I didn’t mean to cause trouble between y’all.’

Without taking his eyes from his grandson, Ernie answered, ‘It’s not your fault. This has nothing to do with you.’

It certainly felt like her fault, she thought as she stepped behind her chair and slid it forward. As Georgeanne walked through the narrow, foam green kitchen toward the multipaned back door, she realized that she’d let John’s good looks impair her judgment. He wasn’t pretending to be a jerk. He was one!

Ernie waited until he heard the back door close before he said, ‘It’s not right for you to take out your bad temper on that little girl.’ He watched one brow rise up his grandson’s forehead.

‘Little?’ John planted his elbows on the table. ‘By no stretch of the imagination could you ever mistake Georgeanne for a “little girl.”’

‘Well, she can’t be very old,’ Ernie continued. ‘And you were disrespectful and rude. If your mother were here, she’d give your ear a good hard twist.’

A smile curved one corner of John’s mouth. ‘Probably,’ he said.

Ernie stared into his grandson’s face and pain wrenched his heart. The smile on John’s lips didn’t reach his eyes – it never did these days. ‘It’s no good, John-John.’ He placed his hand on John’s shoulder and felt the hard muscles of a man. Before him, he recognized nothing of the happy boy he’d taken hunting and fishing, the boy he’d taught to play hockey and drive a car, the boy he’d taught everything he’d known about being a man. The man before him wasn’t the boy he’d raised. ‘You have to let it out. You can’t hold it all in, walking around blaming yourself.’

‘I don’t have to let anything out,’ he said, his smile disappearing altogether. ‘I told you that I don’t want to talk about it.’

Ernie looked into John’s closed expression, into the blue eyes so much like his own had been before they’d clouded with age. He’d never pressed John about his first wife. He’d figured John would come to terms with what Linda had done on his own. Even though John had been a dumb-ass and married that stripper six months ago, Ernie had hopes that he’d begun to work things out in his own mind. But tomorrow marked the first anniversary of her death, and John seemed just as angry as the day he’d buried her. ‘Well, I think you need to talk to someone,’ Ernie said, deciding that maybe he should force the issue for John’s own good. ‘You can’t keep it up, John. You can’t pretend nothing happened, yet at the same time drink to forget what did.’ He paused to remember what he’d heard on the television the other day. ‘You can’t use booze to self-medicate. Alcohol is just a symptom of a greater disease,’ he said, pleased that he remembered.

‘Have you been watching *Oprah* again?’

Ernie frowned. ‘That isn’t the point. What happened is eating a hole in you, and you’re taking it out on an innocent girl.’

John leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. ‘I’m not taking anything out on Georgeanne.’

‘Then why were you so rude?’

‘She gets on my nerves.’ John shrugged. ‘She rambles on and on about absolutely nothing.’

‘That’s because she’s a southerner,’ Ernie explained, letting the subject of Linda drop. ‘You just have to sit back and enjoy a southern gal.’

‘Like you were? She had you eating out of the palm of her hand with all that white sauce and funeral bullshit.’

‘You’re jealous,’ Ernie laughed. ‘You’re jealous of an old guy like me.’ He slapped his hands on the table and slowly stood. ‘I’ll be damned.’

‘You’re crazy,’ John scoffed, snagging his beer as he stood also.

‘I think you like her,’ he said, and turned toward the living room. ‘I saw the way you were looking at her when she didn’t know you were looking. You may not want to like her, but you’re attracted to her, and it’s pissing you off.’ He walked into his bedroom and stuffed a few things in a duffel bag.

‘Where are you going?’ John asked from the doorway.

‘I’m gonna stay with Dickie for a few days. I’m just in the way here.’

‘No you’re not.’

Ernie glanced back at his grandson. ‘I told you, I saw the way you were eyeing her.’

John shoved one hand in the front pocket of his Levi’s and leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. With his other hand, he impatiently tapped the beer bottle against his thigh. ‘And I told you, I’m not going to have sex with Virgil’s fiancée.’

‘I hope you’re right and I’m wrong,’ Ernie zipped the duffel bag closed and reached for the straps with his left hand. He didn’t know if he was doing the right thing by leaving. His first instinct was to stay and make sure his grandson didn’t do anything he might regret in the morning. But Ernie had done his job. He’d helped raise John already. There was nothing he could do now. There was nothing he could do to save John from himself. ‘Because you’ll end up hurting that girl and damaging your career.’

‘I don’t plan to do either.’

Ernie looked up and smiled sadly. ‘I hope not,’ he said,

unconvinced, and strode toward the front door. 'I sure as hell hope not.'

John watched his grandfather leave, then he walked back into the living room. His bare feet sank into the thick beige carpet as he moved toward the picture window. He owned three houses; two were on the West Coast. He loved the ocean, the sounds and smells of it. He could lose himself in the monotony of the waves. This house was a haven from life. Here, he didn't have to worry about contracts or endorsements or anything attached to being one of the most talked about centers in the NHL. He found a peace here that he couldn't find anywhere else.

Until today.

He stared out the big window at the woman who stood at the edge of the surf, the breeze whipping her dark hair about her head. Georgeanne definitely disturbed his peace. He brought the bottle of beer to his lips and took a long pull.

An unwitting smile tugged one corner of his mouth as he watched her tiptoe cautiously into the cold waves. Without a doubt, Georgeanne Howard was a walking fantasy. If it weren't for her irritating habit of rambling, and if she weren't Virgil's fiancée, John didn't think he'd be in such a hurry to get rid of her.

But Georgeanne was entangled with the owner of the Chinooks, and John had to get her out of town as soon as possible. He figured he'd take her to the airport or bus depot in the morning, which still left the long night ahead.

He hooked one thumb in the waistband of his faded jeans and turned his gaze to a pair of kids flying a kite down the beach. He wasn't worried that he'd end up in bed with Georgeanne. Because contrary to what Ernie believed, John thought with his head, not his dick. As he raised the beer to his mouth again, his conscience took the opportunity to remind him of his asinine marriage to DeeDee.

Slowly he lowered the bottle and looked back at Georgeanne. He never would have done anything so stupid as marry a woman he hadn't known more than a few hours if he hadn't been drunk, no matter how great her body. And DeeDee's body had been great.

A dark scowl turned John's mouth downward. His eyes followed Georgeanne as she played in the surf, then with a foul curse on his lips, he stormed into the kitchen and poured out his beer.

The last thing he needed was to wake up in the morning with a pounding headache and married to Virgil's fiancée.