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*My Husband
Traded Me*

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By

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Denying your desires will make you unhappy. Indulge them.

CHAPTER 1

"What? Is this some joke or something?" *Did I really just hear that out of your mouth?* Molly shook her head.

Her husband, Trent, was looking at her excitedly. "This'll be great."

Are you serious? I'm being traded for a truck? This has to be a joke. They were, however, in dire financial straits. Being evicted in less than a week, neither had been able to find work. Trent was overqualified for everything with a Bachelor's of Science in Business Management and also possessing a Microsoft Engineering Certificate they had spent a couple thousand to get hoping it would pave the way to instant riches.

Instead, he had lost his job as a car salesman while waiting for something to break. She had lost her job as a short order cook when the breakfast house had decided to hire in early-release convicts.

The landlord had apologized when he taped the eviction notice to their front door.

Molly rubbed her eyebrows. "Wait a minute. Traded? You can't trade me. I'm not like a TV set or something; we're married."

Trent was bubbling with enthusiasm. "It's temporary, Molly. Don't worry, I still love you. But Gary called me and said there was still work in North Dakota in the oilfields. We're talking two thousand dollars a week, baby."

She sighed. "I thought you were going to see if Deacon Ford had a position—"

"They don't. And even if they did, the paycheck would be too late. What are we going to do? Sleep on the streets? We don't even have a car."

They had been forced to sell their old Pinto just to have money to eat.

She held out her hands. "Why am I being traded?"

"Blake has a truck with a camper shell on it. I can live in the truck. Renting is way too expensive up there." He said it as if it were obvious.

"I can go with you."

"I need the truck, first: you're the trade."

"You can't trade a wife." *This is crazy.*

"Like I said, it's just temporary. He'll put you up in the guest bedroom and you help around the house."

"I have to slave for him?" *I don't want to be picking up someone else's dirty underwear.*

"Consider it like any other work. Cook, clean, laundry."

"And he's giving you a truck for this?"

"Baby, it's almost a hundred thousand a year. This is the big break we've been waiting for. We just have to make some sacrifices."

She coughed. "And I have to be a slave for it."

He held out his hands, palms up. "Look at it this way; you get to sleep in a bed and I get to camp in a truck."

She sighed. *I guess that is better than both of us sleeping on the street.* "Cooking, cleaning, and laundry? He's not expecting anything else, is he?"

Trent laughed, looking relieved. "That's all, promise. Blake's a good guy."

She had met him before – a nice-looking man who was interested in hunting and the like. Sort of odd in a quiet way. "He can't clean on his own?"

"Last I saw, his place was immaculate. But he said for the opportunity of having a live-in cook for a few months, it was worth the trade."

"A few months? Can't I just go stay with mom?"

Trent took her in his arms. Not much comforted them anymore with all their money worries, but hugging at least reminded them of their love. "You have to do your part. Two thousand a week will solve all our problems. Maybe we can start our own business when I get back."

That sounded better to her. "Doing what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I can always find something in one of those magazines selling franchises and the like."

I hope it won't be another get rich quick scheme that requires a twenty thousand dollar investment. "Our own business?"

"We just need some starting cash."

It was true, she knew. It took money to make money, but they had never had much money with which to begin.

She pouted against his neck. "Will you activate our cell accounts when you get paid? I already feel like I'm missing you." It was more than that. Despite their discomfort with finances and their uncertain future, their bond was the only thing that kept her somewhat sane. If he was going to be leaving, how would she cope?

"Of course. Consider it done."

"Are you sure about this? Can't I come?"

"The only reason I'm getting the truck is because you're going to take care of his house."

She sighed. "This isn't fair."

He stroked her hair. "It's our only chance."

~ ~ ~

Molly looked around the apartment. They had nothing left but a couple boxes. The TV had been sold at a garage sale and the couch along with it. The entertainment center that had made them feel as if they were rich was gone, too. They had needed money for food.

She had a few books and her personal papers. Her clothes amounted to a small pile that would make a street person think twice about accepting them. She had a ragdoll from her youth, well-worn and frayed from hugging and clutching. The leather-bound Bible her father had given her before he died topped off her pitiful possessions in a single box.

They had tried lottery tickets. Spent hundreds on them. One man had chided her in the minimart at the gas station that the lottery was a tax on people who were really bad at math. But she had been filled with hope to win big. They spent over eight hundred dollars on them and collected about fifty-five in return. The man had been right.

Then they couldn't even afford lottery tickets. The power had been shut off. The rent went unpaid. It was everything they could do to put food on the table. Getting welfare turned out to be nearly impossible for a citizen with no children. They had applied for Section 8 housing, but the wait was over a year. They didn't have a year.

Trent had been planning on taking her to the tent city with all the other homeless people on the outskirts, but they didn't even have a tent. Nor could

they afford one.

She closed the box. One box: it would fit in a grocery cart. *How fitting.*

Trent was watching her. "I love you, Molly. We need this."

She was gazing at the single box. "I know." She moved with no energy into the bathroom. A shoebox waited there. In it was a plastic freezer bag with the handful of pictures she owned. On top were her toiletries and a bottle of perfume with two uses left in it. She had no make-up left; it was an unaffordable luxury.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she had forfeited her saltine cracker to Trent so he could have energy this morning to drive.

Her husband said, "I don't think this could have come along any later. We're just about rock-bottom."

And they were. Everything of theirs was gone – sold for food. Their only remaining possessions were the mattress in the bedroom with its blankets and their cheap kitchen table with only two squeaky chairs. They had sold the other two that had made the set.

She placed the shoebox on top of her packed box and lifted both. So light. So nothing. She went out to the empty living room. Only a box remained there: Trent's things.

A cheap picture hung on the wall that no one had wanted to buy.

There was a knock on the door.

Trent took a deep and excited breath. "This is it."

She stood there, box in arms, and watched him open the door with a shaking hand.

Blake stood there, looking with curiosity. "Hey, bud. Still want to do this?"

Her husband couldn't speak fast enough. "Oh yeah. No problems. I'm looking forward to work."

She had met Blake before. He was a handsome man with short sandy-brown hair. He was wearing a tan canvas hunting vest over his dress shirt and bottomed off with jeans. He saw her holding the box and came in.

He said, "Are there more boxes? Let me help you. I made a space in the barn—"

She said, "This is it."

Blake stopped, the stun clearly showing on his face. "Are you sure? I have room."

"This is all I have. That box there is Trent's."

Blake's mouth was open in shock and she saw the pulse beating rapidly in his neck. He closed his mouth, looking down and nodding. "All right." He looked around furtively, the shock growing on his face. "Any... furniture?"

Trent said, "Nothing. We're leaving the rest. It's just a table and mattress and a few dishes. The landlord can have it."

Blake shook his head slowly, clearly not believing what he was seeing. "Are you sure?"

Her husband grinned like a schoolboy. "I'll be buying all new things."

Consideration crossed Blake's features and he nodded. "Well, then." He reached for Molly's box. "Let me carry that."

Why is he looking at me with horror? I'm not ugly. She let him carry the box. *He's disgusted with me; this isn't going to work.* She gave Trent a longing look.

He was already out the door with his box.

Blake looked at her expectantly.

What? She looked down and followed her husband. She walked out of the apartment that had been home for four years. She would never see it again.

CHAPTER 2

"You didn't have to bring a trailer." Trent was shaking his head.

The truck and camper had a hitch that was currently towing a trailer for any items they might have had.

Blake shrugged next to Molly. "I didn't know. Figured you had furniture."

"Nah, I told you we didn't have anything."

"Yeah, that's why I brought the small trailer."

Molly was sitting between them in the cab of the Chevy truck Trent would be driving. She sat quietly, hands clasped together in her lap. She frowned suddenly at her jeans: they were so worn her knees were showing through.

They pulled into the Conaco gas station and Blake climbed out to top off the tank.

She whispered, "I don't know if I can do this."

Trent looked surprised. "Of course you can."

"I don't think he likes me."

"Sure he does."

You didn't see the look of disgust on his face.

He said, "Look, just a few months and we'll be set."

"A few months?"

"Enough to set us up with a franchise of some sorts. I'll be scouring the entrepreneur magazines as soon as I get there."

Great. Those things are filled with money pits. "Why not start our own? From scratch?" I don't want to be in this situation again.

He tilted his head in consideration. "Well, we could. There's so much money to be made." His eyes were shining.

She sighed quietly and looked down at her hands.

He said, "If I stay longer, maybe we can really do things right. A house, a car. Two, even. A business..."

Her eyes widened. *A house? Cars? And a business? That's not three months.* She started to say she couldn't do it, no way.

Blake opened the door and climbed back in.

The door shut and so did her mouth. She was more on Trent's side, touching close against him.

"All topped off," Blake said.

"It'll be enough to get me there," Trent said.

Molly's eyes were unfocused. Their lives rested on a single tank of gas and her husband's enthusiasm. Shouldn't she be feeling the same? What would it be like with her own home? A real car? Would it be a dream come true? Or just a dream?

~ ~ ~

Trent hugged her. Molly could feel him trembling with excitement. They stood outside Blake's old ranch house in the suburbs. Trees shaded them from the sun and Molly suddenly didn't want to let go.

She whispered to him, "What are you going to eat?" He had eaten the last of the crackers that morning.

He put his lips to her ear. "I'll dumpster-dive, if I have to. People throw all kinds of good food away."

She squeezed harder, not wanting him to have to suffer that.

He said, "It's only for the first week until the paycheck anyway. Don't worry."

"Promise you'll eat better than crackers and food from the trash?"

He nodded. "I will, really."

She squeezed again.

He put a kiss to her lips that was rushed. "I need to go."

Everything in her melted in despair. *I don't want you to go.* Her eyes pleaded.

He let go and turned away.

She gazed at his back and hugged herself with her arms. He had lost so much weight, though he had never had much to begin with. His shoulders were bony under his shirt. His black hair was short, kept trimmed by Molly's scissors. She felt a pang of melancholy, wanting to trim his hair one more time.

He shook Blake's hand.

His friend had a curious look on his face, as if wondering something, but she did not know what.

Her husband said, "Thank you so much for all of this. You really saved us on this one."

Blake's nod was slow and sad. "Go and get back on your feet."

Trent's smile was happy and hopeful. He climbed into the truck and drove away.

~ ~ ~

Blake stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and stared at her.

Molly looked down and tried to hide her face from his gaze.

He said, "Let's get you settled in, huh?" Grabbing her two boxes from the walkway, he motioned with his head.

How can I do this? He already thinks I'm gross. Does he think I'm going to put something in his food?

He said, "We'll go to the store in a few minutes. I wanted you to come – see if there's anything you might need that I don't have for cooking." He led her inside.

She stopped in the doorway. Her eyes popped out, stunned.

He said, "I understand you're a really good cook?" He turned and saw her expression. "Is something wrong?"

Molly shook her head. Trent had said his place was immaculate, but that didn't really describe it. Almost as spare as her previous home for lack of furnishings, the place was not just neat, but clean and very well-ordered. A leather couch filled the living room with a wonderful leather aroma. A leather recliner accompanied it. A mahogany lampstand held a polished brass lamp that looked like it cost more than their old Pinto. His coffee table was also mahogany, and richly carved.

From the outside, the place looked like an old ranch house for the surrounding orchards. Inside, it was fresh and up-to-date. The carpet was a

rich Berber – the type that lasted. A large circular Persian rug sat under the coffee table and looked to be an inch thick.

His walls were wallpapered in an old country-pattern that looked original. A single sepia family photo of people most likely dead hung on the wall – its curved glass cover speaking of a bygone era.

The inside smelled of leather and incense.

Molly blinked. "No, nothing's wrong. But, maybe you should hire someone to mess the place up, first."

His eyebrows drew down.

Uh oh, wrong thing to say. He must think I'm really stupid.

"I'm something of a neat freak. A fault of mine, maybe. Didn't have much growing up. I like to keep things clean and orderly. Will you be able to maintain the place like this?"

She nodded quickly. "Oh, sure. It'll be easy. I just thought..."

"Thought what?" He led her through a dark hall.

"Well, I thought you being a bachelor and all. I don't know. Maybe it would be messier."

He said nothing. He shifted her box and shoebox to one arm and opened a door. Light spilled faintly out. A loud lightswitch snapped and warm incandescent light spilled into the hall. "This is your room."

She peeked in. The bed was a high one – the type you had to climb into. A heavy quilt that looked as old as the house but in excellent shape topped the mattress. A polished wood dresser faced it and an armoire with a mirrored door angled in the corner. Light from an old bell-glass light fixture on the ceiling cast a warm glow. A small lampstand with an elegant looking lamp was between them and the bed. The pink lampshade was hung with little crystals, and for some reason began to bring tears to her eyes.

He set her box down by the dresser. "The bathroom is right across the hall there. It's all yours; I have my own bathroom." He looked at her askance again. "Do you...need a few minutes to get settled in?"

Molly was battling a desperate sense of nostalgia. She said, "I'm sorry?"

"I wanted to take us to the store. I can bring the Jeep around if you need to use the bathroom or unpack your box. Or whatever."

She felt very alone and abandoned at that moment. *Can I run away and die?* "Maybe just the bathroom. I can unpack when I get back."

He nodded as if he expected the answer.

Am I going to be able to do things right? She followed his gesture to the other side of the hall. She went in and shut the bathroom door. Everything was old and very clean. The claw-foot tub had a shower curtain hiding a large shower head that almost looked comical due to its size. The sink was on a pedestal and a cabinet on the wall promised the things you normally put under the sink.

She washed her face and wondered if he would mind her wrinkling the towel hanging from the towel ring. She pulled it and dried her face. Looking at herself in the mirror, she wondered if Blake had looked disgusted because of her face. Was it her nose that was a little too big for her face? Her wide cheekbones? Her long, plain brunette hair? *Is this going to work? Will I be able to do what he needs so my husband can finally make something for us?*

Blake was waiting for her when she came out. "I got the Jeep out. Let's go for a ride."

Great. A ride? Sounds ominous. Isn't that what they say in the movies before they kill you? "All right."

He was looking at her with a curious expression on his face – a scrutiny that made her wonder what it was he didn't like or found distasteful.

CHAPTER 3

Molly expected a different kind of Jeep. Instead of a CJ or YJ boxy four-by-four, it was one of those old Jeep Wagoneers. White and clean, it looked like it was from the seventies.

The door shut with a heavy, iron *clank*.

Blake got in and looked at her with that odd mixture of curiosity and suspicion. At least, that's what it looked like to her.

He said, "Are you all right?" He turned over the engine and put the Jeep into gear. "Trent didn't say much except that we had a deal on the truck. But he didn't say anything about what you thought?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I don't think we had very many options."

"I don't expect you to be my slave or something. Just be your normal housewife self while you're here."

"And make sure the place is clean."

He shifted his shoulders as if in discomfort. "I'm not going to hold a whip over you. But he did take my hunting truck."

She picked at her fingernails. *No whip? Well, thank God for small comforts.*

He drove under the speed limit, in no hurry at all.

She furtively glanced at him, then away. "What do you do, anyway? For a living? All Trent said was that you hunted."

He thumbed over his shoulder. "All those peach trees around my place? Gives me a comfortable income sometimes. I supplement it with hunting and gun guides I sell."

"You're an author?"

"I pretend to be. It's not as glamorous as it sounds. But I get by well enough if my harvests come up short."

"So you grow peaches?"

He gave a short, upward nod. "Used to have hundreds of acres in the family. Sold most of it for all that housing development. Shame, too. The family used to be wealthy. Now it's just me holding the reins and getting just enough to stay afloat. Usually."

"Usually?"

"Some years are better than others. But my book sales help out."

"And you hunt." She looked at him furtively again. *What kind of man kills animals?*

He nodded resolutely. "Puts meat in the freezer."

"You eat them?" She was horrified.

He looked at her as if she had said something odd. "Well, yeah, that's why I hunt."

"I don't know how you can do that."

He frowned. "Are you vegan?"

"Me? No."

He gave her a raised eyebrow. "So you've eaten beef."

"Of course."

"Ever seen the inside of a slaughterhouse?"

Molly shifted on the bench seat. "No."

"It isn't pretty. I make a clean kill, dress the carcass right there. The meat is better than what you can get in the grocery store, unless you buy buffalo."

"They sell buffalo meat?"

He grunted. "Yeah, a little too expensive for my blood. But I have a good stock of meat as it is. Don't need to buy it."

"So why is it better?"

"More nutritious. Deer and elk eat sprigs from trees. They munch on natural things. They aren't penned up in mud and fed genetically modified crap that has almost no nutritional value except to fatten them up."

She pushed herself back on the seat, facing forward. *Huh, never thought about that.*

She saw him looking at her.

Twisting her mouth, she said, "What?"

"Tell you what. We'll buy a single pack of ground beef. We'll open it up and let you smell it compared to my ground venison."

"How would I know what I'm smelling?"

His smile was that all-knowing smile and it made her feel stupid. He said, "You'll see."

~ ~ ~

Blake waved his hand over the packaged meats. "Go ahead; pick the best-looking one."

She felt like a street-person. Bent over the meats dressed as she was, she was sure the manager would come along any moment to tell her she shouldn't be in the store. Even though she and her husband had come here often enough, she felt as if everyone would know she had no money and no business being in there. She snatched a package that looked vibrant and fresh. She thrust it at him as if it wasn't something she should be holding.

Blake gave her a strange look and gently took the meat. He put it in the cart and moved along. "Do you have any special spice requirements?"

How would I know what he likes? "I don't know what you like to eat—"

"I mean as a cook. Little secrets?"

"Salt."

He nodded. "I have sea salt at home."

Molly shrugged. "As long as it's salt."

He grabbed several different things and she watched closely. He said, "I like meatloaf, red potatoes, eggs, all kinds of fruits and vegetables."

She pegged him as a health-eater. "Fresh garlic?"

For the first time, she saw him smile. It crinkled up his eyes slightly as if hesitant to be truly loose and free. His flash of white teeth were even and clean. "Yes, I love garlic."

"Just at dinner?"

"Actually in my omelets, too."

She gave a short nod. Some people liked garlic with breakfast. As a cook, you never questioned – you just made the food the way they ordered. "Do you like your potatoes mashed?"

"Only if you leave the skins on, but I prefer them fried. Retains more nutrients that way."

Fried potatoes were easy and she liked to fry them in butter for a rich crisp outer and creamy interior. She said nothing, though. Cooks cooked – they rarely dealt with the customer unless there was a complaint.

He said, "Can you make your own mayonnaise?"

"What? Make it? Why when you can buy a gallon for pennies?" It wasn't that cheap, but cheap enough.

"The mayo sold in the stores is all soy. Causes inflammation and inflammation is the bedrock of all kinds of really bad things. Diabetes—"

"What? Mayonnaise?"

"No, the soy. They use soy oil now to make mayonnaise."

"Soy causes inflammation?"

Blake grinned. "Indeed. The only edible soy is fermented. The fermentation converts the toxins so that it's edible."

Huh? "I don't know how to make mayonnaise."

"Don't worry, I'll show you. Very easy."

Molly shrugged. *Whatever.* She watched him finish loading the cart without much more input. *Yep, health-eater.* Her stomach growled ferociously and her eyes went wide.

He looked at her with a scowl.

Sorry.

He said, "Hungry?"

Ack, he did hear it and knows it was me. "I, uh, was too rushed to eat this morning."

His scowl deepened.

What? I can't help it. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

A wave of dizziness passed over her. Thankfully, they were at the register. She watched him unload onto the conveyor while she stood gripping the cart handle.

The checker was Pam, an older, pleasant woman she and her husband knew from previous visits. Pam looked at Blake with familiarity, then saw Molly. Her smile turned to a frown. She looked at Blake, then Molly again, then dropped her gaze down to Molly's wedding ring. The frown deepened and she pursed her lips. She went about scanning the food items with a snap of disapproval.

Molly flushed red with embarrassment. *It's just temporary. My husband traded me for a truck; I'm still married to him. This isn't what you think!*

She moved so that Blake was between her and Pam's accusing eyes.

That didn't last long as Blake finished and moved through, pulling the cart with him.

Pam's eyes flicked to Molly every couple of scans. Flicked to her face and ring.

She felt the flush of blush rushing up her face from her neck with all the heat of shame. Her hands trembled and she clutched them together to quell the visible shaking of her fingers.

Blake looked to her as if to make sure she was there. He did a double-take and frowned.

Why is everyone looking at me? Her eyes watered and threatened wet-works if she didn't do something. *Hurry up, let's go.* The water welled. She wiped at her eyes with a savage sweep of shaking fingers.

Blake was paying, but looking at her.

She moved past him and grabbed the handle of the cart as if to strangle it. Feeling as if she were trailing heat from her blush in a visible cloud of steam, she shoved the cart away from Pam and towards the door.

He caught up to her just outside. "Are you all right, Molly?"

She couldn't hold back any longer and burst out in a strangled sob laced with loneliness and loss.

CHAPTER 4

Molly flipped the ham slices in the pan. "I'm really sorry."

Blake was sitting at the kitchen table, one leg crossed over the other – sitting with an ease that calmed her, but also with a tension that hinted at action. "No, I should be the one apologizing. I didn't think going to the grocery store would be so traumatic—"

"It was embarrassing. Her looks." There was some heat in her next words. "I'm not some weak woman—"

"No, I meant I didn't think about what others might think. I'm sorry I put you in that situation. I didn't mean you were weak."

She slathered his homemade mayonnaise from a glass jar onto his strange-brand bread. She placed the spoon in the sink and then saw his look of disapproval. "What?"

"I use the dishwasher." His dry tone was exploding with expectation.

The idea caused a disconnect in her brain. She shook her head. "Oh, uh...sorry. I'm used to being a cook." She cut the tomato and placed a slice on each of their breads. "Priority was getting the food prepared as fast as possible, not cleaning utensils. That came between orders. But I'll try to adjust."

He shrugged and sighed. "All right. I just hate dirty stuff in the sink. If it gets taken care of, then good."

"I will, I promise." She placed the cheese she had sliced over the ham and covered the pan. Then she arranged spinach on each of the other slices of bread.

"You're fast." He almost sounded impressed.

Molly smiled quickly. "Habit, I guess." Now that she was done with the preparations and the cheese was melting, she began putting things away.

He watched her with a careful scrutiny that made her feel uncomfortable.

She sighed. "What?"

He shook his head as if shaken from daydreaming. "What?"

"Am I putting things away wrong or something?"

He pulled his head back in confusion. "No..."

What's wrong with you, then? Am I weird-looking?

He drew down his eyebrows. "You're very efficient."

Is that good? Do you actually like something about me? "Oh? A few years of being a cook, I guess."

He nodded, the expression on his face changing to something more neutral.

She next handled the utensil in the sink. She dropped it into the dishwasher basket and in the same move, leaned up and flicked on the sink lever. Grabbing the hose, she gave a quick squirt to where the spoon had rested. Off went the water and she checked the cheese. It was ready. She deftly scooped with the spatula and set the ham and cheese on the tomato slices. She turned off the burner and covered the pan. Spatula went into the sink. She gently flipped the two halves of each sandwich together and picked up both plates.

He had a small grin on his face.

"What?"

"You're fast."

"And out of work."

His grin vanished. "You couldn't find another cooking—"

She set the plates down. "I looked...and looked and looked." She dropped down into her seat with a sigh. The smell of the food made her stomach growl again. Her eyes widened at the sight of her sandwich before her. *How long has it been since I had a decent meal?*

She started to reach.

He said, "Do you say grace?"

"Grace?" *Oh, a meal prayer.* "Oh, I used to when I was a kid. With the family."

His look was still neutral. "I do here. I'll say it."

Her stomach growled in anger. *I hope you aren't a windbag.*

He bowed his head slightly. "Thank you Almighty God for this food, and may You bless us with health."

Molly waited for more. *What? That's all?* She glanced up at him: he was reaching for his sandwich. *Wow, that was simple.*

He took a bite and chewed three times. He stopped and looked at her.

She squinted at him *No way is that a bad sandwich. Don't even think of criticizing—*

"This is excellent." He said it while trying to keep the bite in his mouth hidden. He went back to chewing.

She wasn't concerned with accepting the compliment. She bit into the first real meal in weeks. *Sure beats a couple crackers or a can of beans.*

~ ~ ~

His kitchen was small and old. The sink was the big open ranch house type sink that went out of fashion sometime early last century. The countertops were new, but the cabinets were original and refinished. The mixture of well-kept old and new created an eclectic sense of rightness in transition. Molly grasped the concept right away. If it worked, why replace it? The refrigerator was a big curved white thing with a chrome handle. It reminded her of a big curved car from the forties.

But in the adjacent mud room to the back door, there was a newer freezer where he stored all his hunting meat.

Blake put the opened package of store-bought beef on the counter. A few feet away, he put some of his homemade ground meat. "All right, come over here."

She approached slowly, horrified that his homemade ground meat might be moving or bleeding.

He waved. "Smell the beef first. Get down to it and take a deep whiff."

That was easy; she had smelled beef millions of times in many different varieties of preparation and cut. She leaned down easily and inhaled deeply. *Smells like beef.* She straightened and looked at him.

He wore a small smile that said he knew what she was thinking. "Now this here."

She tentatively bent over and prepared herself for something horrifying. Instead, she was stumped by the unusual smell; it reminded her of grass,

trees, and juicy steaks. Her eyebrows danced on their own. She took another whiff.

He touched her arm. "Now smell the store beef again."

With a curiosity that compelled her, she moved back to the ground beef. She inhaled and suddenly pulled back sharply. "Oh, wow. What is that?"

"What do you smell?"

"Ugh, like bleach and poop, or something. That's gross." Molly looked at the beef with disgust. "All beef is like this?"

"No, not grass-fed beef. But I rarely buy any. Have enough meat of my own here." He pulled out a plastic bag. "If you won't be offended, I'm just going to throw this away."

"Offended? Why?"

He was looking at her with a troubled look that she couldn't decipher.

She searched his face. "What?"

He frowned. "I didn't know if you might think it was a horrible waste..." His voice trailed off.

What are you going on about? She shook her head. *You're a strange one, Blake Parker.*

CHAPTER 5

Molly sat on the bed, feeling full and fearful. *Is Trent okay? Has he made it there, yet? Seven hour drive, yes, he should be there by now. Is he eating?* She felt guilty for having the sandwich. She yearned to talk to him, to hear his voice and his words that he was okay. That everything was going to be okay.

Blake leaned into the door. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. His look was directed to the dresser where she had put her worn ragdoll.

Her mood fell from fearful to frightened. *He doesn't like my Annie-doll.*

He turned his eyes to her - that frown back on his face. There was a curious look to his eyes that seemed foreign there. "I'll show you which meats to use." He jerked his head for her to follow.

She got up as he moved out of the doorway. She grabbed Annie and stuffed her quickly in the drawer.

In the mudroom, he had the freezer propped open and he was pointing out meats. "I rotate them just like a store does. Steaks here and ground meat here. Just two sections, so pull from the front of each."

Molly nodded. "Okay."

He cocked his head to the side. "In fact, don't bother arranging the freezer; I'll do it."

Don't trust me to do it right?

He looked at her silent face. "I do it anyway. Let me handle the freezer. Just take from the front." His lips quirked into a small smile that seemed warm and sincere.

She shrugged. "Okay."

That curious look returned to his eyes. "I was thinking a big meatloaf tonight and some fried potatoes."

"Right now?" It was four.

He gave a short nod. "I usually eat around now."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, well, I better get cooking."

He shut the freezer.

She opened the heavy refrigerator door and pulled the package of ground meat. His refrigerator stock was all health food – organic stuff. *Even organic ketchup! Nutty.*

He watched her preparing.

She moved quickly, turning on the oven and putting things where they needed to be.

"Very fast," he said. There was admiration in his voice.

Her mind registered his compliment, but her concentration moved with her hands, moving on to the next task in preparation. She turned and placed a hand on her hip. "Let's talk about how you like your meatloaf."

His smile crept over his face and crinkled his eyes.

~ ~ ~

Molly was shaking her head. "No, really."

"You made plenty; have some more."

She felt the pain of food in her stomach that had long since grown accustomed to containing less.

"More potatoes." He was lifting the plate and beginning to fork some onto her dish.

"No." A little bit of force in her voice where she hadn't intended made him frown. *Why does he keep frowning at me?*

Gone was the smile – replaced by the look of disgust.

Frustrated with everything, she tossed up her hands. The heat was gone from her voice, replaced by a quaver. "Why do you look at me like I'm disgusting?"

He blinked several times in confusion. He slowly put the plate back down. "Disgusting?"

"Ever since you saw me at the apartment this morning, you keep looking at me like I smell or something. I shower every day."

He shook his head, his eyebrows drawing down. "No, you're not disgusting—"

"I can see it in how you look at me; you think I'm disgusting. Well, I didn't want to be here, either."

His face turned into a scowl. "Hold on, there."

"Am I ugly or something?"

"No."

"Then what is it? Am I doing something wrong?"

Blake leaned back and sighed.

"What?" She held up her hands in loss.

"When I saw you this morning, I was shocked."

"Shocked at what? My hair? Am I gross to look at?"

He shook his head harder. "No, you looked like you really needed to eat."

Molly rolled her eyes to the ceiling and coughed. "Too fat, too thin, a woman never wins."

"You're so pale; it looks like you're malnourished."

She sighed heavily. "I guess that's what happens when all you can afford is saltines."

His eyes took on a look of sadness. "At first I was hesitant to trade my truck..."

"Trent will return it."

"But now I'm glad I did."

Molly went silent.

Blake rubbed his lips together. "I didn't know things were that bad."

"There's just no work to be had around here. So much for all the hyped hope and change. The job situation got worse."

He made a face. "Things get worse no matter who's in office. It's planned that way and the presidents play their part."

Molly didn't care. When there wasn't a job to be had, who cared who won the political football game? *At least Trent found something.*

"Your husband is a good man; even at rock-bottom, he kept up hope."

She lowered her gaze to her lap. *Save us, my love. I hope you sleep well tonight.*

~ ~ ~

The bed was warm and so very comfortable. The knock on her door startled her awake. Chasing away remnants of a dream about her husband eating raw, stinky beef, she said, "Yes?"

Blake opened the door and poked his head in.

She turned on the lamp.

"Sorry if I woke you, but I get up at three." He glanced over to the dresser and frowned. His eyes scanned the room, then back to her. "I like to eat at six, if that's okay."

She moved and rubbed her eyes. "Oh, okay. I'll get up then."

"I have coffee going."

That sounded wonderful to her and as if the thought of it was enough to summon it, she smelled the drifting aroma of coffee being brewed. *At least he found my Annie not polluting his dresser.*

~ ~ ~

Showered and awake, she went about making breakfast.

He was sitting, watching her. "Did you sleep well?"

"Not really."

"Ah, sorry to hear that."

"I miss Trent."

"I bet."

"You get used to sleeping next to someone – feeling the warmth of their body." She flipped the eggs.

A smile was on his face and a teasing note in his voice. "Did you sleep with your doll?"

"Hmm? No, I put her in the drawer."

"Huh? Why?"

"I saw you scowl at her. Messing up the dresser or something, I'm sure."

He was shaking his head, a look of indignation in his eyes. "Um, no. I thought it was sweet. Put her back."

She turned to him fully, studying his face. *I can't figure this man out. But do I need to? Cook and clean, while Trent gets the green. I just need to last a few months. Easy work.*

He drew his eyebrows together. "I mean it, put her back."

She let out a breath and relaxed. "Are you sure?" *I don't want you all pissed off because my doll is soiling your dresser.*

"Quite. I liked seeing it there."

Suddenly confused with conflicting emotions, she spun around to resume her cooking.

CHAPTER 6

Molly read the letter with a shaking hand. She was sitting on the bed, Indian style.

Dear Molly,

I hope you're doing well there, I miss you.

Work here is exhausting – I throw around a lot of rebar everyday. Technically, I'm a floorhand, but they call us worms – the lowest of the roughnecks.

I passed out on the first day and that led to a friend of mine I made here loaning me some money to eat. I thought I was going to get fired, but Tom's a good guy and helped me up really quick. So I had some real food almost right away. Already paid him back.

I included a new phone for you and put my number in it. I'll try to call on my lunch hour in a couple days.

She had been at Blake's for almost a month now. Cook, clean, and spend a lot of time doing nothing. She had been reading her Bible.

I have so much in my bank account now I don't know what to do with it.

She shook her head. "Don't do anything with it. Save it and come home." Only Annie heard her.

I've been buying lottery tickets...

"Oh my god."

...but only won a few bucks. We can certainly afford a lot more tickets now. We're going to hit the big times, I promise.

Tell Blake his truck is fine. I've decided to get one of those small RV type vans and when I do, I'll make sure he gets his truck back.

I love you.

Trent

She read it again, searching for more. But there wasn't any more. She picked up the phone and charger. "I guess we're finally getting somewhere. I have a phone once again."

A clang from the kitchen perked up her ears. *What's that man doing? I'm the cook.* She glanced at the clock; it was still an hour until lunch. She had already cleaned the two showers and tomorrow she would be finishing the bathroom floors. Monday would start the whole routine again with vacuuming.

She folded the letter and slid it into her Bible.

Dropping her feet down to the floor, she padded silently in her socks to the kitchen. Blake was indeed starting something – a loaf of bread and a block of cheese out. She put fists to hips. "Hey."

He glanced at her with a sneaking look, then away.

She frowned. "Hey, what's the deal? I'm the cook here."

He shrugged. He glanced at her again – at her jeans. "I've had enough. Things are about to change." His voice sounded odd.

What's this? "Um, like what? What's going on?"

"It's those jeans."

"Yes, I know, they're horrible."

He glanced at her quickly again. "Er, no, it's not that. They're not... horrible. I've decided to take you to get new clothes. Call it a bonus."

"If they're not horrible, then why get me new ones?"

He looked again, a haunted look in his eyes. He whipped his head back to the cheese he was unwrapping. "They're, um...very distracting."

"Distracting? What? Would you stop with the food? Let me do it." She pushed at him and grabbed the block of cheese. "What are you making?"

"I thought grilled cheese before we go shopping would be good."

"Get out of my kitchen."

"It's my kitchen."

She pushed harder at him. "Why are my jeans distracting?"

He didn't want to budge. He grabbed the block of cheese back from her.

"They're driving me nuts; I can't handle it. They're sexy."

A fuzziness flooded her. *Did I hear that right?* She pushed on him and pulled on the cheese.

He had been kind to her and appreciated all that she did. He had been the perfect gentleman, listening when she needed to talk and sympathizing with her plight. They had moved about each other with respect and with an ease that created within her a puzzling sensation of tension.

She hadn't understood that.

He jerked on the cheese block.

She yanked back, still trying to break through the sudden block of fog in her thoughts. They had went to the store together once each week, working with each other to stock the house with the food they wanted. He had understood when she would leave the store before he checked out. She would wait for him outside.

There was a silly struggle over the cheese. She ground out through her teeth. "Gimme that."

Blake's eyes were unfocused. "I can cook it."

"No."

"Yes."

"Why am I here?" *If not to cook?*

But the thoughts and words were torn from her in an insane instant. He grabbed her and she let go of the cheese. His arms gripped her to him as she found herself clutching desperately to him in return. Her head went numb and her heart pounded in her chest. With a trembling hold, she clung to Blake as if clinging to life. Warmth flooded her and she gasped in breaths that did not alleviate her need for air.

She was so dizzy with senseless feelings that she wasn't sure which way was up. She hugged him tighter, panting against his shoulder – her head turned away to avoid seeing that she was hugging this man while her body shivered with something between shock and excitement.

Her knees shook and threatened to sag limply. Here she was getting something she had so missed: the strength of a man to hold her and smooth away her worries.

I'm...hugging him and it feels good. Why does it feel so good?

They breathed against each other, and she could feel his breathing getting stronger – his heart thumping harder against her.

A hug, that's all it is. Just a hug. Trent can't fault me for giving Blake a hug, can he? But she broke away from that in her thoughts and also pushed Blake away from her in their embrace.

He let go. His eyes searched hers, looking at one and then the other and back and forth. He looked at her eyelashes, her lower lids, her right eye and left. He looked at her lips.

She backed away, pursing the object of his gaze.

Blake's look was intense. But his words were uncertain. "I...uh..."

Grilled cheese sandwich. The thought focused her. "Get away from the counter and I'll make them." Her words sounded harsh. *Get away from me.*

He appeared indecisive for but a few seconds. He retreated to the chair at the table and sat.

She nodded to herself. He was in his place, much like the pan was in its place on the stove. Neat, orderly, and where he belonged. *Nothing to see here; move along.* She prepared the grilled cheeses, carefully steering her mind away from thinking about the hug. *It was just a hug, check the bread. There was no feeling there, flip it over. The excitement was just shock, flip the other one. Simple.*

She took down two small plates and ignored the trembling in her arms. *I must be hungry.* But she wasn't. She deliberately cast away the memory of his strength – that manly certainty and solidness that had held her up when she would have fallen.

She emptied her mind and sought solace in the void of thoughts – the void of feelings. She watched the two sandwiches with unfocused eyes. A longing emptiness in her complemented the emptiness of her mind. *Maybe I am hungry.*

She set the two plates on the table while studiously avoiding Blake's searching eyes. She could tell he was in that pose – a barely contained coil of tension ready to spring into action, but he didn't move.

They ate in silence, the hug all but forgotten between them.

~ ~ ~

Molly shook her head in the Jeep. "I don't really need new clothes."
Blake was in full dense-man-mode. "Too bad."

She coughed a sigh. "I'm just going to be cleaning in them. Why would I want to wear new clothes?"

"Like I said, your jeans are distracting."

She looked down at her knees poking through the holes. "What? These stupid holes?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "So you can see my knees? How can that be distracting?"

"It's not just your knees."

"Huh?" She looked at him but felt a swell of something she wanted to avoid. She turned her head quickly and watched some blonde-haired, overdone bimbo driving her huge, bloated Suburban while concentrating on her cell phone. The insanity struck her.

He said, "Your butt is fraying, too. I can't help looking."

Her head snapped back to him. "My what?" She felt her eyes large and round and her breathing became puffs of panic.

He grimaced. "I'm sorry; I can't help it. And you're married, too. I know, I know, I shouldn't be looking."

Eight different thoughts assaulted her thought processes. She was married to Trent and Blake shouldn't be looking. They had hugged, but hugging wasn't so bad. Her jeans were fraying in the seat? Blake was distracted looking because he thought it was sexy? Someone thought she was sexy? She hoped there wasn't skin or panties showing. She felt an excitement creep in and crowd out the panic. Would Blake lie about it to make her feel good?

She realized her mouth was open and she was staring at the side of his face. His sandy hair might have been neatly trimmed, but it was full of boyish life, hanging in a textured tangle over his forehead. She realized she had an urge to ruffle his hair as she would a puppy. "Um..." She said it to clear her thoughts. It didn't work.

He looked at her briefly with a grave look. "Sorry about the hug. I don't know what came over me."

Me either. Her pulse began to race and an uncomfortable ache twisted inside her.

Looking forward and avoiding her eyes, he said, "A couple pairs of new jeans and you'll be set. Or a skirt, even."

"A skirt?"

"Yeah, one of those ankle-length things that hides everything."

She laughed abruptly, surprising herself. "Do you...really think my jeans are sexy?" *I can't believe it.*

He cast a glance at her again. "Not your jeans. You."

She dropped her mouth open, unable to speak. She felt the blush rushing up her face. The pounding of her pulse increased and a ringing began in her ears. She heard herself saying, "You're kidding."

His tone was stony. "I'm not a liar."

No, I didn't mean that. This isn't coming out right at all. She took in a shaky breath. "I guess...I'm flattered."

He jerked the wheel over and the Wagoneer swerved angrily into the drive of the shopping center.

Why is he mad? Is he mad at me? The blush left her face and was once again replaced by the customary paleness. If anything she thought she might even be whiter than normal. She felt the icy cold of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 7

Molly watched him yank his keys from the ignition.

He said, "Let's go."

She got out, trembling. It was chilly outside, but it wasn't the cause of her shaking.

He reached over and pushed down the door lock, then got out.

She scurried to him as he walked with a will towards the doors of the store. "Are you mad at me?"

"Mad?" His word was sharp. "At you? No. I'm mad at myself."

She could see then the struggle within him and the determination to control himself. *So strong.*

He pushed into the doors as if to fling them.

Molly followed, as scared as a mouse.

The clothing section wasn't huge like the big cities, but it had a better selection than Walmart, if more expensive.

He looked at the shelves of jeans. "I don't know what size you wear."

She looked down at what she was wearing. "These are a size three."

"Maybe you should get a bigger size."

She blinked in fear. "Why, am I getting fat?"

He blew out a breath. "No, you could stand to put a little meat on your hips." He pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed shut, and turned away.

"Do my clothes smell bad?"

"What?"

"You're acting like you smelled something bad."

A young woman gave her a curious look, walking by slowly.

Go away.

He said, "No, I'm trying to wipe the image from my mind."

"Of me being fat?"

He sighed tiredly. "No, of your hips. Just find some you like."

She looked down. "Sorry."

He was there in an instant. He lifted her chin with his curled finger. "Sorry for what? Being sexy? It's me that's being weak." His words came gritty, filled with guilt.

The trembling intensified in her. Her chin vibrated from his touch, sending shaking shivers down her insides. Her pulse thumped in response to the contact. *I've been in his home a month. Why does he affect me so? What's going on with me?*

His eyes were locked on hers.

She could see his own racing pulse and the deep breathing of someone who was ready for action.

He removed his hand and the strange sensations went with it.

She felt as if her body fell – suddenly drained of energy. She turned away languidly, her eyes passing over the jeans without really seeing them.

He said something about skirts that she didn't register.

Molly thought of Trent. *Come back and save me.* A sick feeling coiled around her core, filled with fear and war – a war for her identity. She realized she was standing and staring. She didn't know for how long.

She picked up a pair of jeans and held them out and up.

Blake came and stood beside her, looking. He was holding a skirt on a hangar. He said, "Why not try the size five?"

"Because my hips are getting meatier?"

"No, because the bigger ones will hide more."

A surge of sensuality sent her spinning like a ballerina on the dance floor of her mind. Holding up a pair of jeans with Blake at her side, talking about how to hide what he thought was sexiness seemed like a secret shared that could not be shared with others. Heat built in her and she leaned slightly closer to him while she held them out. "Are you sure? These fit better."

"They show off too much."

A flash of fire spiked up her middle and she realized she didn't want to hide anything. She could feel his heat radiating from his arm and she fought fiercely not to lean just a little closer to touch... *A little brush – just an*

accident. Trent couldn't be mad at that, could he? Her breathing was getting faster.

He moved away.

She lowered the jeans as if tired of holding them up – the loss of his proximity to her sending the tension away. *Why am I feeling so strange in a department store? This is ridiculous.* But she couldn't deny the feelings flowing through her.

He was holding up the skirt. "What do you think?"

It was a voluminous thing with pleats that would cover every inch of her from her waist down. She grimaced. "That would be a little harder being on my hands and knees."

He shut his eyes suddenly.

What?

He pursed his lips and then swallowed. He opened his eyes, a change there she couldn't decipher. "Do you like the color?" His tone was even and controlled.

"It's all right."

He sighed. "Do you like flower prints? I think they had some solid colors your size."

"Flower prints are okay."

He sighed louder and dropped the skirt down to his side. "I'll pick a couple. Find your jeans."

Why is he being so mean? Did I say something wrong? She picked out two new pairs in size three. The sick coil in her tightened.

~ ~ ~

She tried on the full-length skirt the next day, deliberately picking the day she would be cleaning the floors. *We'll see how this works.*

Blake ignored her while she made breakfast. He said nothing when she put down the plate. He didn't even look at her.

Did I make him mad? What's wrong? "Is breakfast okay?"

He looked up with a look of surprise – as if just realizing she was there. The carefully plastered look on his face didn't seem genuine. "Yes, of course."

She knew there wasn't anything wrong with the scrambled eggs, but his silence was eating at her. She couldn't suffer not knowing what he was

thinking. *Does he hate me?*

After breakfast, she rinsed the dishes. She could feel his eyes on her. She glanced back and caught his eyes rising from her skirt. *Was he staring at my butt?* "What's the matter?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe the skirt wasn't a good idea."

"What? Why?"

"It's a looser material than the blue jeans. It drapes...more..."

"Drapes? What do you mean?"

"It...shows more." He looked angry.

She felt the familiar surge of strange sensations in her bringing a giddiness that threatened to break into a smile. *No, I can't smile; that would be bad.* But the excitement coursed through her; she couldn't deny it, even if she did deny its expression.

She bent down to put the dishes in the sink.

He blew out a loud breath.

She straightened and he stood at the same time. She leaned back against the counter, watching him with wide eyes. *Is he going to blow up? Be mad at me?*

His fingers were twitching, looking as if they were itching to strangle. He took a step toward her and she gasped in a breath.

Her pulse was racing, beating a staccato tempest in her neck. *Does he mean to hit me? Is he that kind of a man?* But she knew he wasn't.

Then he took a larger step forward, coming to her fast. His hands came down on the counter on either side of her and his face was close, looking at her with a mixture of anger and desire.

Molly tilted her head to him automatically, her lips parted in a silent pant.

But he was gone – pushing off the counter and away from her. He spun, shoulders tense, and stomped into the mudroom.

She heard the back door slam. That draining, deflating sensation moved through her, leaving her empty and cold. *What did I do?* Water rimmed her eyelids and she fled to her bedroom.

CHAPTER 8

Molly fretted in her room later that evening. *I need to apologize. I don't want to be a problem to him.* She glanced at the clock; it was nearing the time he would go to bed. *I need to do it now before I miss the chance.*

She flicked off the light, but stood in the darkness of her room. *What if he gets angrier? What if I cause him to hate me?*

A movement in the hall startled her. Walking past in front of her in the pitch blackness was a shape. She almost gasped, but kept her silence in the doorway.

It was Blake, going to his bedroom.

Darn, I missed him. But maybe I can just go in and say what I need to say before he gets in bed. She knew she would have to hurry. Instead she retreated into her room, doomed by doubts. *If he's already mad, can he get any madder? Am I just making a mess of things?* She looked in the general direction of the lampstand. Her cell rested there. *Would Trent guide me?*

She didn't pick up the cell; she paced. *I need to do this. I need to do this. Just do it!* "What do I do, Annie?"

Her doll gave her the silent treatment – listening but not offering.

Turning on her heel, she moved quickly into the hallway. *Do it before I chicken out. Just apologize and get it over with.* She paused at his darkened doorway. Years of living alone in an empty house meant he never shut his door. Her fist was raised to knock on the frame. The lamp was already off in his room. *No, that would sound stupid in the dark; maybe I'll just call his name.*

But she didn't. She listened for a moment, holding her breath. She heard the shifting of the bed. *Darn, he's already in bed. I blew it.* Her shoulders

slumped and she started to turn to go back to her room.

Blake gasped lightly. His bed was around the corner of the door to the left and against the far wall.

She couldn't see him, but she could hear him. She turned back. *Is he crying?*

He groaned softly.

No, not crying.

In the inky darkness of the hallway, she leaned her head around the corner.

The light from his old flip digital alarm clock cast a very faint orange glow on the bed. She squinted and tried to focus on the shapes. She opened her mouth to call his name but froze suddenly when she saw the movement.

He was doing something, moving.

She realized he was masturbating.

An icy-hot flush of embarrassment eroded all her will to apologize. *Oh my god, I need to leave. How embarrassing.*

His gasp stopped her.

His groan hooked her and lured her back around the corner.

She tried to focus again. Movement that could only be his hand drew her nearly blind gaze in. She couldn't see anything, but she knew what was happening.

Blake was moving faster, panting quicker. "Oh yeah." His whisper sounded loud in her ears.

Then she heard the words that blew her world.

He groaned and said, "Yes, Molly. Oh...fuck..." He began grunting desperately.

Heat flooded her between her legs and she felt her nipples harden. She pulled back away from his door, holding her breath. A few hand-touches to the wall and she was back in her room.

She was shaking so hard her teeth were rattling. She gripped her wedding ring and held on.

~ ~ ~

It was Saturday, the morning after her discovery of Blake's nocturnal deed. She looked at her other skirt he had bought. She selected it since her jeans were still drying in the laundry room.

Her underwear was a different story. She scowled at her only clean pair of panties. She had just come off her cycle a few days back and unfortunately had ruined them, even after laundering. *I'm not wearing those.*

She crumpled them and tossed them on the bed to dispose of later. Washing hadn't saved them. *Good thing he bought the skirts. Can't run around with no panties in jeans.*

She came out of the bathroom later and headed to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Blake was sitting, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper. The aroma of coffee and leather that permeated the house comforted her soul. He did not acknowledge her.

That's odd, you'd think he would at least say something after his activity last night... Her mind started to slow, focusing on what she had mostly heard, rather than seen. *Would have been nice to see it.*

She blinked rapidly and shook her head.

He said, "Are you feeling all right?"

"Um, just need some coffee, I think." She poured herself a cup, her back to him. She moved over and began preparing breakfast – all the while, feeling his eyes on her. She resisted the urge to turn around.

During breakfast, she stole looks at him while he ate: he did not look at her. *Did the thought of me last night disgust him? It didn't sound like it. Why is he so cold this morning? She couldn't figure why he would masturbate thinking of her and then be so distant the next morning. Sort of like high school? Cum and dump?*

She went about cleaning feeling dejected – rejected the next day after something that secretly had excited her. *He was attracted to me but now he isn't? I was sexy yesterday but not today? Maybe he was imagining my torn and worn jeans.*

She was on her hands and knees, cleaning the area behind the sink pedestal in his bathroom when she heard him. She looked back.

He was blinking and looking uncomfortable. "Maybe you should be wearing jeans."

She sat up on her ankles, kneeling. "They were drying."

"You washed them two days ago."

"Well, yeah, but I didn't think you'd want me to be running to the laundry room in my t-shirt and panties."

He blinked faster and then pulled on his shirt collar. "Uh..."

"I'll be wearing them tomorrow."

He sighed with relief. "Good. I think those skirts are worse."

She looked left and right for an answer that was hidden nowhere.

"Why? They cover everything."

"But they drape. I would swear you're not wearing panties."

She blushed, very embarrassed. "Actually, I'm not."

He pulled on his shirt collar again. With an exasperated gasp, he said, "Whyever not?"

Her voice dropped low and so did her gaze. "I only have one pair left. They have to get washed."

He threw up his hands. "Why didn't you say something at the store?"

"I didn't think it was appropriate to be talking to another man about my panties."

He chuckled sharp and short. "Uh, well, maybe not."

"Sorry."

"You only have one pair left?"

"And I'll wear them tomorrow."

He ran a hand through his hair and glanced down at her several times. "I guess I could drive you back to the store and just hand you fifty dollars."

It seemed so odd to her to be talking about Blake buying her panties. How would she explain that to her husband? *Hi, honey. Blake bought me panties.* It just didn't seem right.

He sighed again and pursed his lips. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

She looked down again. *He knows?*

"I'll try not to gawk."

And that sent the dejection in her soaring into daring; she wanted him to gawk. *Why? What is this? Why did Trent dump me here? I got traded for a lousy truck?* She fought back tears, not sure if they threatened over this outrageous deal her husband had struck or over Blake's resolve not to look at her. *Nothing is going my way; I'm at the dead-end of life.*

She bent back forward and took a savage swipe at the last area of flooring. She felt him watching.

~ ~ ~

Dinner that evening, just a month after she had been dumped off, was a steak and mashed potato meal.

She felt his eyes on her. *What's changed since breakfast? And why didn't he take me to the store like he said?*

She cleaned the plates in the sink and put them in the dishwasher. She could hear him breathing behind her, sitting in his chair and watching her.

She heard him stand while she rinsed the sink.

Arms slid around her waist that shocked her to inaction. She froze, tensing, feeling the surge of sensations that erased all trace of rational thinking. Her lips parted and she breathed rapidly through her mouth.

He hugged her from behind, pressed fully against her.

Her head swam as his breath blew a hot breeze across the skin of her neck. She closed her eyes and put her hands on his arms as they encircled her. A warmth and buzzing comfort filled her being. She relaxed in his arms as she faced the sink. She could feel his manliness pressed against her butt and a tendril of ache radiated up from her pussy into her inner core.

Gone were the feelings of dejection, rejection, and consternation. Something comforting flooded her and her heart beat with a joy she had long regarded as fable.

His one word sent shivers down her spine. "Molly..."

Her heart responded immediately, beating faster.

He turned her slowly, not really letting go.

She allowed it, following his lead, until she was face to face with him, seeing each other with their eyes and something else inside.

He leaned his head in and she allowed it. No, she welcomed it. Their lips met and his first tentative flick of tongue sent her spiraling to dizzying heights in her mind.

She kissed him back and he warmed immediately, kissing deeper. Her tongue and lips moved over his and she pressed herself forward against him, wanting to feel all of his strength pressed to her, fortifying her, filling her, and reinforcing her against the coming loss when they parted.

He pressed forward too, until they were crushed together, man to woman, melded and warm. His hand cupped her head, holding her mouth to his as he explored her intimacy.

A sound distracted him, and then her. He broke the kiss and she panted.

She said, "What's that? What's wrong?"

He said, "I think that's your cell phone."

In a chilling flash of ice and separation, they were apart. With the flush of guilt, she ran to the bedroom. *Trent?*

It was. "Hi, honey." His voice, so familiar, sent the guilt wringing harsher around her soul.

Her voice shook. "Hi."

Trent blew out a breath on the other end. "Wow, I'm tired. But it's a good tired. How have you been?"

She heard Blake in the doorway behind her. She tried to keep her voice from shaking. "Fine..."

"Sorry I didn't call earlier but these twelve hour days are killer. I get in the camper and just collapse."

"That's all right."

"I'll try to call on Sundays; it's my only day off."

"Oh...what do you do on Sundays?" She tried to talk about anything to drown out the insistent memory of Blake's lips against hers.

"Do a lot of lottery tickets."

Disappointment flooded her. "Don't you make enough to not buy them?"

Her husband's voice got excited, despite the weariness. "That's the thing. We can afford so much more now. We're going to hit the big one, I know it."

She sighed. "The more tickets you buy, the longer you'll be gone."

"When we win the jackpot, I can come home right away."

"How much are you spending?"

He sounded disappointed. "Not as much as I want. I put half of everything into tickets this last week, but I want to get to the point where I'm investing five grand per month. We can't lose with all those chances."

Five grand? That leaves three grand per month? "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh, come on, Molly. We've been at the bottom for so long I think you actually like it down there. We can't win if we don't buy the tickets. Someone has to win and I want it to be me."

She touched her lips, wiping at them and remembering Blake's kiss. The sick coil unwound in her with a ferocity that fueled her desperation. "I want you to come home."

"I will, baby, I swear. And we'll be rich."

She sighed.

He said, "Is Blake treating you all right? How's it working out?"

She laughed on the edge of sanity and tears. "He's fine. Everything's fine here." She licked her lips. *Yes, his kisses are fine, too, dear.* Tears rimmed her eyelids.

"I'll call tomorrow, okay? I'm going to crash."

"Okay." Her one word was small against the enormity of her plight.

"I love you."

She wanted him to know. She wanted her words to bring him back and save her. "I love you, too."

CHAPTER 9

Molly clicked off the cell phone and put it down slowly. *What am I going to do?*

Blake entered and stood behind her. His hands descended lightly on her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

She spun and gripped him, the tears rolling freely. She buried her face against his neck and said, "No. No...it's my fault."

He shook his head. "No, really. I shouldn't be kissing a married woman. And my friend's wife at that. I'm not that kind of man."

She looked up desperately, searching his eyes. *Don't abandon me. Don't do that to me.* She kissed him fast, before he could move.

He resisted, stiff at first, and then kissed her back. The coil of sickness in her intensified and at the same time, the previous feelings of comfort and satisfaction returned. It was a bittersweet flavor that hinted at something darker and ominous.

She kissed deeper and more passionately, trying to reclaim what she had felt at the sink.

He pushed her gently and lowered her to the bed.

Panic flooded her at the same time as an exploding passion. Her body trembled from the war being waged within her. She pulled on him as he climbed over her, lying on her as their lips met again. It was just a kiss; they were fully clothed. But his weight on her pressed away the worries and submerged her in satisfaction.

She could feel him trembling, trying to hold back – trying to control whatever drove him to kiss her. She held onto him with her arms, squeezing, seeking to pull at his resistances and uncover what passion he

was trying to hide. *What are you holding back? And why? Do you hate me? Or do you like me? Is a kiss all you can spare for me because I'm married?*

Her thoughts drifted into something meaningless as his tongue pushed into her mouth slowly. She felt the heat and moisture in her pussy, safely hidden from him, as he warmed her with his solid weight.

He broke the kiss and looked down at her. His hand stroked lightly at her hair. He was looking, searching her eyes for something.

She looked back, wanting to know how to provide him the answer for which he desired.

Then he was off, crawling away with a look of grim determination. He was trembling visibly and his jeans showed a lump where they normally didn't.

Torn by the excitement of exciting him and the pain of loss at his getting off of her, she half reached to pull him back, but far too late.

His words and look were stony. "I shouldn't be doing this to you. You love your husband."

She sat up quickly. "No, wait—"

But his back was already to her, leaving her room and her alone.

~ ~ ~

Sunday breakfast was a little awkward. Molly had chosen her older jeans that were torn and frayed. She hoped to bring back the Blake she had seen emerge. Was it too late? Had his resolve firmed? Was masturbating about her enough for him so that hiding everything else became easy?

He avoided looking at her, but she could see the tension in his face.

When she rinsed the dishes, she hoped he would hug her as he had done the previous night. He did not, but she felt his eyes on her. *Why do you look at me when you know I can't see?*

She expected him to take her to the store and waited for something to be said, but nothing was. Having all the cleaning done so she could take a day off for herself, she decided to go for a walk. A stroll through his orchards might help clear her mind or give her insight.

She noticed him out of the corner of her eye giving her a strange look when she went out the front door.

A chill wind blew and a cold sun greeted her. The trees surrounding the property on three sides whispered promises to her with the wind. The cold

was not enough to deter her and she wandered into the bright gold of the autumn peach trees. Golden leaves on the trees moved in the wind and sun and also shifted gracefully on the ground.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Blake and Trent were on her mind, chasing her through corridors of questions. Why had Trent traded her for a truck? Even if it was temporary, shouldn't their love have kept them together? Wasn't that how all the songs went? And why had Blake become interested in her? Was it interest? Was it fascination? Was it just her worn jeans that hadn't seemed to impress him this morning?

She looked up and closed her eyes, letting the sun rest on her face. *What do I do? I love my husband and yet I find myself thrilled with his friend in a way I shouldn't. What's happening?*

Running steps broke her probing thoughts. She blinked her eyes open and looked to see Blake trotting to her through the leaves.

His look was angry and curious, a mixture of conflict that created within her a tension and caused her shoulders to clench. He said, "Are you all right?" His eyes told her he expected a certain answer.

The strength she saw in those blue eyes and the determination in the lines of his jaw melted her insides to jelly. She stammered, "Y—Yes. Why?"

He scowled, his eyebrows drawn down. "I don't want to be doing something that causes you pain."

She searched his eyes and face, looking for a trace of something she could use to decipher his puzzle. "I'm..."

He gripped her shoulders, looking more intently at her. "I'm trying to control myself; I want you to know that."

Why? She blinked, wondering why she was thinking that. Did she really want him to let go? Should she? Her husband flashed through her mind; he was somewhere to the north, working for them and hoping for a better future for them together. Should she be standing here in the leaves with his friend? But there was nothing wrong with what she was doing, really. She was just standing there.

He was gripping her still, searching her face.

They stood in the orchard of trees with only the wind stirring the leaves for sound.

She felt at peace, but at the same time filled with a yearning tension that was grasping for something unseen. She felt the immediacy of need for

action, but couldn't discern what it was. Was she supposed to twist from his grip? Slip away and let him deal with his own tortured efforts of control? Why didn't she want to? Was she supposed to stand still and hope his will was strong enough for both of them? And did she want him to be strong?

She stood on the edge of something high, but was as fragile as one of the leaves beneath their feet.

Blake shook her, ever so gently, his mouth twisted in determination. He opened his mouth to speak, his eyes frantically searching hers. His fingers gripped tighter on her shoulders but whatever he was about to say, he didn't. He snapped his mouth shut in a firm line and turned away.

She watched him stride through the leaves as if striding towards his destiny – away from her.

Stunned loss replaced whatever yearning tension had been there. Had she missed something? Had he been about to say something devastating? Had she missed an opportunity to draw it out of him? *Why didn't I act, instead of thinking?*

She watched him enter the barn.

Loud clanging sounds echoed out angrily. It sounded as if he was throwing things methodically around.

She stood there, mouth opened, wondering after him. Alone in the leaves with the wind, she listened to the slow cacophony of metallic impacts from the barn. Something metal went spinning across the floor of the barn, making that wobbling sound as would a trash can lid settling loudly on concrete. *What's he doing in there?*

More banging, this time faster, as if he were punching something, or kicking it.

Is he angry at me? And why? For wearing the old jeans?

A growl emanated from the barn with the cessation of sound.

~ ~ ~

Molly sat on the couch, watching him come and go about the house. He seemed focused on one thing, then something else, moving with a purpose that said he was going to accomplish something.

Finally, he stood before her, fists and teeth clenched. "Bird season starts Tuesday. Don't hunt bird much, but think I'll take off for a week. We can go to the store and get you stocked up."

She stood. *A week? What?* "Wait, you're leaving?"

He gave an abrupt nod. His blue eyes were sharp and loaded.

She clutched his arm. "Don't go."

"I can't stay here—"

"Why?"

He jerked his arm back, but she held on. He said, "I need to get away."

From me. "Why? I don't want you to go. Is it because of me?"

He went still and silent. After a deep breath, he said, "Yes."

"Why?" Her voice held a high quaver.

He pressed his lips together in effort, breathing through his nose. Through clenched teeth, he said, "Because I want you like no other woman."

Ice flowed down her spine and she dropped her mouth open in surprise. Warmth flowed up from her pussy and collided with the ice in a spray of shivers that sent tremors through her limbs.

He sighed again, straightening. "And you're married to my friend."

She gripped his arm tighter, not wanting to let go, now that she knew his struggle. "But—"

"I need to get away."

"I don't want you to."

His jaw clenched. "Don't you understand? It's all I can do to keep my hands off you." He bent his head towards her to give force to his words. "I need you. I want you and I can't have you." He started to pull back.

Her hands clawed. *Act and stop thinking!* "Wait, maybe we can help each other." Her mind was flying in every direction. *Help each other? Why did I say that? I want to feel him, touch him, feel his touch.*

He frowned. "Help each other? How?"

That's what I'd like to know. Maybe the truth... "I heard you the other night..."

"Heard me? What?" His eyes drew down in suspicion.

"I..." She swallowed. "I wanted to apologize and went to your bedroom. I heard you...call my name."

He was as still as a pillar.

She pulled on his arm, thinking fast, and grabbing at the first thought that came to her mind. "Maybe you could help me talk to my husband." She blushed, unable to believe what she was thinking.

"Huh?" He looked completely confused.

Don't think about it. Just say it. "Could I...play with you while I talk to him? I could pretend it's him..." She pulled his arm again, quivering with fright, panic, and desperation. "Please?"

"Play with me while you talk to Trent? So you can imagine it's him?"

"Yes."

She heard her cell phone. *Answer me, Blake, please. Hurry.* She pulled his arm again.

He sighed through gritted teeth, but his voice was a guttural whisper and a fire was in those blue eyes. "I'll do it."

CHAPTER 10

Molly raced for the bedroom, pulling Blake with her. The tremors in her limbs became worse; she almost felt as if she were vibrating.

She snatched up the cell phone. "Take your pants off." A panic was in her voice and thoughts. *I'm doing this? Really? Me?*

He removed his jeans.

She answered. "Hello?"

Trent's voice bombarded her with guilt. "Hi, hun." He groaned on the other end, as if stretching. "How's it going there?"

She opened her mouth, watching Blake kick off his jeans. "It's going."

He sighed on the other end. "I swear I could sleep all day."

She motioned to Blake's boxers and pointed down, a thrill pushing in and making a counterattack against the guilt. The phone call, if anything, gave her enough courage by its immediacy to do something she might have never done – a release from the tension of needing to do something, if anything at all. She got on the bed. "Are you getting enough to eat?"

Blake straightened from removing his boxers. The head of his cock hung swollen, just peeking out from under his shirt.

Molly's eyes were large and her breathing was rapid. *Simple words. Action. Not endless thinking about what might happen. This is the result and it was so easy.*

Trent said, "Yup. No problem there. I guess we're both eating better, huh?" He laughed.

Blake motioned questioningly to the bed.

"Yes," she said to both.

Blake climbed up and rested his back up against the headboard. She scooted to his side and looked in wonder at his hardening cock. *I'm actually doing this! No way, it was so easy.* She reached out and paused just before touching it. Her thoughts tried to intrude, bringing self-doubt and guilt for company. She pushed her thoughts firmly away.

Trent said, "Do you eat with him?"

She dropped her shaking hand down onto Blake's erection and closed her eyes. "Yes..."

"Oh, I didn't know if he made you eat separate or something."

She moved her hand along its length and gently squeezed the helmet. "No, he's not like that." Touching another man's cock while talking to her husband did sort of link her to him in a way and gave her a little more courage and comfort to handle Blake's erection.

"Miss me?"

She began stroking Blake's shaft. "Yes, it's hard."

Her husband sighed. "Aw, I love you, Molly."

Act. Stop thinking about everything or you'll never stop being abandoned, dumped, and forgotten. She bent over and pulled her hair back. "I love you, too." She opened her mouth and placed it over Blake's cock, sliding her lips down his shaft. He tasted so good and his erection stuffed her mouth. *Suck him. Suck him and just do it; don't think.*

"It's awful lonely up here. Work around a bunch of guys. I feel really sorry for all the single men; they're all chasing after the same few women who live up here."

She moved her head faster up and down, enjoying the solid shaft brushing back and forth in her mouth. She pulled off and licked her lips. "Sounds like the women are in the sweet spot. Don't have to settle for the first guy that comes along." She used her hand to stroke Blake. His eyes were shut and there was a look of relaxation on his slack face.

Her husband laughed. "Yeah, I guess you could look at it that way. But the poor guys."

"What do you do with rebar, anyway?" She lowered her mouth back down and sucked.

"Oh, that was just the first couple weeks. Building some forms. I work with the mud crew now."

She listened to her husband describe what the mud was for though she wasn't really paying attention. She sucked and stroked, marveling at Blake's

erection. He wasn't huge, but he had a perfect shape to his circumcised cock. Not huge, but still longer than her husband.

An ache twisted in her and she stroked him faster.

Trent said, "I wish there was time to come see you or a way to bring you up here. I miss sleeping next to you."

"I miss you, too."

"I miss the other stuff, too." He chuckled.

So did she. "I'm sort of thinking about that right now." She lowered her mouth again and gave Blake a big suck. He was panting. She heard her husband sigh on the other end as she sucked hard up and down on Blake's cock.

Trent groaned. "Torturing myself isn't going to do any good. Guess I'll get my shopping out of the way. Need to buy some more lunchmeat."

She went back to stroking and licked her lips. "Okay." *That's okay, dear. You dumped me for a truck and I have a handful of cock right now.* But she didn't feel all of the anger for it. Hiding there with the resentment was the love she still had for her husband.

Trent hummed on the other end. "I'll give you a call tomorrow night around seven. Let you know how my lottery tickets go."

Great. "Okay."

"I love you." Her husband's voice sent serenity over the lines and into her soul.

Her hand slowed on Blake's cock and she sighed peacefully. "I love you, too."

Blake got off the bed after the call ended.

She looked at him in confusion – the look on his face was accusatory.

He said, "Is that what you wanted?"

Oh no, did I do something that damaged something? Her eyes large and panicked, she said, "Yes, thank you."

He stooped and scooped his boxers and jeans. With a twist of his mouth, he left the room.

What did I do? I wanted to feel you, Blake. Why are you so mad?

~ ~ ~

She came out of her room and worried over nothing in the kitchen: it was clean. Instead, she worried inside. *Did I totally blow it? Was my lame*

excuse to want to imagine my husband too lame? Does he think I'm weird? Why didn't I think this through? Why did I have to act instead of thinking about it?

His entry into the kitchen was startling.

She jumped and grabbed her shirt. "Oh, it's you."

He stared at her for the longest time, a tense silence stretching between the two that left her breathless. He took two steps and gripped her chin, forcing her to look him in the eyes. "You didn't use me to imagine your husband, did you?"

Convulsive trembles tore through her. Her voice was a whisper. "No."

She was lifted suddenly in a scoop that took her feet out from under her. She was hefted easily in his arms. Her squawk of surprise sounded so much like a dippy duck.

He carried her out of the kitchen.

"What are you doing? What's wrong?"

His voice was gravel and lava. "I'm going to give you what you need."

"What?"

He strode into the bedroom and tossed her down onto the bed.

She bounced, legs and arms flailing.

He grabbed her legs and pulled her hips to the edge of the bed.

"What are you doing? Wait."

"Waiting's done." He yanked on her jeans button, undoing it with a jerk.

"You can't do this; I'm married."

"Sort of like how you blew me but you're married?"

She gasped as he pulled down her jeans. She struggled up and he pushed her back down. She tried to clamp her legs shut, but he was already yanking her jeans down over her knees. Her pussy was exposed and his eyes lit hungrily on it, like a wolf slavering over meat. She gasped. "You can't—"

"I can and will. I want you and I'm going to have you."

Explosions of lust, guilt and passion threw rainbows of color through her mind, even though her eyes weren't really registering much in her panic. Her knees were forced open. Her chest heaved as if she were drowning and gulping water but getting no air.

Then his tongue touched her pussy and everything she was and felt went spinning out of the window. She lost control and flopped limply on the bed as his tongued torched a scorching fire up her pussy and deep up inside.

She heard herself cry out in tension and relief, though she felt no control over the sounds she was making.

He savaged her clit with his tongue, driving an enormous, unseen wedge of ache twisting up her insides. The hair rose on her arms and even they felt filled with tension. She panted faster, driven by the soft mash of his tongue on her.

She felt her pussy lips spread to the invasion of his fingers. Spirals of spiky pleasure ripped up her waist, tickling the area where the top of her thighs melded with her lower abdomen. She cried out again, gasping faster and groaning when she could. His fingers moved, pushing at the ache and giving waves of temporary relief. But the ache kept coming back stronger. The tension increased in her until she felt as if her trembling was vibrating the entire bed. She felt fragile, on the edge of a mighty fall – barely able to breathe.

His fingers curled up and his mouth sucked at her clit. The dual change tossed her fast over the edge and she was consumed immediately by a crushing wave of release. Tension exploded into a million fragments of pleasure and tingled along her limbs. She cried out loudly at the shock, then gasped as the tension came back again with a ferocity that shook her even harder.

Her body convulsed repeatedly, sending away the waves of tension with explosive releases that became almost painful with pleasure. She panted loudly as the waves slowed, and finally pushed Blake's head away.

Her clit tingled and pulsed with relief. She blew out a large, shaky breath. "Wow." Tingles ran up her body in a spray of sensuality and satisfaction. She looked along her body.

Blake was standing, removing his clothes.

Her eyes went large. "Um..."

He stopped, mid-button on his shirt. His cock was already half hard and bobbing gently. "What?"

"I...don't know." *Should I? I'm married to Trent; I can't let Blake fuck me. That would be adultery. But isn't this what I want? What if I let him? What if he treats me like a slut after? What if Trent finds out? What if—*

A scowl settled on Blake's face. He bent down and picked up her jeans. He tossed them down on the bed beside her. "Get dressed."

But—

He turned and left the room.

Wait...

CHAPTER 11

Molly cried silently in her room. *Why did I stop him? Why can't I be more decisive? Why did I get dumped here and left alone? Why am I faced with choices I can't seem to make?*

She made him dinner; she made nothing for herself.

He scowled at her, anger in his face.

Maybe I was right to stop him. He hates me now because I didn't put out.

His look got worse as she stood there, arms crossed, and watched him eat.

He finally said, "Why aren't you eating?"

Huh? "I didn't feel hungry."

"You need to eat." The heat in his voice flowed with the anger on his face.

"It's kind of hard to have an appetite when you're so mad at me all the time."

"Mad? I'm not mad at you."

She laughed incredulously. "Your eyebrows are all drawn down, you've got a frown on your face. Because I didn't put out—"

He was up from his chair with an explosion of movement. "I'm mad that you're torturing yourself with this not-eating kick."

"Kick? What?"

He gripped her and shook her gently. "I don't want to see you going hungry ever again. Ever." The force and heat in his last word sent her still.

She searched his eyes. The anger she saw didn't seem to be hateful. "You don't hate me?"

His face hardened. "You don't get it, do you?"

Her mouth was opened and she was unable to formulate a response. *I'm not getting a lot of things, apparently. Why are things not like I'm thinking? Do I need to think more? Or less? Maybe I need a good month to think things through.*

He released her and sat back down, then he pushed his plate back. "If you aren't eating, neither am I."

He doesn't like my food? "Why?"

His words were hot. "I just told you; why aren't you listening?"

"But—"

"It rips me apart to see you so torn and suffering. It makes me want to kill."

Kill me? Or kill something else? Why are men so difficult to figure out? I need to think more, not less.

He sat there, staring at her for a moment. Then he got up in disgust and walked out of the kitchen.

~ ~ ~

Molly fretted all night, remembering his tongue on her and recalling the confusion of indecision and emotional uncertainty afterwards.

Had she been right to let him lick her? She had most definitely enjoyed it. But had she been right to stop him from making love to her? It seemed right. It seemed like the thing to do – uphold her marriage vows and draw the line.

But why did it leave her feeling so empty?

Was she at fault because she did the right thing? And if it was the right thing, why did it feel like such a total failure? Wouldn't Trent celebrate her chastity? Shouldn't Blake respect it? Why wasn't the world and angels singing of her strength?

Why did she feel like a total loser?

She cried on her left side into her pillow. Later, she flipped over and cried on her right side, too. Neither helped; she still felt like a loser.

Is this what marriage is supposed to be? Empty? Needing and not getting? Wanting and starving? Being traded for a truck?

Anger filtered through her dejection.

Why did this have to happen to me? We were supposed to be billionaires with his Microsoft certificate and our purchase of Lotto tickets. Why had we fallen into the pit of white-trash? Why is my husband off buying more stupid lottery tickets instead of facing life together with me?

She flipped over and pounded a fist into her pillow in frustration. I've been abandoned for a dream of lottery bonanzas. Lottery tickets aren't a tax on people who are really bad at math, no sir. Whoever you were, you were wrong. The lottery is a tax on stupid people.

She tossed over onto her other side, fuming. I've tried to think things through and it hasn't helped. I've tried, by God, I've tried. Maybe I'm too stupid to figure things out. Maybe God didn't bless me with enough brain cells to come up with the right answers. Every time I think around Blake, he gets worse.

She wanted to get up and march into his room, shaking a finger and saying... What? Say what?

She flopped onto her back, blowing out a large breath. Face it Molly, you're no good at thinking your way through things. No good at all. You got dumped for a truck and a lottery dream. Fact. Face it or be forever stupid.

She gritted her teeth until her jaw hurt, and stared in the darkness up at the ceiling. Something firmed in her, but she knew not what. She didn't try to think it through before she drifted to sleep.

She dreamt of Trent opening the back of the camper and lottery tickets stuffed all the way to the ceiling. She dreamt of Blake stomping around and throwing her on the bed. And she dreamt of lonely peach trees surrounding her in loneliness.

~ ~ ~

She cleaned Monday as usual, trying to be quiet around Blake and not disturb whatever mood he was in. He still seemed angry. Breakfast had been quiet and she had eaten. At least his face had softened a little then.

She wore her skirt because her panties were in the laundry, though Blake stayed away most of the day.

By dinner, though, he had started to be near her, watching.

He said, "I guess I really should take you and let you buy some underwear."

Did she want to? The idea of him looking at her appealed to her; she didn't want him to stop looking. "I think I like the skirts. Don't really need to bother with panties if I wear them. Although, during my monthly I will..." she trailed off, embarrassed.

But he was nodding, not laughing. The look on his face was thoughtful. "It doesn't bother you, running around with no panties?"

Not around you. She blushed. "Um, everything's well-hidden away..." She would never have thought of going without panties around her husband – the thought just wouldn't have crossed her mind. Why did she want to around Blake?

She pushed the thoughts away; thinking had gotten her nowhere.

A ghost of a smile twitched on his lips.

He likes the idea? Or is he laughing at me? No, stop thinking. Start doing. Make a change, Molly, she told herself. "I...don't mind you looking." Her breath caught and she held it for fear of gasping.

The smile spread.

She found herself smiling back without any control over her face that she could find. Her blush deepened. "Trent is going to call in about forty minutes."

His smile sank.

She went on quickly. "But I want to...play."

His eyes sharpened. "You admitted you weren't really thinking of him."

"It was the truth. In a way I was, but I wanted to feel you."

The smile tried a tentative twitch. "You want to play with me while you're talking to him?"

She bit her trembling lip and nodded.

"Are you sure?"

Don't think! "I want it." It was the truth, damn the consequences.

The smile bloomed again. "All right."

~ ~ ~

They were lying on the bed, playing with each other. Her hand moved up and down his shaft. His fingers moved in and out of her pussy. She was content and hot. So was their kiss.

She squeezed his shaft. Her whisper shook with heat and fear. "I want to feel it. Inside." Waves of panic and desire collided in her, but she was

determined to act and not think.

His erection twitched in her hand, swelling impressively as it flexed with his gasp. He began to tremble, his muscles tense. He started to say something but stopped himself. He shut his mouth and a look of determination covered his face. He leaned up and began crawling over her.

She had to force herself to open her legs, but once she did, she relaxed. His manliness positioning himself at her most private entrance made her want to submit and surrender. Spread open, she was ready to be taken and an unbelievable itch grew in her as his cock came closer to her pussy. She clenched, already wanting his cock inside her gnawing emptiness.

He gripped himself and touched her pussy with it.

She tensed immediately, gasping, and then slowly relaxed as he twirled the head around. What had seemed like it might be the end of the world had instead turned into something familiar: a man's penis against her pussy. It hadn't been hard, except in her mind. Relaxing as she did, she reached for him and arched her hips. "Put it in—"

He was pushing in. After not having sex for so long, she thought she had shrunk and would be ripped open. But she didn't rip or tear or explode like she thought. Her lips stretched open and she felt the familiar filling sensation as his cock slid deep into her. The fullness banished the emptiness. A perfect fit and perfect feel. Her mouth was open and she let out a long sigh of intense relief.

Once again, her hole was satisfied with a man; it was what she was made for. Their union was male and female, strength and emotion twined together in a bond of flesh.

He began moving, sliding in and out, leaving delicious thrills spinning through her as his shaft made fantastic friction on her stretched lips. His hardness quenched her hunger. His thrusts moved her with force and familiarity. Something so wonderful that she had shared with her husband was now being shared with Blake, and there was no difference in the feel of the act.

Why had she been so timid?

Blake's cock drove down into her, affirming his desire in an intimate sharing of passion.

She clutched at him.

He pulled out.

She looked at him horrified. *Don't take it away.*

He motioned. "Hands and knees."

Oh, change positions... She rolled over and knelt.

The slap that landed on her ass was not hard, but the shock of it altogether caused her to cry out in surprise.

He said, "That's for teasing me." His cock shoved at her entrance and she moaned at the feel of salacious stretching and the slight sting on her ass cheek.

His shaft speared into her and her arms collapsed, her face driven into the bed. She let out a long groan of lust and satisfaction.

Her phone rang.

Blake growled and began to pull out.

She whipped her ankles up to his hips and said, "No."

"But he's—"

"I want you inside." She grabbed the cell and settled forward into a comfortable position. She thumbed the Call button. "Hello?"

Trent's comforting voice came through. "Hi, hun."

"Hi."

Blake wasn't moving.

Trent said, "Well, didn't do too well with the tickets, but I've got a couple hundred of the big balls. So we'll see what the big one turns up. They draw tomorrow."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I'm excited about it."

"I hope you win."

He shifted around on the other end. "I miss you."

You dumped me. But she told him the truth. "I miss you, too." She reached under and grabbed Blake's balls and the base of his shaft. She massaged.

Her husband's voice deepened a little. "So what are you doing?"

"Not much. I'm on the bed in my room."

"Mmm, wish I was there. You know I played with myself last night a little, thinking of you."

"You did?"

"Yeah, I'm sort of doing that right now." He chuckled. "What about you? Are you able to talk?"

She pushed herself back on Blake's cock, feeling his fullness slide deep. "Yes."

"I've got it out and I'm playing with it. That's not gross, is it?"

"No, of course not." She pushed back again, ramming her butt back against Blake's hips. She closed her eyes as his cock went deep again – deeper than her husband's could go.

"Oh? Good. Are you...playing...?" He sounded excited.

She reached and gripped Blake's shaft and began stroking it while the head was inside her. She gasped. "Yes."

"Does it feel good?"

She squeezed Blake's cock and then shoved back on it. "Very good."

Trent moaned on the other side.

Blake gripped her hips and shoved hard, forcing his cock into her over and over.

She dropped her head down onto the bed and moaned happily. Her pussy was up in the air and open, admitting Blake and taking it all with an overwhelming relief. *You traded me for a truck, and now I'm being fucked and loving it.* "Oops, I think I hear Blake coming. Gotta go." She was panting and clicked off the phone.

The phone went flying as she was suddenly flipped over.

Blake moved between her spread-eagled legs and thrust his stiff erection back into her. She moved up the bed with the force of the thrust and cried out in surprise. He pounded into her, grunting with effort, driving his cock deep and hard.

Her pussy didn't stand a chance. It tried clenching at him, tried feeling each move, but was so overwhelmed that it built a furious frenzy of need deep inside her. His hips pounded into hers, his balls slapped her ass, and the entire bed moved and squeaked with his thrusts.

Molly was almost hyper-ventilating. The sensations in her pussy were so intense and fast that she felt as if she couldn't catch her breath. She spread her legs out farther, getting a grip with her feet, and humping her hips back up at him. She offered her married pussy to this man to be taken and dominated. She wanted it. She wanted to be violated by Blake. She wanted to fuck him while her husband was away.

It was with immense satisfaction and success that she felt Blake unload inside her, squirting his hot seed deep. She groaned loud at the completion of the violation, fully happy and satisfied.

Why did I try to hold back?

EPILOGUE

Molly was riding Blake in his bed. Her hips moved slowly, her pussy sliding up and down his shaft.

He said, "I wonder if Trent will get Christmas off?"

It had been three months since their first fuck. They had followed with a spree of pairings that lost number in the amount. She had never felt so satisfied.

She shrugged. "He hasn't said. Been rather secretive about it. But he said he had a present for you."

"Probably my truck."

Molly nodded. "It's been enough time to get that used RV he had his eyes on."

Blake's face clouded. "I don't want you to go."

She smiled, warmed by his sentiment. "Oh? And why not? You'll have your truck back."

"It might have started that way..."

"But?" She wanted to hear it. Bastard Blake had been stubbornly obstinate.

He held his breath and pursed his lips.

She twisted her mouth. "Come on, you won't miss me."

"Yes, I will."

"Why? Why, Blake Parker? Tell me why."

A smile flicked across his uncertain face. He drew a breath.

She pushed down on his chest as if to shove him. "Why?"

He looked away. "Because I love you."

Finally. Finally after three months of non-stop fucking I get you to admit it. "Is that all?"

His eyes snapped back to her. "Do you know how much that took? You're married."

"Wasn't hard at all, was it? Maybe you think too much." She clawed at his chest. "I love you, too."

He shook his head. "It can't work."

"What can't work?"

"You being with him. What am I supposed to do?"

She leaned down and laid on him, her pussy making little circles with his shaft buried deep. "What does Blake want?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you want?"

He shook his head. "I want you."

"And how do you think you can have me?"

"Well, it seems sort of pointless, but, will you marry me?"

She laid her head down sideways on his chest and closed her eyes. Tears leaked and she gently gripped his chest with her fingers. "Thank you."

He seemed confused and confounded. "What?"

"I accept, I accept."

"But you're married."

She giggled. "Not for long."

"But—"

"I'm also pregnant."

Blake heaved under her in shock. "You are?"

She laughed. "I've taken over a hundred of your loads inside me, did you think I was sterile or something?"

His mouth was open, dumbfounded. "I... But..." He swallowed. "You'll marry me?"

"Of course, silly." She kissed his lips.

"But Trent—"

"Is married to his dreams for money. I want to know a real man loves me and wants me. I want you."

His arms came up and encircled her. Those arms would never leave her.

~ ~ ~

The divorce was painless. No kids, no property, no possessions: no court appearance.

Trent felt betrayed, but wasn't that what she had felt all along? To whom had he been married? Lady Molly? Or Lady Money? She hoped his new mistress would serve him well.

She didn't wish him ill, but she found she needed more in her life than the common pursuit of money. She needed love and not to be put second to the quest for a dollar.

She needed love and passion and commitment. She needed Blake, and she got him.

Thank you for reading My Husband Traded Me; I hope you enjoyed it. As you can see, I don't have a "street team" following me around giving all my books a dozen 5-star reviews the day of release. All reviews are greatly appreciated.

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