

Emily Sinclair

*Heels
Up*

HEELS UP

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EMILY SINCLARE

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If it hadn't been for my family, I wouldn't have written this, my first erotica book. They encouraged me to expand my romance writing, and I did. Thank you to my two sisters, who are always there for me. I love you both very much.

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The Meeting

Trapped. The man had her trapped between the cart and his ruggedly hard body.

The grande black decaf spilled down the front of her navy uniform when the passenger, overloaded with carryon bags, barreled into the galley on his way to his seat and shoved her into the metal corner of the cart. Betty had just taken a sip and the Starbucks flew out of her hands, liquid dribbling down her mouth and chin, puddling on the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” a deep, raspy voice said. “Are you hurt?”

Betty couldn’t catch her breath. The cart’s corner pushed into her rib cage. Or was it the man’s velvety sensuous voice that caused the haze in her brain and awakened dormant pulses between her legs? She turned to see who had invaded her galley and said in a strained voice, “Who do you think you are? Don’t you realize flight attendants can’t drink hot coffee and work at the same time?” The man’s eyes narrowed then he laughed. Hot, spicy tingles raced up her spine as the melodic sound traveled straight through her, touching a place deep in her center, a place she’d kept locked and buried.

Her hands shook. That’s odd, she thought, as she stared, mesmerized. Did Starbucks forget and give her coffee with caffeine in it? Confused by her reaction, she stood blocking the man’s access to the aisle. Well, the

heavy cart filled with meal trays blocked the man's way. She had nothing to do with it!

"Really, is there any way I can make it up to you? I didn't mean to injure you," the man said in a low, amused voice.

Betty glanced into striking blue eyes. Eyes that matched a crystal blue sky—one without smog, that is. Eyes that mesmerized. Beguiled. Eyes that...wait a minute! Since when did she wax poetic about a man's eyes? She decided to knock off the romance novels for a while. Time to go back to her spy stories.

"No, thank you, I'm fine. I'll just smell like a grande decaf nonfat vanilla latte for the rest of the day."

"What?" The man's eyes crinkled at the corners and a low chuckle escaped his throat.

He sure was attractive, Betty thought on a sigh. Wait, wasn't she attractive? Attractive was in the eye of the beholder and for years Betty had thought of herself as plain. It didn't matter that she was slim and had good legs. Her breasts were perky but average, and her face was too. Except for her eyebrows. She'd always thought they were perfectly shaped. She came out of her sensual fog and realized the man still stood in her galley staring at her. What had she just said to make him laugh? His smoldering eyes unnerved her. Not many men gave a woman their full attention, and her befuddled brain had overloaded the instant their eyes clashed. Oh, yes, she remembered with a flash of brilliance. "I always wear vanilla perfume. Now that it's mixed with my decaf, I'll smell like a Starbucks for the rest of the day."

The man laughed harder and leaned toward her. His loud inhalation and resulting exhale blew Betty's shoulder-length curly auburn hair across her cheek. "Ah, nothing sweeter." He kissed the side of her neck.

She shivered with desire. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up as liquid heat raced through her veins, weakening her knees. It was a good thing she was still pinned to the cart or she would have slid to the floor like a rag doll. Her breath hitched and she couldn't think for a moment. Overcome with something close to heat stroke, Betty squeezed back from the cart and stepped away from the seductive, spicy scent of the man.

Unfortunately, in order to get out from behind the cart she had to move closer to the attractive man in her galley. In the process she accidentally

touched his crotch. He sucked in a sharp breath and the muscles in his jaw hardened. She felt his erection, hard and ready. Betty wished she could crawl into a hole. Why didn't this airplane have an escape hatch when she needed it? There had been one on the old McDonald Douglas DC-10. What was Boeing thinking not to put one on the 767?

The man grabbed her offending hand and studied it. "My, you have a beautiful hand." His eyes sparkled with a teasing glint as he lowered his voice and whispered, "I like the way you caress me. Softly, yet with spirit." He stroked between her long, slim fingers, where the tender flesh was the most sensitive.

Why hadn't she worn nail polish today?

Her heart banged in her chest from the man's light, sensuous touch. She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out. Betty felt like a carp that had just landed on the dock after a fisherman hooked it.

"Enough smooching in the galley, Betty," Dee, the flight's purser said. "You know better than to take strange men into your work area."

Then Dee screamed.

"That's...that's...you're...you're..." Dee's hand flailed in the air like a limp windsock.

"Yes...yes...I am." He chuckled.

"What's wrong with you, Dee?" Betty asked. She didn't know how she'd gotten the words out while the man continued to stroke her fingers. Her breath rushed out of her chest and she felt lightheaded. She tried to jerk her hand away and push the cart from her midsection but her unwelcome guest tightened his hold and his fingers scorched the erotic zone just under her wrist. He then continued to lightly travel up to the soft underside of her arm.

"Don't you know who this man is?" Dee's hand continued to flop in his direction. Her eyes were wide and glassy.

Betty stared at the dazed look on Dee's face and wondered if her own face reflected the inner turmoil wreaking havoc on her body. Dee had always been a study in composure and Betty had never seen her so flustered before. No matter what type of situation came up on the airplane—passenger complaint, medical emergency, engine shutdown inflight—Dee handled it with ease and confidence.

Betty lifted her eyes back to the mystery man as he continued his dangerous assault on her senses. He had short, dark brown hair and

incredible blue eyes lined with crinkles—just enough to entice. He had lips that were not too plump or too thin, lips that would make a nun swoon—did nuns swoon? She forced away the thought of a nun on the ground and concentrated on Dee. With total incomprehension on her face, her mind fighting the sensual attack on her body, Betty asked in a strained voice, “No, why? Is he somebody famous?” She gasped when his hand jerked, pulling her toward his wide, wide, wide—okay, really wide chest.

The now incredulous man studied Betty. Intense azure eyes stared into confused emerald ones. Betty watched as a calculating look crossed his features. The man’s eyebrows lowered and his eyes narrowed to slits. In a split second his kind, humorous face shut down.

Closed. She’d never seen a person retreat into himself so fast. A curtain couldn’t have dropped any faster.

“Betty!” Dee huffed in exasperation. “He’s Bradley Moore.” Her face had a warm glow about it, her mouth hung open and Dee actually seemed awed.

“Who’s that?” Betty asked.

“Who’s that?” Bradley Moore repeated, stupefied.

Betty could tell he didn’t believe she didn’t know who he was. He dropped her hand like a hot potato, leaving her breathless and despondent at the same time.

“Whoa, girl, what rock have you been living under?” Dee asked. She glanced at Bradley Moore and blushed crimson. “He’s only the biggest movie star in history,” she whispered loudly to Betty. “He comes from a legendary family.”

Betty fixated on the rock question, embarrassed that she didn’t know this celebrity, shocked that her body cried out for his touch. “My rock. I’ve been living under my rock.” A confirmed bookworm, Betty didn’t watch movies or television. They were all a bad influence anyway—except those that taught a man romance. After all, men needed to learn what women liked, didn’t they? Yet what man read a romance? She sighed inwardly. “I need to finish setting up this galley. Would you please excuse me?” She straightened her shoulders, gave herself a hard mental shove, pushed the thrum of her body out of her mind and turned away from both people, not caring that they wore identical stunned expressions on their faces.

Betty didn’t see the disbelieving stare that Bradley Moore gave her as he turned to leave the galley. On his way out of the tiny space the bag he’d

slung over his shoulder swung into her back, slamming her into the cart again.

With a little yelp she said, “You’re going to have to stop battering me, Mr. Moore, or I’ll have to take away your carryon baggage privileges. There’s a short five-hour training class for passengers who need to relearn how to walk through restricted galleys and down narrow aisles. I can have you signed up like that.” Betty snapped her fingers.

His exasperated, astonished look changed to mirth. Betty glanced at him. His strong, handsome face had a wide smile that showed beautiful white teeth. His full head of glossy, dark hair was artfully cut to frame his strong face and enhance his rugged square jaw. Betty watched Bradley Moore leave the galley and struggle through the narrow opening with his carryon bags. His sexy laughter followed him out of the galley to his first-class seat and wound through Betty’s body, leaving her shaking with steamy desire for a superstar she’d never heard of.

As Brad settled into his seat, he couldn’t believe the flight attendant didn’t know who he was. Was it a ruse? The whole world knew him. He’d been making movies and doing television for twenty years. The media called him a megastar. He called himself either blessed or cursed, depending on the day. All he wanted was to be normal. Regular. Treated like a human being.

He scoffed. He hadn’t been normal since the day he’d been born. How could he have been? His father and grandfather were two of the biggest movie star legends in Hollywood. And his mother had been one of the most beautiful actresses of her day. What no one knew, was that she was one of the most regular, normal women he’d ever known and had been a wonderful mother. He laughed again at the word normal. There was no normal in Hollywood. Brad felt as if he’d had no choice but to follow in his parents’ footsteps.

Not that he didn’t like making movies. From the moment he’d turned eighteen and his father had let him work in the business he had loved the job. Everything from reading the scripts, to acting, to hiding in the theaters to watch the audience’s reaction. Brad loved producing and finding new talent too.

As he took out his iPad and turned off his phone, he thought about the stewardess. Oh, he knew they weren't called that anymore. But in her case the word fit her. She seemed old-fashioned. Innocent. Pretty.

And hot, he thought. Something about her was hot and desirable. He remembered her touch and the sensations that rocketed through his balls, tightening them, sending desire straight to his cock. He struggled to hide his hard-on and ignore his throbbing body as he rustled through his briefcase.

Brad wondered if the flight attendant was as innocent as she seemed. Her innocence intrigued him. Maybe he could bring out her inner passion. That intrigued him too.

She did smell like vanilla. Cookies. Cinnamon. Home. He shook his head and marveled that he'd kissed her neck. She'd been almost childlike in her surprise at the gesture. But he'd felt the quickening of her pulse, heard her breath hitch in her chest.

Her quick sense of humor drew him to her like a moth to a flame. Why? Because she seemed warm and real. Normal. And she hadn't fawned over him like other women. Maybe she really didn't know who he was. Maybe.

Brad mused that he seemed to be longing for what he couldn't have. His mother had recently passed away and he missed her terribly. She'd quit acting when she'd married his father and Brad had been lucky to have her home with him while he grew up. Whenever he'd stepped into the house it smelled like vanilla and cinnamon. His mother had been a fantastic cook and baker. That legacy was almost as strong as her acting career. She'd published a dozen cookbooks that were bestsellers and even catered parties for her family and friends.

A smile crossed Brad's face as he shoved his carryon bag under the seat in front of him. Even in the midst of being bruised twice by him, the flight attendant had lashed out with a sharp humor and a quick, dry wit. There wasn't anything more alluring to Brad than a fantastic sense of humor.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Betty's low, deep voice sent longing rushing through him. He pushed it aside and kept his head buried in the briefcase that he'd put on the floor at his feet. "Just give me a pen and I'll autograph whatever you have," he mumbled.

The woman coughed. "Uh, that's not quite what I had in mind, but if you insist."

His eyes started at her sensible navy-blue shoes then rose up her sensational legs, paused at her perfect knees and halted at the hint of her svelte thighs hidden by opaque blue pantyhose. She shifted her feet in irritation. He wondered what those thighs would look like unwrapped and sliding through his hands, what they would feel like slick and warm around his waist.

“Really, Mr. Moore. I didn’t think the view was any good down there,” Betty said.

Brad realized he looked like an idiot staring at the flight attendant’s thighs. He hated it when people stared at any part of his body and here he was lost in some erotic fantasy about her legs coiled around his waist. He shook his head, choked out a cough and jumped up.

She certainly was beautiful, Brad thought. Her medium-length curly brown hair was styled to accent her oval face and high cheekbones. The top of her head came only to his chin. With her face tilted up to ask her question the bright light in the cabin showed creamy, flawless skin. She held out a cheap hotel pen for him and a menu. “The view is spectacular, in case you haven’t noticed,” he said with a grin. He took the pen and wrote his name with a flourish on the menu.

Brad felt real warmth radiate from Betty. Somehow, he knew this beautiful woman didn’t get many compliments. He grinned with the simple joy of making her feel good and cocked his head to the side as he signed the menu. For some uncontrollable reason he leaned toward Betty, swaying as if a strange magnetic cord pulled them together. Before he could hand her the menu, her hand reached out to touch him, then pulled back with a little jerk just before she did so. So, she felt the attraction too. Interesting. Brad hadn’t felt this way about a woman in a very long time.

Betty coughed to clear her throat and said, “I’m just checking to make sure you ordered a low-fat special meal. You know...the one with bean sprouts, lettuce and cereal pebbles?”

Brad barked out a laugh, surprised again by her sense of humor. This woman was priceless. He took a dramatic pause, deepened his voice and said, “No. That’s not what I ordered. Why can’t the airline ever get it right? After all, I’m a frequent flyer.” He sighed. “I ordered my usual. Carrot sticks, celery, mushy beans and protein powder.”

Betty burst out laughing. “Okay, you got me. But you really do have a special meal ordered. Low-fat.”

“Yes, thank you.” He smiled, more intrigued than ever by her quick wit, her warm affection, her obvious shyness, and his instant desire for her.

Betty’s stomach plummeted to the airplane floor. God, what a stunning smile. Her mouth dried up, which saved her from groaning out loud. Why? Because he looked right at her, his bright blue eyes peering into her soul, and a need so strong she felt it deep in her womb, nearly brought her to her knees. With knocking knees, she turned and fled into the galley, hoping her legs would hold until she could bonelessly drop onto her jumpseat, out of sight of the handsome movie star. Somehow, she had to collect her long-scattered wits from wherever they had disappeared to.

As the flight progressed, Betty stayed in the galley cooking, setting up carts and making sure the service ran without a hitch. When every course from nuts to desserts was finished being served, she cleaned up and settled down to eat her roasted chicken salad and read her last romance novel for a while. After all, she’d sworn off the books for the time being.

The other eight flight attendants fawned over Bradley Moore. They giggled, peeked, pointed, and generally made a nuisance of themselves. The four junior ones asked him for autographs, irritating the first-class passengers. Betty sighed. She’d passed the thirty-five year mark a couple of months ago and had been flying since she was twenty. Sometimes new flight attendants wore her out.

Yet she was pleased to see that Bradley Moore treated each flight attendant with kindness and grace. He asked for their names and requested a little information about them. Then he wrote each one a personal note. They floated into the galley with their autographs clutched to their chests, all bemoaning the fact that they weren’t working first-class and she, who didn’t even know who Bradley Moore was, had five hours to be with him.

The only “celebrity” Betty had ever been impressed with was a former United States president she’d had onboard. He’d been wonderful, and she’d been intimidated.

After all, how many people ever met a president—let alone cooked a chateaubriand for one? He had walked onto her airplane before the boarding process surrounded by his four Secret Service agents. He’d introduced

himself and shaken her hand. She could still feel the president's strong grip, and he'd been in his mid-eighties at the time.

Her mind drifted back to the celebrity seated in first-class. Bradley Moore. His name still didn't ring a bell. But his masculine scent, something mixed with spice and soap, jangled her bells and jarred her emotions. Betty shrugged and pushed her suddenly overripe libido out of her mind. Focus, girl. She hadn't watched a movie in a very long time. She didn't listen to the galley gossip about celebrities and she didn't read the rag magazines. Betty figured the articles were lies, the pictures digitally manipulated and nothing in them was worth wasting her time.

She took a bite of her salad. It tasted...boring. Even though she'd put in red, yellow, and orange bell peppers, green beans, white onions and fat-free feta cheese, the salad had no flavor. Maybe it was her fat-free dressing.

Betty had tried every diet known to man because she had always been a bit overweight. All her life she'd been told that if she only lost the weight, she'd be beautiful. After all, she had such a pretty face. She finally gave in and went to Weight Watchers on both of her sisters' suggestion. They had loved the program. It worked and she lost the pounds. Now she ate the Weight Watchers way to keep her weight where she wanted it.

Betty frowned at her salad and took another bite. She needed more variety in her life.

Just as she thought that, Bradley Moore walked to the bathroom. That's variety! Betty's food stuck in her mouth. What an intoxicating rear view. He had tight buns of steel and the sexiest, most masculine walk she'd ever seen. Something liquid, loose, strong. Without warning her mind conjured pictures of them tangled in sweaty sheets, the scent of musk and heat thick in the air. No wonder he acted in movies. She placed the glass salad bowl on the counter, her appetite gone. Staring at the bathroom door, she felt like a lovesick teenager. Disgust roiled through her at her juvenile behavior and she jumped up to put away her dish.

Bent over to reach into the bottom of a cart, Betty didn't hear the toilet flush from the nearby first-class lav or hear Bradley enter the galley.

"What a pretty picture you are in that pose," Bradley chuckled.

Betty's rear stuck up in the air. How stupid of her to bend over that way, knowing the famous actor would be coming out of the bathroom. Did she have some unfulfilled wish to humiliate herself in front of this man? She straightened as if she'd touched a live wire. Her pulse skittered, her heart

banged against her chest and her fingers went numb. She dropped the glass bowl on the corner of the counter. It shattered, cutting her fingers, leaving sparkling glass all over the counter and floor.

“Oh my God,” Bradley said. “I’m so sorry. I can’t seem to do anything right around you.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a pristine white handkerchief, which he wrapped around Betty’s hand and held close to his chest.

Flustered beyond reason, desire thrumming through her, Betty said the first thing that came to mind. “Give me my hand back. It’s my property, not yours.”

Bradley chuckled, deep and low, almost a growl. “Do you always make jokes?” His eyes twinkled and his wide grin made him look like a young boy.

Betty’s stomach filled with butterflies. He looked so vibrant and happy. He smelled like her vision, all musky and hot. “Only when I’m in shock and awe.” When she was stressed, she couldn’t stop herself from making outlandish comments. She was noted for it at the airline.

“Betty, you’re a breath of fresh air. Will you go out with me?”

The words slipped out of Brad’s mouth and Betty gasped. His eyes were wide and his mouth had dropped open. His hands tightened on hers. He pulled her to his chest.

“What?” Betty whispered. Heat enveloped her, seeped down to her uterus. Wild pulses throbbed between her legs.

Still holding her bleeding fingers in both of his large hands, he looked her in the eyes. “Something about you calls to me.”

“What?”

“You treat me like a man.”

“Uh...oh...” For goodness sakes, Betty thought. Get a grip. How eloquent she sounded. “I can’t go out with you, I only have my uniform to wear.”

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Brad bent his head back and laughed a full-bodied laugh that sent skitters down her spine. “Actually, I was thinking more on the lines of when we get back home to Los Angeles. You do live in Los Angeles, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t.” Betty didn’t understand why she felt both relief and regret when she told him that.

Bradley's face changed. It looked as if he were disappointed. "Where do you live?"

"In Orange County." It wasn't L.A., she told herself. It was sixty miles away.

Bradley's smile returned full force. He reached into his pocket. "Here's my card. Call me."

Now Betty wondered why the relief gave way to excitement. She wasn't going out with this man. They had nothing in common and he was geographically undesirable to boot, especially with gas prices the way they were. It was a true pleasure, however, to have such a handsome man ask her out. Betty hadn't been on a date in a very long time. She hadn't wanted to. But today, with her hand held tenderly between this stranger's fingers, she felt beautiful for the first time in years.

Betty finally retrieved her hand and unwrapped the now bloody handkerchief. Dismay shone in her eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Moore. But I can't." She went into the bathroom to rinse out the stains and left the door open.

Brad followed her to the door. Betty didn't notice his quick glance down the aisle as she busily soaped his handkerchief. Before she realized what was happening, Brad stepped inside the lav and pulled the door shut. Momentary blackness enveloped them and a silence so stark she could hear their breaths, feel them tangle. Then he threw the lock, blinding them for a moment as the light came on, and placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her toward him, away from the sink. The water stopped running and her wet hands hung at her sides. She dropped the handkerchief from her nerveless fingers. "You're turning down a date with me?"

"What are you doing?" Betty was shocked. In all her years of flying, no one had ever followed her into an airplane bathroom. She pushed Bradley's chest. "Let me out." She felt trapped in the tiny space with the handsome movie star. Her breath caught as her chest pressed against his. Her nipples hardened and she knew when he sucked in a sharp breath, he felt them through their clothing. He rested his chin on top of her head. Who dimmed the lights? Electrical failure? Was there an emergency with the airplane? Bradley's hands stroked up and down her shoulders and arms, leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake. The airplane didn't seem to be having any electrical problems, she did. For the first time in years all her body's receptors were in fine working order.

He shook his head. "Don't say no."

Desire boiled through Betty, leaving her weak and wanting. She had never reacted so intensely to a man before. His voice wound through her, leaving her hot and dry at the same time. No, the dryness was caused by low cabin altitude, she reminded herself. She clenched her hands, now trapped at her sides. "It's a good thing I'm not claustrophobic," she muttered.

Bradley laughed. "I have never laughed so much with a woman before. You are wonderful."

Betty tried to step away from his powerful chest but stumbled over the toilet. Bradley pulled her back against him and wrapped his arms around her waist. As if plugged into an electrical outlet, Betty's body took over, sparks of electricity shooting through her system, liquefying her blood. "Okay, what do you want?" she sighed in surrender as she craned her neck to look up. He pushed her away enough to let her see his face. Betty gasped as she looked into Bradley's eyes and saw raw, hot desire. His pupils were dilated, his breath shallow and his mouth gaped open. Inch by inch his head dipped until his lips touched hers.

Fire! Had the smoke alarm gone off?

Betty's legs turned to jelly, her stomach flip-flopped and her knees weakened. If Bradley hadn't held her in his massive arms she would have fallen into the open toilet.

The kiss was endless. His firm tongue mated with hers, sweeping the inside of her mouth, tasting the soft inside of her cheek. Betty sighed with desire, which spurred Bradley on. He sucked on her tongue and her body responded with tight tugs deep in her womb. His earthy scent wound through her, sending hot sparks flowing through her, causing her legs to quiver.

With a master's touch he rendered her senseless. His hands traveled her narrow waist up and down. With splayed fingers he ran one hand over the front of her skirt to the junction of her legs then brought it back up to the underside of her breasts, teasing her, leaving her wanting. His fingers burned through the material. Betty might as well have been naked. His fingers found their way to her nipples and pulled. A moan tore from her throat when they hardened. He tugged, rolled, his fingers firm on the tight peaks, never letting go, never stopping his relentless assault on her senses. Betty's head fell against Bradley's shoulder and she moaned as she gave

herself fully to the sensations, unable to tell him to stop, not wanting him to stop. Never in her life had she been touched so sensually. Betty felt cherished for the first time, yet vulnerable. Bradley Moore made her feel like a sexy, sensual woman, a new feeling for her, and she marveled at the strength that flowed through her from that emotion.

At that moment she was his, completely and totally. No man had ever breached her defenses so quickly. The thought shocked her. With other men she'd held back, protecting a part of her soul. This man ripped away the walls and Betty felt defenseless against his intrusion. Defenseless and powerful. A potent combination.

The kisses slowed to light pecks and a teasing of his tongue on her lips. His hands stilled on her breasts. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around to face him. "I want your phone number."

In a shocked monotone, Betty gave Brad her number.

"Good." Bradley kissed her on her nose and smiled. Then he left the bathroom.

Dinner

Somehow, she got out of the first-class lav without anyone seeing her and collapsed on her jumpseat in the galley. The rest of the flight passed by in a sensuous blur. Betty kept touching her lips, wondering if they were swollen from Bradley's kisses.

She couldn't believe he'd kissed her. She couldn't believe how pagan, powerful, and problematic that kiss had been. She couldn't believe he'd touched her breasts and the intense reaction her body had to his touches. She still tingled between her legs, her panties were wet and her nipples rubbed against the material of her bra, keeping her aroused. Her breath hitched and when she raised her hands to her cheeks, she felt the heat that blossomed there.

Why would a celebrity as famous as Bradley Moore kiss her?

Had she fallen through a rabbit hole into some fantastic alternate universe? When she'd gotten up this morning, she'd never dreamed a celebrity she hadn't even heard of would make love to her mouth in the airplane bathroom.

Then a horrible thought struck her. Oh my God! Betty hung her head in despair. Bradley's erotic kisses and flaming touches easily passed for sex. She'd just joined the mile high club! After all, her bones had liquefied. How could it have happened so fast? She told herself no one could know.

She'd forgotten what sex was. That was it! After all, it'd been quite some time. Maybe she should go buy a vibrator.

Dee was back in the aft galley and no passengers stood near the entry door to stretch or wait for the lav. What Betty really couldn't believe was how she'd kissed Bradley Moore back.

Like a starving woman.

Heat flushed her face as she sat on her jumpseat, mortified at her wanton, loose behavior. Praying for the flight to end and her embarrassment to be over, Betty pulled out her sudoku book to keep herself occupied.

It didn't work. She stared into space and relived Bradley's kisses over and over—and over—again. Just remembering his touches caused her nipples to harden, sending electrifying sensations racing through her. She squirmed on her jumpseat, desperate for relief.

When they landed in New York, Betty stood by the entry door with Dee to say goodbye to the deplaning passengers. Her body had calmed somewhat but when Bradley Moore came to the door his manly scent wound through her, bringing all the longing and pent-up feelings she'd suppressed to the forefront again. By the grace of God she didn't moan and give away her suddenly raging sexual feelings. That would be an embarrassment she just couldn't tolerate.

He had two bags slung over his shoulder and one in his hand. "Goodbye, Mr. Moore. Thank you for flying with us today," Betty said. She gave him a wide smile as she twisted her hands together and prayed she wouldn't drool.

He didn't grin or glance at her. Bradley Moore, big shot Hollywood superstar, walked past her, knocking his shoulder bag into her arm as he deplaned. He acted as if he didn't know who she was and making out in the bathroom had never happened.

Shame and humiliation washed through her, rinsing away her lustful thoughts. Her smile faltered. Then anger pushed those feelings aside. She walked off the airplane and came up behind Bradley Moore. "Excuse me, Mr. Moore. Am I chopped liver or something?"

Bradley stopped walking, causing the passengers behind him to step to the side. A few glared at him for holding up the deplaning process but most ignored him and went around.

He glanced up and down the Jetway then bent his head to Betty. "We can't be seen together," he whispered.

“Well, of course not!” Betty said with exaggerated understanding. “Why would you associate with a mere flight attendant? Did you know you hit me with your shoulder bag just now? I realize we doorstops do get in the way every once in a while. I’m sending you the link for our training course for clumsy passengers with overstuffed bags. You can do it at home from your computer so no one will see you. It’s similar to traffic school, but longer.”

Betty could tell Bradley Moore didn’t know whether to laugh or not as she watched the play of emotions cross his face. She saw shock that she’d confronted him, then humor. It didn’t take long until his face cleared and a smile lit his eyes. Damn if those lustful feelings didn’t return in full force. At least he liked her sense of humor.

“You’re a very rare person, Betty. Not many people could put someone in their place with a few funny words.” He shook his head.

“You’re one very lucky man today, you know,” Betty continued.

Lines furrowed Bradley’s brow. Passengers continued to skirt around them and he moved closer to the wall to give them room. “Why is that?”

“Very few men have had the opportunity to kiss and fondle me in the first-class lav.” She leaned forward to speak privately with Bradley and whispered, “You, actually, are the first. You have no idea what an honor it is that I’ve bestowed upon you.”

Bradley’s mouth opened then slammed shut. She saw amusement cross his features. His smile lit his eyes and crinkles wound around the corners, accenting how damned handsome he was. It was criminal for one man to have such good looks.

Betty turned to leave. She’d said her piece and was done. Another lesson learned. Don’t let strange men make love to her while working a flight, no matter how irresistible they were.

Brad reached out and put his hand on Betty’s arm to stop her from leaving when a woman came down the Jetway. He dropped his hand to his side. His brief touch shot straight to her core and she inhaled a sharp breath.

Damn, damn, damn the man!

“Mr. Moore? I’m Joan with special services. May I carry your bags for you? A car is waiting downstairs. Is there any luggage to be picked up at baggage claim?”

He glanced at Betty with a mixture of longing and concern. But there was a hidden twinkle in his eyes. He knew she wanted his touch again.

When he turned back to the special services woman Betty fled back to the safety of the airplane like a chicken fleeing the hatchet.

“No, thank you, Joan. This is all I have for the short trip.” By the time Brad turned back to her, Betty had stepped onto the airplane.

She saw his hesitation and wondered if he would say anything more, maybe an apology? Dee’s comment about the rock came back to her. Not many men apologized nowadays, let alone a major celebrity to a lowly flight attendant. She felt he should explain, but could see by the way he glanced between her and the special services woman that he didn’t know how to do it without drawing attention to her.

She saw him watch her as she said her goodbyes. Betty hoped he wished he had treated her better. Forcing a smile to her face for every passenger who walked off the plane, Betty’s eyes widened when Brad grinned crookedly at her. There was something unusual about his look. Remorse? He nodded, a subtle, “I’m sorry.” He was still watching as an older man made a comment to her. She touched the man’s arm and grabbed his hanging bag out of the closet. The man kissed her on the cheek.

“Mr. Moore?” the special services woman, Joan, said. “Are you ready?”

The older man walked off the airplane with his garment bag and Betty looked up the Jetway for Brad. But the area was clear and she wondered if the experience of meeting Bradley Moore had been real or a figment of her imagination.

Now settled in her hotel room, Betty lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. She’d never made such a fool of herself. She didn’t even know the man. His kisses seemed sordid now, stolen for his amusement alone. Her body still hummed from the encounter in the lav, and shame rose to the surface again. She tossed and turned, mumbling what an idiot she had been. The twelve-hour layover stretched out endlessly while Betty couldn’t sleep. She finally fell asleep in the early morning hours and when the alarm went off, she groaned.

The flight home was slow, bogged down by departure delays. She never mentioned to her coworkers what had happened on the last flight, too embarrassed to admit it to anyone. For five and a half hours Betty listened

to the other flight attendants moaning and drooling about Bradley Moore and prayed for the flight to end.

When the airplane pulled up to the gate, she heaved a huge sigh of relief. Another chapter of her life done. Finished.

Thank God.

When Betty arrived home, she buried herself under her covers to take a long nap, exhausted and agonized by her loose behavior. She hoped when she awoke, she'd have dreamed the whole horrible trip.

The ringing phone penetrated her sleep-deprived mind. She fumbled with the receiver. "Hello?" she croaked.

"Hi," a deep, velvety voice said.

"Who is this?" Betty mumbled.

"Brad."

"Who?"

"Bradley Moore."

Betty bolted straight up in bed. Her heart pounded and her palms leaked sweat. Her body reacted as it had done in the bathroom on the airplane. Hot lust raced through her veins. Bradley Moore! It hadn't been a dream. She couldn't believe it. Why was he calling her? She squinted at the clock, couldn't read it. Damn eyes. Why were her knees knocking? She wasn't even standing up.

"Oh...uh...hi." One day she'd learn to speak complete sentences again. She fumbled for her glasses so she could see what a fool she was. The clock read five in the evening.

"Were you sleeping?" Brad asked.

"Yes, I didn't sleep well last night."

"Because of me? I'm sorry." He didn't let her answer. "I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"Oh, I could tell." Anger replaced nervousness. Lust disappeared. "You walked off the airplane as if you didn't even know me. After you trapped me in the bathroom, I might add. We're you playing me for a fool?"

Brad sighed. "I'm sorry, Betty. I didn't want anyone on the plane to realize we'd been, er, intimate. I never meant to hurt you."

"Oh fine. I guess bad manners equals famous movie star."

"Ouch."

"Really, Mr. Moore—"

"Call me Brad."

“Why are you calling me?” Betty asked.

Brad paused. “I don’t know. I feel something for you. You’re beautiful, in a normal sort of way. You smell good. I like vanilla lattes.”

Betty couldn’t help it and laughed. “At least there’s something you like about me.”

“There’s a lot I like about you.” Brad lowered his voice. “You have a fantastic sense of humor, incredible legs and beautiful skin. Your nipples pucker at my touch, causing your eyes to lose focus and go all dreamy.”

Those gravelly comments pushed her anger to the background as a wave of desire vibrated through her body. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Brad.” Her breath quickened and Betty sat up in bed. She couldn’t believe she was talking intimately to a famous movie star and calling him by his first name. “You sure know how to distract a woman. Why, I bet you learned it all from the movies you’ve made.”

“No. I learned it from my mother. She taught me to respect and care for women. She was the best woman I ever knew.” Betty heard Brad shifting around, slapping something. He must have punched a pillow. “She had a great sense of humor, but I think yours is better.”

Betty didn’t know what to say. “Thank you. I take it your mother’s gone?”

“Yes. It’s only been a few months. I miss her terribly.”

“I’m so sorry, Brad. I know what you’re going through. My mother has been gone for five years and I miss her every day.” Betty ran her hand through her hair and screeched when she looked in the mirrored closet doors. She wished she hadn’t put her glasses on.

“Betty? Are you okay?”

“Er, uh, yes, Brad. I just frightened myself when I glanced in my mirror. Naps aren’t good for my ego.”

Brad laughed. “You are a gem. I’m sure you’re exaggerating.” He said in a deep baritone, “I’d love to see you when you wake up in the morning.”

Erotic pictures flashed through Betty’s mind. Heaving breaths filled the air while soft touches turned turbulent, masterful. She could almost feel Brad’s hands as they ran up the inside of her legs, leaving trails of molten fire as they probed at her opening. They were tangled in satin sheets all hot and sweaty after a morning of wild lovemaking. Betty sighed. Knowing her, she’d be sliding off the sheets and Brad would have to rescue her from falling over the side and hitting the floor.

“Betty? You still there?”

“Uh, I am.” She pushed the erotic images away. “I’ve never slept on satin sheets.”

“What?”

Oh, damn! Open mouth, insert foot...again. “Uh, nothing.”

“You say the damndest things. I love that about you. Just when I think I have you figured out you throw a wrench in the bucket. Thank you.”

Betty didn’t know what to say. She felt humbled by the compliment. A change of subject seemed critical. “Have you finished your business or do you have work to do tomorrow?”

“I had some interviews today and have one tomorrow morning then I come home. Will you watch me on TV tomorrow? You do watch TV, don’t you?”

“Yes, believe it or not, I own a TV with rabbit ears and watch it once a decade or so.”

Brad laughed. “Good. I’ll be on ABC tomorrow morning at nine.” There was a long silence then Brad said, “When I get home can I come visit you?”

Betty had grabbed a hairbrush from her bathroom to tame her wild curls. It clattered to the sink when she dropped it. “I thought we couldn’t be seen together.” She wanted to be with him again. Badly. But she wouldn’t go through another humiliating experience. She might be a bit of an introvert, but she wasn’t a pushover.

“I know I screwed up yesterday. Please give me a chance to make up for my incredible rudeness. I’ll explain my bad behavior and I promise to never treat you like that again.”

Betty picked up her hairbrush and resumed untangling her curls. The phone sat on the marble bathroom counter with the speaker on. She stared at it for a minute. “You are smooth, Mr. Moore, I’ll say that for you.” She had managed to tame the curls to a respectable style. “I’ll give you one chance. I’m a firm believer in letting the one who wronged me grovel and take the rest of his life to make up for the gaffe.”

Brad laughed with relief. “Thank you, kind lady. I won’t disappoint you. Hold on a minute while I grab my beer off the table. I just had room service.”

Betty waited with the brush still in her hand. She stared at her reflection in the mirror and wondered if Bradley Moore could really be interested in

her. She was certainly interested in him. Movie star or not, she'd never reacted so instantaneously to a man before and she wanted to see if the connection was really there or just in her imagination. Before she finished the thought, she realized she wanted more. More depth and passion and romance with a partner. She wasn't looking for anything permanent yet, but Betty knew she needed a relationship that was equally passionate, humorous and loving.

Brad broke into her thoughts when he asked, "How about we meet day after tomorrow? It'll give me a chance to catch my breath after this trip."

"I'll cook," she said rapidly. She didn't want him to back out before he backed in. Oh God. Backing in gave her a whole new set of vivid pictures. Brad bent over her back on his knees, his hands fondling her breasts. "We'll defer to your fear of the outside world and eat in," she said to take her mind off her aroused body.

Like that was possible.

"A home-cooked meal. I'd love that."

The sincerity in Brad's voice tore at Betty. He really sounded like he missed home cooking. "I'll make you a batch of cookies too. I'm a great baker."

"Good. As long as I smell vanilla, I'll be happy," Brad said. "Very happy."

"See you day after tomorrow," Betty said.

"I can't wait. So long for now." Brad hung up the phone.

"What?" Betty screeched into the phone the next morning. "You can't come over here tonight. I'm not ready."

"See you at six," Brad said.

"Wait! You don't even know my address..." Betty wailed. But he'd already hung up.

For some unknown reason Brad had decided to come over this evening, instead of tomorrow evening. Betty raced around all day to get the house in order and make the dinner she'd planned for tomorrow.

She baked her famous powdered sugar cookies, made chocolate chip cookies and a Bailey's Irish Cream Bundt cake. She threw on a pot of chili,

baked cornbread, and chilled beer glasses in the refrigerator. Then, like a mad woman, she dusted her house, wishing she could have her carpet shampooed. Vacuuming would have to do. If Mr. Superstar Celebrity wanted normal, he'd get normal, stains on the carpet and all.

She'd just finished her hair and makeup when the doorbell rang. Her stomach revolted. Pressing her hand to the offending organ, Betty rushed to answer the door.

Brad stood there in tight faded jeans that molded to his butt and showed his powerful, muscular thighs. Betty gulped at the raw sex appeal radiating off him. Her nipples puckered and suddenly her blouse seemed too tight, too sheer. He wore a black t-shirt that hugged his massive chest and scuffed white tennis shoes. A blue LA Dodgers baseball cap covered his thick, dark hair and black sunglasses covered his oh-so-blue eyes. Betty's mouth turned to cotton. "Hi." She stared.

"Hi." Brad grinned. "Gonna let me in?"

"Oh! How stupid of me. Sorry." Betty opened the door and stepped back. Too nervous to think about what she should or shouldn't say, she bombarded him with questions. "Why are you here? How did you get my address? Do you do this with all of your girls?"

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Betty wanted to kick herself in her own ass. She clamped her mouth shut and prayed Brad wouldn't turn around and leave without another word.

Brad took off his sunglasses and searched her face. "You're beautiful and you smell like vanilla."

Well, that's a good way to break the ice, she thought. Betty's face flamed with excitement, or was it nervousness? Or was it arousal? Her eyes widened when she saw hot desire fill his eyes. Without thinking she glanced down and saw the bulge straining against his tight jeans. Brad's eyes rested on her erect nipples and she felt her cheeks bloom with twin spots of color. Really, she thought, disgusted. Did her body have to give her away every time she was near Bradley Moore? She knew it'd been a long time since she'd had sex and the tight, shiny material of her blouse showed the round buds of her nipples, hard and ready to be plucked. Why hadn't she worn a bra that hid her nipples instead of a low-cut demi-bra that practically shouted touch me, rub me, take me?

God, could she do anything right?

“Don’t worry, Betty, I know you’re nervous. So am I. This is the first time we’ve seen each other since I made a jackass of myself and walked off your airplane in New York.” He kicked the door shut and stepped close to her. “I’m here because you intrigue me, I like your humor,” he said, answering her spew of nervous questions. “I have a few connections for gaining addresses,” he touched her small nose, “and, no, I don’t do this with ‘all my girls’.”

“Oh.” For the first time in Betty’s life, she didn’t know what to say.

“Come here.” He pointed to the floor right at his feet.

“Why?” Her heart pounded, her knees knocked. Could he hear the knocking? Would she faint? She’d better not faint! Betty had never fainted in her life and wondered why this man affected her so much.

Bradley’s grin spread across his face, lighting up his sparkling blue eyes. He shook his head, rumpling his gorgeous mass of hair as he stepped toward Betty. He closed the wide gap between them and pulled her into his arms. “Because I want to kiss you, see if you respond the way you did on the airplane. Because I want to touch your nipples, watch them become hard and ready for my tongue to taste them.” His voice turned to gravel as it rolled across Betty’s emotions. Brad’s words excited Betty. No man had ever spoken to her like that before. Maybe it was because of the romance novels she read, but she’d secretly always wanted someone to talk sexy to her.

He bent his head and plundered her mouth. Betty groaned. Brad groaned. The kiss melted her heart like warm chocolate. Hot, pulsing desire washed through her, weakening her, and before she knew it, she’d plastered her body to Brad’s. His hard, sinewy muscles, six-pack abs and broad shoulders enveloped her. Betty forgot everything but what this man did to her. She couldn’t remember who he was, let alone who she was.

She didn’t want to remember.

With Betty in his arms Brad felt whole, humble. He didn’t know why, but he felt as if he’d come home. Every muscle in his body hardened. He had a raging erection and his balls were tight. So tight. Brad sucked in a sharp breath at the need that raced through his body. No other woman had ever

made him feel this way. He wanted to go slow, teach her what her body could do, pleasure her. He wanted to go fast and dive inside her, stroke between her legs, touch and taste her nipples, run his tongue over the shell of her ear, feel her shiver with need.

He wanted Betty now with a burning desire he'd never felt with any other woman. With tender gentleness, he buried his hands in her hair. But the gentleness didn't last, couldn't last. He kissed her lips, first licking them, then nipping them, then pulling the bottom one into his mouth and sucking on it. He couldn't hold back the passion that thrummed through his body and burned through his thighs, causing them to tremble with need. Betty's moan told him she felt the same. He pushed his tongue inside her mouth then nibbled her lips, softly. Her body jerked and she whimpered. He pulled her closer so he could feel her tight nipples against his shirt. He wanted to rip off her blouse, tear away his shirt and feel those taut buds on his chest. After long moments he stroked her lips with his tongue to soothe away any roughness he hadn't been able to rein in. Brad's heart pounded so hard he thought it would burst out of his chest and his thighs were rock-hard from the strain of standing and holding Betty when he really wanted to carry her to bed and make love to her. Being with Betty tamed him, yet turned him into a savage. On the one hand he wanted to teach her, bring her out of her innocence, see her bloom with newfound knowledge about passion, tenderness, and love. On the other hand, he wanted to push her to her limits, hear her shout her joy, rush her to the top where she couldn't think, could only feel. He felt strong, manly, loved that she needed him, even if she didn't know it.

With an effort Brad pulled away. Betty was an innocent, but not so innocent he couldn't teach her passion, his kind of passion. Her responses to him were instinctive, filled with primitive need and untouched desire. Tenderly he touched and stroked her brown curls, watching with awe the way the light touched her hair like a halo. "Lady, you sure know how to kiss."

"Thanks. I learned it from reading romance novels."

The minute she said it Brad could see she wanted to die. She closed her eyes and mumbled, "When will I learn to shut my mouth?" Betty stepped out of his embrace and staggered to the kitchen.

With a smile on his face, he said with a gentle laugh, "No need to crawl away, although I know that's what you want to do. I'm just glad you haven't

had a thousand boyfriends before me.” He grinned as she straightened her shoulders, held her head high and stumbled into the kitchen.

Brad chuckled. Betty was smart and kind, quick and funny. He laughed from joy, knowing he’d found a special woman he could be himself with instead of being a celebrity from a famed Hollywood family that some woman wanted to show off to the world.

He followed her down a short hallway and entered her large kitchen. White cabinets with glass doors framed the island that stood in the middle. “Nice.”

“I’m sure it’s small by your standards.” She wouldn’t look at him.

“I know what you’re thinking. I do not think you’re an idiot.” He thought she was charming, in a muted hot, passionate kind of way. He thought she was honest and tender. She didn’t know her sexual potential yet, but Brad did. He knew she’d open to his caresses, surrender to his touch and mold to his instructions. Brad’s penis hardened even further at the thought that he could turn her into a sensual woman, teach her what her body craved and reap the rewards of her studies.

“I can’t seem to control my mouth,” Betty said, embarrassment clearly written on her flaming face. “My filter seems to have slipped.” Betty pulled out bowls and utensils, napkins and two frosty beer mugs she’d put in the freezer. She filled the mugs with a light beer and handed one to Brad, then took the dishes to the table.

Brad took a drink of his beer then placed the mug on the kitchen table. “I’m just a guy. One who rarely cooks, doesn’t have a maid, and goes out to eat because I’m lazy. I don’t need a large house or a large kitchen.” He walked around the oval pine table and stroked the fine wood like he wanted to stroke Betty. “I try to live a normal life in a modest, suburban home.”

“Uh-huh.” Betty said. She clearly didn’t believe his regular guy speech. But her eyes fell to his fingers as he touched the table. He purposely ran his fingers slowly along the grain of wood, moving closer to her until he touched the hand closest to him. Her fingers twitched and she sighed. As if mesmerized, she stared at their hands and Brad twined their fingers together. Betty’s mouth dropped open and her eyes flew to his face.

“What are you doing with me?” she whispered.

“I don’t know, but I want to find out,” Brad said. “Don’t you?”

Betty didn’t speak for a minute, then nodded. After taking a deep, fortifying breath she said, “Well, sit yourself down, we’ll eat.”

When she pulled her fingers out of his, Brad felt a sense of loss. Like something essential had been ripped from him.

She dished up the chili and cornbread and they sat down. After a big swallow of beer to bolster her sagging ego she said, "So Brad, tell me about yourself."

He dug into the chili with a large spoon and after his first taste he said, "This is delicious. I haven't had a 'real' meal in a long time. Thank you." To lighten the mood, with a twinkle in his eyes he said, "I especially like the Corelle fine china." Betty arched an eyebrow and Brad knew from the look on her face she wasn't upset or embarrassed. He'd achieved his goal.

"I'm sure you get tired of eating off of English bone china every day. I thought that bringing out my favorite dishes would impress you. It's homey, normal," Betty commented dryly.

Brad grinned and wondered why Betty's face changed.

"How come I haven't noticed the crooked slant to your mouth before?" she blurted out. The way she drank the rest of the beer in one long gulp told him she'd just embarrassed herself again. But before he could comment she said, "Are you going to tell me about yourself?"

Brad took a long swallow of beer. His attraction to Betty was more than sexual. Her worldly innocence, the fact that she buried herself in books, didn't watch much TV or movies, made their attraction oddly exciting, like the anticipation just before opening a gift at Christmas. Even with instant media nowadays, she didn't know his background. He prayed that Betty wasn't scamming him. He'd had that happen before when he had just started in the business. Brad had fallen in love with the woman and was devastated when he'd found out she only wanted him for his money and family connections. "You really don't know about me?"

"No, Brad, I don't. And before you say anything else, I'm not a liar." Betty stared hard at Brad. "I was raised to be honest and fair, and I am. There isn't anything more or less to me than you see right now. I'm honest and forthright and I like it that way. I don't want to be with someone who isn't real and down-to-earth, and I don't want someone who isn't real and down-to-earth to be with me."

Shaking his head in amazement, he said, "I grew up in a celebrity family. My grandfather was a pioneer in early movies. He started in silent films and moved to the talkies. My father followed in his father's footsteps and I followed in their paths." He leaned forward and grabbed Betty's hand.

Primal passion jolted along his body. Betty's fingers curled into his. Sexual arousal wound around them. Betty's mouth slackened, her eyes narrowed with desire and her breathing was short and fast. He stroked her long, elegant fingers and continued, "I started in films at eighteen and by twenty-five I had my first blockbuster. Soon I became a leading man, playing roles against famous leading ladies."

"And?"

He could tell by the open look on her face that she wasn't sure she wanted to hear this part. "No, I don't have a thousand women in my past. But I became romantically linked to most of them by the tabloids." Anger radiated out of Brad's eyes. His fingers tightened on hers then loosened and kept stroking. Betty's mouth opened and her tongue licked her lips. The move was innocent, provocative. Brad suddenly desperately wanted her tongue on his penis, stroking and licking and sucking. "I never became involved with any of them," he croaked. "Not that the public would believe me. My parents didn't bring me up to be that way." He sighed and stroked between Betty's fingers, slow, light touches up and down the insides of her fingers, circles around the tips, then back down to the sensitive spot where her fingers met her palm.

"When I was in my twenties I met a woman, not in the industry, and married her. I truly loved Liz. But she couldn't get used to seeing me kiss women on screen. She thought I fell in love with every woman I worked with. Little did she know I couldn't stand most of them and kissing them and pretending to like it was pure acting. Plus, we were hounded by the press." Brad put his spoon in the empty bowl and sat back. "This isn't a pleasant topic for dinner conversation."

Betty smiled at Brad. He saw her sympathy as she listened to his story. Watched the way her delicate brows furrowed in concern for him. "Well. I've heard the paparazzi are nasty, pea-brained, pea-sized people," Betty said. "I could make you pea soup if you're still hungry?"

Brad burst out laughing. His face softened, the anger drained away from his eyes. "Betty...have you really never seen my movies? What do you do with your time? Why are you so isolated?"

Betty shifted in her kitchen chair. Brad traced his fingers over her knuckles, up and down her fingers and stroked the soft, sensitive underside of her wrist. She heaved a loud sigh and gave in. Her hand turned in his and she tickled his palm with her thumb. Heat pooled in his cock and he shifted

in his chair. This time Brad ignored the thrum of his body. As much as he was ready for Betty, she wasn't ready for him. Yet.

"I'm a bookworm. I read all the time. When I'm not working, that is. I find television and movies abrasive. Raw. There's too much violence and not enough sex in them."

Brad laughed. Aching desire raced through him as he pictured Betty under him, slick with sweat, panting with desire. His continued sexual reaction to Betty stunned him. Another first. He clutched her hand, leaned forward, and whispered, "Not enough sex." His eyes smoldered. "How much sex do you want? I can certainly help in that department."

"Romance," Betty croaked. "I mean romance. Why did I say the word sex? God, what an idiot I am."

"So, you are a sexy woman, single, no cats—"

"No," Betty said, obviously in a hurry to change the subject. "I'm a mean-spirited spinster, alone by choice, and I'd have a dog if I wasn't gone so much."

Betty jumped when Brad stood and his chair scraped the wood floor. "I'm sure you're a busy man. I'll just take the dishes from the table and walk you out."

Brad pulled her into his arms and held her. He knew he unnerved her on every level. "If you think mentioning sex has ruined the evening, you're dead wrong." Brad wiped at the lone tear that slipped down Betty's cheek and gave her a quick squeeze. "I'm more intrigued than ever, Betty. I feel lucky. I found a beautiful woman who doesn't know the celebrity and is willing to learn the man. I'm the luckiest man alive."

Dessert

Betty took two steps before Brad swung her around and pulled her into his arms. He wrapped one arm around her waist and used his other hand to raise her delicate chin. “Wait. I’m not leaving. Actually, I’d like to stay. You’re beautiful, funny, kind and can cook. Everything I’ve looked for in a woman my whole life. Will you marry me?” The minute he said the words his legs shook. A terrible fear raced through him. Why had he said that? Some Freudian slip? Brad didn’t want a wife. He’d had one of those and it hadn’t worked out.

“If only you’d lose some weight,” Betty said.

“What?”

“What?” Betty said. “Did you ask me to marry you?” Her hands trembled.

“Did you tell me to lose weight?” Brad asked. He didn’t know whether to be offended or laugh. That was the thing with Betty. She kept throwing him completely off-guard.

“No...no...you misunderstand,” Betty said. Brad nearly laughed out loud. The twisted she-could-kick-herself-in-the-ass expression clearly showed she hadn’t meant to say the comment.

“Fool. Fool. Fool,” she muttered under her breath. After a long stare at the hardwood floor Betty sucked in a deep breath, raised her head, and

looked into Brad's eyes. "I just spouted what my family and friends always said to me when they told me I could be beautiful," Betty murmured. "If only I'd lose some weight."

Not wanting to laugh at how Betty's family and friends treated her, but thoroughly enchanted with how she'd dealt with their thoughtless comments, Brad smiled. What a delight she was. He held Betty close and said, "Betty Hammond, you're a dream come true."

With those cryptic words Brad dipped his head. He stopped a breath away from her wet, open mouth and watched her eyes, stared as her pupils dilated, marveled as desire filled them. Their breaths intermingled, warm and fragrant. The house smelled of cinnamon and vanilla, reminding him of safety and love. A ceiling fan lazily rotated overhead, pushing the fragrant air down, raising tiny hairs on Betty's arms. Her breath hitched and she licked her lips again, leaving them glossy and shiny, giving him a tantalizing vision of what she would look like naked in his arms just before he entered her. His heart beat rapidly and he was short of breath. Brad wondered again why this woman touched him so deeply. He searched her stunning face and became lost in her emerald eyes. His eyes drifted shut for a moment and he knew he'd always remember this minute. After a long, sensuous pause, he slowly continued the path to her mouth and fused their lips together, kissing her with all the passion he felt.

The kiss was hot and moist. Their tongues touched then dueled. He tasted sweetness on her breath from the sugar cookie she'd eaten. He met her thrust for thrust as she caressed the inside of his mouth. Brad's penis strained to escape its prison. He groaned and pulled Betty closer. He didn't know if he could last. He wanted her but he needed to wait, make it perfect for Betty.

When his tongue touched Betty's, he pulled her arms around his neck then tangled his hands in her soft, curly hair. The room spun as if he'd drunk a whole bottle of champagne. Betty moaned as he deepened the kiss and he pulled her tighter, closer. He wanted to be inside her, feel her sheath wrapped tightly around his penis. His heart needed to beat next to hers.

Brad marveled at Betty's reaction. She acted as if she'd never felt this kind of passion before. With desperate hands she touched his neck and shoulders and stroked down his face, lingering at the small cleft in his chin. Brad pulled her skirt up and stroked her legs. His hands slid slowly up and down the insides of her thighs from her knees to the juncture of her inner

thighs. He touched her clit, hovered only a moment then moved away, wanting to tempt Betty, needing to feel her response. Her groan of surrender filled the room, but Brad barely heard it as his own savage need raced like fire through his veins. Betty's knees wobbled as she clung to his neck and shoulders. Her hands bunched into fists, drawing his shirt tight across his back.

"Oh God, Betty," Brad said between harsh breaths. "I want to make love to you so much." He kissed her neck and shoulders. "You have the most luminous skin I've ever seen. Moist, soft, silky. Sensuous."

"For my kind of woman," she muttered on a sigh.

Brad chuckled. He loved her offbeat humor and he kept stroking her, wouldn't stop, couldn't stop. "For any kind of woman." He knew she meant a non-celebrity person, someone not in the public eye. He hoped she'd be able to look past his stardom. He promised himself he'd make her forget everything but the passion they had for each other. Teach her to crave his lovemaking, crave him, the man, not the celebrity. He assaulted her senses by touching her clit again, this time with more pressure. Betty's head fell back on a long-drawn-out groan and he kissed along her elegant, soft neck, forgetting everything but the unspoiled beauty in his hands. Without letting up the pressure on her clit, he stroked the folds around her lips, dipped a finger inside her sheath and pushed. Brad felt her goose bumps as Betty shivered and moaned.

"Can we take this to the couch?" Brad could barely get the words out. His body cried out for release but he knew it would be some time before he would give in to his own satisfaction.

Without letting her reply, Brad picked her up and carried her to the couch. He stretched out on top of her, pinning her right where he wanted her. His fingers continued their assault on her senses and he felt the wetness between her legs as Betty's body told him she was ready.

Brad stopped to ask her a question. "Do you want this, Betty?" He would never take a woman against her will, but the wait was killing him.

"Do I want you to make love to me?" Her eyes were half closed, hot desire blazing from the emerald orbs. She groaned and squirmed when he trailed the fingers of his other hand under her blouse and bra, found a nipple hard and ready to be tasted. He twisted it lightly with his thumb and forefinger, then firmly. He scraped a finger over the rigid peak, then lowered his head and nibbled the stiff bud. God, he loved her breasts. They

were so responsive. He blew on the nipple and laved it. Betty groaned and shuddered as she reared off the couch and for a moment Brad thought she had come right then and there. Her responses were immediate, something that called to him deep inside. Brad felt strong knowing he could give her this kind of pleasure, something he instinctively knew she hadn't had before. He panted from his own desperate need, craved completion, and strained to keep from ejaculating too early. His need for Betty was like nothing he'd ever felt before. He wanted to teach her about her body, show her what they could have together. Betty finally answered Brad's question by fumbling with the buttons on his jeans and struggling to pull the tight pants down his legs.

Before she got the jeans over his hips, he struggled to get a condom out of his pocket. Once done, he couldn't wait and kicked off his shoes, shoved his boxers and jeans down his legs and threw the offending garments on the floor. Brad's erection sprang out big and hard, proud, and needy. He ripped open the foil packet and rolled the condom over his penis. Betty lay on the couch, flushed with desire. Brad lay on top of her then nuzzled his erection between her legs. God she was warm, and wet. And that was on the outside. His mind blanked at the thought of being inside her. The liquid from her arousal slid along his penis, hot and slick, and Brad nearly entered her then and there. Instead, he kissed her on her eyelids, the tip of her nose and her lips while steadily rubbing her clitoris with his penis. Without warning he pushed his tongue inside her mouth, sweeping the interior with strong thrusts. At the same time, he entered her with one strong thrust. Betty reared off the couch and gasped, a sound that was drowned out by Brad's groan. God, she was so tight and hot. He moved lightly at first to let her body accommodate his size, then built up speed with firm, fast strokes.

“Come to me, Betty. Let me give you incredible pleasure.”

Betty might as well have taken some kind of drug. She soared to sensational heights as her body rocked against Brad's. His erection, large and thick, filled her to perfection. His thrusts, strong and steady, touched the one spot no one had ever touched before. She was shocked at how wet she'd become, but that was nothing compared to what he was doing to her now.

Brad groaned low and guttural ,and Betty thought he would explode then and there. She matched the pace he'd set thrust for thrust. It might have been a while since she'd had sex but she knew that this time it was special. Brad pulled every feeling from her body. Every craving was intensified. She wanted more with each plunge, but she wasn't quite sure what "more" was.

"Oh God. You're so tight," he panted. "And wet. Hot." He quickened the pace to a near frenzy. Harsh breaths and loud groans filled the room. Brad's musky scent mixed with her lighter, earthier scent and it nearly drove Betty to madness. The cool breeze of the fan couldn't relieve the heat raging between them. Neither one had any control at this point. Betty's center enveloped Brad's erection. He fit her like a hand inside a glove. A very tight, molded glove. No one had ever fit her like this. She used her muscles and squeezed him with every push and pull. As he thrust in and out, over and over again, she nearly unmanned him.

Betty felt Brad's body tighten, his thighs bunch, his hands spasm. He quickened the pace, moving them toward their climax. She sucked in her breath at the mounting sensations that raced through her. Her body rose higher and higher. Her legs tightened and clenched around Brad's waist. Her head fell back onto the pillow and Brad placed his arm under her neck to cradle her. He pulled her head forward and kissed her, his tongue thrusting in and out, the timing tuned to their bodies. She opened her eyes and saw wild passion in Brad's wide, dilated depths. Desire, deep and dangerous, flowed like flames as they reached the peak together. His gasps filled the room just before he came, his release filling her ears and mind with a satisfaction she'd never had before. With one last thrust, Betty felt her world explode. She cried out in ecstasy as she convulsed around Brad, her body spasming over and over again as they surrendered to a perfect meeting of mind and bodies.

Betty was thankful that her narrow couch forced Brad to hold her close until their bodies calmed. He stroked her hair, down her arms and softly across her swollen lips. "Magnificent," he said.

"I've never had such a strong response," Betty whispered, stunned from the force of her orgasm.

"There's more where that came from, Betty. That's a promise."

Brad's words resonated through Betty with a little ripple of awareness. She knew she'd had a limited understanding of what sex was, and Brad's

words told her there was more to learn. She wanted more, wanted Brad to be the one to teach her. When they were together, she forgot he was a movie star. To her he was the first man to take the time to understand her. And she wanted to understand him. The person. The man. Not the celebrity. Betty hoped their different lives were not an “opposites attract” situation. She needed someone similar to her, maybe not so much of an introvert, but someone who accepted her innate shyness but brought out her more social side.

For the first time in Betty’s life, she wanted to grow more as a person. Brad made her want to do that.

Pinch me, Betty thought the next day. The previous night’s date had been incredible. Spectacular. Dreamlike. Did it really happen? Brad left long after midnight. She’d almost tackled him right there at the front door to stop him from leaving.

He didn’t even comment about her smallish breasts, Betty thought with delight.

It’s a nightmare, Betty decided, immediately changing her mind. No worldwide movie star would eat dinner at her house and make passionate love with her on the couch. She figured she’d wake up from this fantastic, romantic, horrible dream and be left alone and adrift.

Brad told her he’d be away for a week on a shoot somewhere. Betty didn’t remember where he said he’d be or who the costar was, because all she remembered was her body’s reaction to his fiery lips and his torturous hands roaming between her legs. He’d kissed every sensual part he could find.

She could hardly wait for the next time.

With a multitude of groans, he’d walked out her front door late in the evening. Betty had done a tiny jig in her living room, her arms pumping the air. She sure wasn’t going to look the handsome gift horse in his face and not accept his romantic attentions.

The day loomed ahead so she rented five of Bradley’s latest movies. Research. Once home, she put the oldest movie in first, planning to work up to the most recent one.

His performances were masterful, honest. They showed the kind of man Brad was, competent, kind, accomplished. The kind of man she'd come to know. The kind of man she could fall for. Yet why would the sexiest man alive—for the past two decades, no less—want a slightly out of shape flight attendant? All the humor and all the good men couldn't put her into a model's body again.

By the time Betty finished the movies she realized that a man like Brad needed a woman who could relate to his job, his celebrity, and his fanatical fans.

She couldn't.

Betty cried for a week then resigned herself to becoming a pumpkin again. She moped around the house and flopped on her bed.

The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hiya, sweetheart!" Brad said.

"Hi." Betty's heart shriveled to the size of an old, dried prune.

"I miss you. What've you been up to today?"

Betty couldn't answer for a minute. His deep, sexy voice filled her senses. She imagined his strong, capable hands on her body and immediately felt wet. Rivers of sorrow flowed through her veins.

"Betty?" Brad said. "Are you all right, honey?"

Honey. "I'm fine."

"Are you crying?"

Silence.

"Betty." Brad lowered his voice. "Tell me what's wrong. I can hear it in your voice."

She bolstered her courage and said what had to be said. "Brad. This isn't going to work. Thank you for the most unforgettable night of my life. I'll always treasure our time together."

"Betty? What brought this on?" Brad whispered. "Tell me. You can tell me." On a sob Betty said, "I watched some of your movies this week."

"Damn," Brad shouted. "Why did you go and do that?"

"I wanted to learn more about you."

"You know all there is to know. I'm not some fake guy on a flat screen. I'm real," Brad said. Betty heard anger in his voice. "I'm coming home to you. Don't go anywhere."

“Brad, wait—” But he’d already hung up. “What’s with that man? He’s always hanging up on me,” Betty muttered as she slammed the phone down.

He must have been close, because a few hours later her doorbell rang. Betty had cried all afternoon and now she hoped the dusky evening would cover the ravages of her streaked and puffy face. Wiping the last of the tears away, she opened the door. “Hello.”

“You look like crap,” he stated as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her senseless. His hands roamed up her back and tangled in her hair as he cupped her head. His lips pressed against hers for a moment, then he pushed inside her mouth with a strong thrust of his tongue. She felt traces of anger as he rocked his body against hers, as he held her a bit too tight. His hands shook on her shoulders. His mouth had been turned down at the corners. Was he upset because she’d watched his movies? Found out what a huge celebrity he was? His erection, hard and demanding, bulging in his jeans, pushed against her.

Just seeing Brad again brought back feelings Betty had buried deep inside. The thought that she’d never find a man to care for her, quirks and all, the feeling of not being attractive enough, yet knowing she had a lot to offer, had warred within her for years. Yet here was this handsome, accomplished man telling her in words and actions that he wanted her. Betty wanted him too but she couldn’t move forward until she found out why he was upset.

When he pulled away, she said, “Well if that’s your version of gallantry, I’d rather have a pedicure.”

“What?”

“At least I’d get a foot massage.”

He chuckled and wiped away the tear that had slipped down her cheek.

“Now all I have is the most handsome, rugged man alive kissing me senseless and telling me I look bad,” Betty continued as if Brad hadn’t just stroked away her tears with gentle hands. “Are you angry with me?”

“Yes,” Brad said. “No.” He kissed her nose, her eyelids, and her chin. “You’re coming with me. Now.”

“Why?”

“I have something I want to show you.” Brad grabbed her keys and purse, which lay on the entry table, dragged her out the front door and gently shoved her into the white limo that was parked in front of her house.

“Oh my God!” Betty murmured. Brad had filled the inside of the limo with roses. Red, pink, white. The fragrant aroma invaded her senses, causing a slight dizziness. He climbed into the rear seat with her, picked up a phone, spoke into a receiver and the limo moved away from her curb.

“Betty, look at me.”

She looked. Her heart slipped a notch and her bones melted at the look of raw desire and pure love on his face.

“I’m just a man. A man who has searched for a woman who could understand my fake world of celluloid and intrusion. A man who has looked for a funny, kind, beautiful, honest, loyal, down-to-earth, extremely sexual woman to have by my side, to escape that world with. A woman like you.”

“But you’re not normal.”

Brad’s face changed. His forehead furrowed, his lips became a straight line. “I am normal. I have normal feelings, just not a normal job.” His face lit up as he thought of something. “I even use the bathroom like normal people.”

“No, you don’t.” Betty sucked in the lovely fragrance from the flowers on a sob. “I know what you do when you go to the bathroom.”

“What?”

“When you go to the bathroom you kiss a woman until she feels she’s in an erotic dream. You fondle her nipples until she wants to scream. You don’t pee and poop like regular people.”

“You mean the airplane lav.” Brad’s eyes crinkled around the corners with humor and Betty knew her erratic thinking delighted him. He laughed and pulled her into his arms. “Erotic dream, huh?”

Betty’s tears fell harder. “Brad, I don’t belong here. I live a regular life. You live among the wealthy, powerful and sinful. You live a special, high-profile, high-society life.”

“No, I don’t. I never have.” He took her hands in his. “I live like a regular person. I have regular friends who are not in the movie business. I’ve made it a point to keep people near me who don’t want something from me. And I’m very close to my family.”

The limo rode in the carpool lane. No outside sounds could be heard. She waved her hand in the air and said, “Look at this limo. What normal person hires a limo like this? It must have cost a fortune.”

“A person who’s trying to impress his girl.”

His girl. Betty didn't say anything, choosing not to believe Brad's comment. She wasn't his girl. They'd only known each other a week or so. "Where are we going?" Betty asked.

"You'll see." Brad opened a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of champagne. He popped the cork. White bubbly foam spilled over the top and a tangy scent mingled with the sweet smell of roses. He grabbed two fluted glasses, clinking them together by accident.

The musical chime told Betty the flutes were crystal. Something expensive. She sighed. She wanted to be with this man. He made her feel special. Beautiful. Loved. And oh, so sexy. Vibrantly sexy. Even a little sinfully sexy.

And thin.

But how could she open up her life to live in his fishbowl existence? She was a hermit. A crab. Betty-the-bury-your-face-in-the-sand kind of person.

The limo stopped. Betty glanced outside. They had parked in front of a ranch-style home in a suburban neighborhood. "Where are we?"

"At my house."

Betty stared. How normal. The house was a little larger than the others, in a nice upper-class neighborhood. A well-tended lawn with stunning pink, lavender and white impatiens, begonias, hydrangeas, and fragrant roses lined the curved walkway and under the picture window. "This is beautiful, Brad."

"Thank you. I've lived here for fifteen years." Brad opened the door and got out of the limo. He reached inside for Betty and helped her out. "Let me show you around."

They walked into a front entry hall that was lined with bamboo flooring. Soft, light gray walls showed off comfortable-looking white couches and chairs. Glossy black end tables graced the couches and a square black coffee table with glass inserts complemented the end tables. A few colorful pillows were tossed on the couch to brighten up the room. Paintings of landscapes and ocean scenes hung on the walls. The room was relaxed, easy, masculine. There was no hint of formality or stuffiness.

As Betty walked along the hallway to the family room in the back of the house, she studied the photos along the wall. Two incredibly handsome men, a beautiful woman and another man who looked like he could be Brad's brother graced the wall. Photos of a man with a lovely woman and

two young boys hung on the wall too. The resemblance was uncanny and Betty knew these were Brad's grandfather, father, and mother as well as the rest of his family.

She stopped and stared at the pictures. History played out on the wall. From the 1920s right up through present day, Betty saw Brad's family as they grew older and more famous. His grandfather stood with silent screen celebrities and Depression-era politicians, his father posed with presidents and members of royalty. Brad's gorgeous mother stood with her arm around Grace Kelly's waist and in another picture, she laughed with Doris Day and Rock Hudson.

The pictures were a bit overwhelming. Yet each and every one looked like everyday family photos. They weren't professionally framed and had been grouped together randomly, as if they'd been put on the wall when they'd been taken. There was an ease to the arrangements, reminiscent of a casual, regular family.

"You look a little stunned," Brad said. "Do the pictures intimidate you?"

He had moved next to her and placed his hand on her waist as he asked the question. His touch burned and Betty wanted him to make love to her again. She ignored the tingle that thrummed through her and waited a moment to reply, not wanting to say the wrong thing. "The content of the photos could be considered overwhelming if they had been arranged differently. But these groupings remind me of my upbringing. My mother used to stick a picture onto the nearest empty spot on the wall. It might have been one she'd just had developed or one she'd found hidden for years in a drawer."

Brad nodded. "That's exactly what happened here. Every time my mother came over, she'd nail another picture to the wall."

Betty heard the sadness in his voice. "I know you miss her very much. Is it hard for you to see these pictures, know she put them here?"

"Yes and no." Brad pulled her into his arms, her back to his front. He nuzzled her head. Betty's heart raced. He smelled like spice and clean, fresh air. She felt the steady beating of his heart and wanted to turn into his embrace, run her hands over his strong chest, feel the tightness of his body against hers. "Every time I see this wall, I feel a profound sense of love and know that my mother is still here. I can't explain it, but I also feel sad knowing I can never speak to her again or hug her. My mother was a very loving woman."

Tears came to Betty's eyes. Sadness radiated from Brad. No matter how famous the person, they loved the same as everyone else. "It must be hard grieving for your mother so publicly."

"It is. But there is also the comfort that comes from the thousands of letters that sympathetic fans sent. It's a very humbling experience to know so many people care and are willing to take the time to acknowledge my pain." Brad sighed. "Very humbling."

"Who are in these other photos?" Betty pointed to the ones with the younger man and his family.

"My brother, his wife and kids." Brad smiled and pointed to each person. "James, Rebecca, Jeremy and Joseph. They decided to name every boy they had with a J and every girl with an R." Brad laughed. "They've stopped trying for another girl. They say they're too old to want to start again. The boys are now in their late twenties and both very successful. One's a lawyer, the other is an artist."

Betty laughed and squeezed Brad's hand. They stood together for a few more minutes, not talking, but gently touching each other. She stroked lightly down his arm, the hair soft and downy, he gave her a light, searing touch along the side of her breast, a touch that that promised heat and passion and desire. Then Brad sucked in a breath and said, "Well enough of this. I brought you here to make you feel comfortable around me, not morose."

Betty turned in Brad's arms and stroked his cheek. "Your house is beautiful, what I've seen of it, and your family seems wonderful. I'm sure you live as quiet a life as you can." Betty stepped away from him and gave him a rueful smile. "But you are not normal. Most people could never dream of your status in life. They only dream to live comfortably and provide for their children. You have been given a rare lifestyle that has both incredible rewards and harsh realities."

"Don't I know it," Brad said with a sigh. "Well come on into the kitchen. I whipped up something for us."

They talked through an early dinner of poached salmon with dill sauce, creamed corn, and salad. Brad told Betty about his childhood, his first job as a production assistant to the producer for the movie Kindergarten Cop.

"I was only sixteen. I'd told my father the year before that I wanted to be an actor. He was dead set against it." Brad sighed as he shook his head. When he looked up from his plate he smiled. "But I wore him down. He

said if I wanted to act, I had to learn the business from the inside out. One Saturday he took me to Imagine Entertainment and walked me right up to Brian Grazer. He introduced me, told him I wanted to learn the business and left.”

“Oh my God, Brad,” Betty said. “What did you do?”

“I stood there with my mouth gaping open. I was furious with my father and afraid of Mr. Grazer.” Brad laughed at the memory. “I now wonder if Dad called him in advance and planned the whole thing. Grazer gave me a chilly stare as he ran his eyes up and down me. With lowered eyebrows he hollered to an assistant to ‘get this boy something to do!’”

“What did you end up doing?”

“I followed the assistant around for weeks like a puppy dog. I did every menial job, even scrubbing floors. One year later I was a proven production assistant working for them.” Brad leaned back in his chair and placed his hands on his stomach.

“You’re pretty proud of that memory, aren’t you?” Betty said with a smile.

“You bet.” Brad leaned forward and studied Betty. “My father thought I was going to cave in and give up. I showed him. I did everything every director, producer or actor asked me to do and never complained. When the head of the studio ordered my father to come in for a meeting one day, I thought I was fired. It turned out he told Dad that I was the best kid that had ever been hired by the studio and that it was time to let me start acting.”

“Wow.” Betty didn’t know what else to say. It was a storybook beginning with a spectacular ending. She stared at Brad. The man was a legend and she sat in his kitchen. He must have known how awed she felt because he raised an eyebrow at her, lowered it, then raised the other one. Betty burst out laughing and realized he’d done it to put her at ease again. A soft feeling of warmth spread through her. Brad was an intuitive man and had shown Betty that he cared about her feelings. Inwardly she heaved a sigh of wonder, and thanked the heavens for her recent good fortune in meeting Brad on the airplane.

“Tell me about your upbringing, Betty. Where’d you get your wicked, wonderful sense of humor?”

“My father. I’m just like him. He would always say the most outrageous things. My mother would laugh and shake her head, but other people would

stare at him as if he'd lost his marbles." Betty grinned at Brad. "You'll love him. He still cracks me up."

Betty pushed back her chair and picked up her plate. Brad followed suit and they cleaned the kitchen together. Brad rinsed the dishes and handed them to Betty, who put them in the dishwasher. Once they were finished, he pulled out a bottle of white wine and popped the cork. They sat on the sofa in the family room and talked.

"One day," Betty began, "my father decided we should go to the natural history museum. I was probably ten years old. My sister Patti was thirteen. Patti always tried to get me in trouble, and it worked more times than it didn't." Betty laughed remembering the incident. "We were studying the dinosaur display when Patti ran to a Tyrannosaurus rex and pulled on its bony tail. The tip of the tail came off in her hand. I wasn't paying attention, all engrossed in the diorama displayed nearby. With the bone in her hand Patti ran to Mom and Dad and whispered that I had broken the Tyrannosaurus rex. She held up the bone and the curator saw it. He marched over to me and dragged me to Mom and Dad."

Betty stopped telling the story. She watched the excitement and joy on Brad's face and could tell he was totally caught up in the incident.

"Well, what happened?" Brad asked.

"I was shocked. I hadn't even seen the exhibit yet. Patti continued to wave the bone in my face and told everyone that I broke the dinosaur. Her voice rose louder and louder the more excited she became. The curator was furious. He stepped toward me and reached out to grab my collar. Before anyone could stop him, I said, 'You touch me and I'll jump on that dinosaur's back and ride him right out of this museum. See how that would look on the evening news.'"

Brad roared. "What happened then?"

"My father burst out laughing. My mother frowned. Patti stood there with a smug smile on her face because she'd succeeded in getting me in trouble—again. The curator sputtered, grabbed the bone from Patti's hand and called security to escort us out of the museum."

Brad laughed so hard he grabbed his stomach.

"Really, Brad. It wasn't that funny," Betty said with a straight face. "I was traumatized by the embarrassment, angry with my sister for framing me, and upset with myself for falling for one of her escapades again. I

haven't been to a natural history museum since." Betty sat up against the cushion and placed her hands primly in her lap. She twiddled her thumbs.

Brad's eyes flew to her face. "You're kidding, right?"

Betty stared at him for a very long moment. "About which part of the story?" The crinkling around Brad's eyes grew deeper. His smile widened, then faltered. She could tell he wasn't sure if she was still upset by the childhood story.

"Er, the whole story? You made that up."

Betty shook her head side to side. "Fraid not."

Brad's expression changed to sympathy. "I'm sorry, Betty. I shouldn't have laughed."

"You should have. The story is outrageous but true. You know that movie Night at the Museum? I won't watch it for fear all my humiliation will come back to haunt me." She laughed at his expression. "Gotcha! I was traumatized a little, but more pissed off at my sister. It took me months, but I got back at Patti." She saw him relax back into the sofa with a relieved look on his face. "That's another story."

The evening ended with music playing quietly in the background. Betty and Brad made love until the early morning hours, when he personally drove her home.

At Work

Two days later Betty went back to working her first-class cabin. She thought constantly about Brad, imagined his hands kneading her nipples, felt his kisses sear her mouth. Seeing him in his home environment made him more human, less of an unreachable celebrity. He had a public life and a private one. The public life she couldn't do anything about. The private one she could come to treasure. He was a kind, thoughtful man, smart and handsome, funny, and tender. They hadn't made love again because Betty wanted to get to know him better before they did more mattress Pilates. But she wanted him in her arms, inside her body. Now. Again. Betty had never felt this way about a man before. In Brad's arms she felt special, beautiful, treasured.

She'd turned down his offer to stay overnight with him and Brad hadn't pushed. But she'd seen hot desire in his eyes and his wanton kisses sent electrical impulses all the way to her toes. After the hour drive home filled with more sizzling kisses and tender touches, Brad had had to carry her into her house, her legs weakened and trembling from need. With humor in his eyes and a wicked slant to his smiling mouth, he had offered to expand the service and take her upstairs to the bedroom. But desire lurked behind the humor, molten, hot, like magma just before it escapes its boundaries.

“Thank you for the offer, kind sir. But alas, I must learn to wobble away from you under my own steam. That steam being the white stuff you see coming out of my ears.”

Brad had laughed with delight, kissed her on the tip of her nose and reluctantly gone back to his car. Betty had watched him drive away and wondered why a lone tear fell down her cheek.

Now she was flying home from New York to Los Angeles. She always had celebrities onboard and today was no exception. Brad Pitt sat in a window seat with his assistant next to him in the aisle seat, and some singer that Betty had never heard of was causing trouble. The woman was drunk, demanding and demeaning. After shouting at Betty to “take this incredibly bad food away from me right now before I throw up” she didn’t give Betty a chance to comply with her...wishes. As Betty stepped up to her seat, the singer threw the whole tray at her and cursed her out. Betty stood in the aisle with warm roasted vegetables and goat cheese falling from her face. Sauce from the vegetables soaked her blouse, creating a wet circle over her left nipple, which hardened into a tight bud. A piece of rye bread was glued to her breast, calling attention to the small globes. The woman’s white wine dripped down Betty’s cheeks, calling attention to her high cheekbones. Betty licked some of it off her lips and found, with her limited knowledge, that it was an acceptable vintage.

The air marshals jumped up to assist her, but Betty waved her hands at them. They sat back down and gave her a look that said if she needed anything they’d be there for her. Betty hoped the passengers thought they were just regular guys offering to help in an uncomfortable situation, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it anyway. The singer, oblivious to the two men, continued to rant about the food, the service and now Betty’s appearance. Betty calmly picked up the tray and cleaned the food off the floor then went into the galley to clean the food off her chest. Wine-soaked strands of hair clung to her cheeks and her bangs were already curling up to her hairline. Betty went to the bathroom to wash out as many stains as she could from her white blouse, pushed her hair into something resembling a style and prayed no one would laugh at her appearance when they deplaned.

The purser was incensed on Betty’s behalf. When Betty came out of the bathroom, Jeannie told her she had explained to the captain what happened and asked him to have the police meet the flight. The singer was now cut

off from drinking any more alcohol and the air marshals told her they would interfere the next time the woman acted up and restrain her.

Betty thanked Jeannie for her concern. When she made her rounds in first class, replenishing drinks, the singer demanded a refill of her wine. With a smile plastered on her face Betty said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Ms. Gallo." It wasn't the singer's real name but Betty couldn't help making the jab at the amount of wine she'd drunk. "The wine you've requested has just been poured down the drain. We found, after you threw it in my face, that the wine did indeed taste of vinegar as you had complained. The airline has a policy to immediately throw away all bad wine so we don't offend our passengers by inadvertently giving them another glass of the affected beverage."

The singer's mouth gaped open and a bit of drool dropped out. Betty smiled and left, knowing the woman wouldn't ask her for another drop of wine.

As it was, "Ms. Gallo" fell into a drunken slumber for the rest of the flight, snoring so loudly Betty saw the passenger sitting next to her shove her to awaken her. It didn't work, the singer shifted, still sound asleep, and her head bobbed onto the passenger's shoulder. Aggravated, the passenger pulled out his cell phone, snapped a picture of the singer with her mouth ungainly open and a drizzle of drool pooled in the corner of her lips, and emailed the news of the flight disruption to TMZ. In this day of onboard internet, by the time the flight landed in Los Angeles the paparazzi had filled the deplaning area and were waiting to get pictures of the drunken celebrity.

"How was your day today?" Brad asked Betty when she called him.

"Fine. Nothing unusual." Betty wasn't going to tell him about the drunk singer. He might know the woman and think highly of her and she didn't want to offend him in case she was a friend of his.

"Are you tired or would you mind some company tonight?"

Betty's heart raced at the words and her mouth went dry for a minute. She swallowed to get moisture back, to be able to speak. He wanted to see her as much as she wanted to see him! She jumped up and down then darted up the stairs, still holding the phone to her ear. "I would love some company."

"How about I bring us Chinese food?"

"Perfect. I'll supply the wine. Do you want white or red?"

“White. Goes better with Chinese.”

Betty huffed as she reached the top of the stairs. Thirteen stairs and she couldn't breathe. Where was a gym when she needed one? She didn't think she was that out of shape and decided to be honest with herself from now on. Excitement bubbled through her because Brad was coming over. Excitement and something else, something she almost didn't recognize. Need. She needed to see him, to hear the low timbre of his voice, inhale his earthy scents of man and soap.

“What are you doing? You sound...breathless.”

Betty heard the smile in Brad's voice. When he'd said the word breathless, his voice had lowered, stumbled. Her heart kicked into her ribs and Betty sank to her bed. “Nothing. I'm not doing...a thing.” Why couldn't she tell him how excited she was to see him? Because she was afraid. Afraid that his feelings were only temporary. Afraid that she was already too attached to Brad, that he wanted a casual relationship, nothing serious. Did she want a serious relationship? She thought so. In time. Everything was happening too fast. Betty needed to slow down and not rush into a broken heart.

There was a pause on the line then Brad said in a very quiet voice, “I can't wait to see you. What can I do to bring a little excitement and sparkle to our evening?”

“Oh, I'll sparkle,” Betty promised, still short of breath. She already felt the sparkle between her legs. Betty sparkled so much she wondered if she'd pop like a champagne cork before Brad arrived. What would happen if she popped when he arrived?

The pictures tormented her. Pictures of them making love on the entryway floor. Chests heaving, sighs and moans filling the air. She felt the hardwood floor biting into her back, soft yet insistent hands pulling her stiff nipples, bringing torture and relief to her desperate body. So aroused by her imagination she could barely talk, Betty said in a husky voice, “Bring your treats and you never know what exciting things may rise to the occasion.”

Brad laughed, deep and sexy. “It's a date. See you at six.”

Betty sucked in her breath at the low timbre of his voice. The word “date” floated through her brain, freezing it for long moments. She didn't know how long she stood staring into space before the beeping of the phone told her Brad had hung up and she was still holding the darling instrument to her ear.

Date. Betty jumped up from the bed and raced to turn the shower on. It was four o'clock and she needed all the time she had left before Brad came to beautify herself for him.

Once the water was hot enough, she stepped in and prayed that the heat would stay in her cheeks, giving her a rosy, ripe, ready look. After styling her hair, she plastered on the spackle to smooth out any unevenness in her skin, adding rouge to keep her skin looking highlighted and taut. No, wrong word, she scolded herself. Taut sounded too old, too stretched. She wanted her skin to look...she peered closer into the mirror. How did she want her skin to look? Lush, sensuous, soft. Young. Exactly! Betty nodded her head and laughed. She added shadow to her lids, an off-white color to highlight her arched brows, dusted a burnt orange color onto her lids that made her blue eyes pop, added charcoal to deepen the crease and make her look more exotic, and lined it with a navy-blue pencil. After brownish-black mascara, she brushed on a touch of light powder with a hint of sparkle and did a short jig around the bathroom.

Bradley Moore was coming tonight!

He knocked at precisely six o'clock. Betty opened the door and smiled. Brad's mouth dropped open and he stood frozen to the porch. She looked stunning. Her makeup highlighted flawless skin, radiant blue eyes, and sexy laugh lines at the edges of her eyes. His body hardened instantly. He'd always thought Betty was pretty but now she looked gorgeous. There was a glow to her skin that seemed to come from within. The light from the entryway backlit her and she looked ethereal. His heart pounded, and for a moment he forgot to breathe.

Betty tilted her head and laughed. "Is my face on crooked?"

He swallowed audibly to dislodge the knot that had formed in his throat. After a brief cough he said, "You look stunning." Betty took some of the packages from his hands and groaned at the enticing smell that drifted from them.

The groan tore through Brad. "Oh God," he muttered. Betty's smile lit her face, a radiant joy shone from her eyes. He growled under his breath as her eyes fell to his penis. His jeans grew tighter...much tighter, and he

shifted to accommodate the uncomfortable bulge. Betty's face flushed with warmth and hot, sizzling desire as two red spots gave away her thoughts. She licked her lips, wiping off the sparkly gloss she'd applied, and Brad couldn't wait any longer. This woman called to him on every level, emotionally and sexually. She belonged with him. She was right for him. He didn't know how he knew it, but he knew.

With his arms full of Chinese food, he walked into her home, closed the front door with his foot and stepped so close to her she backed up against the nearest wall. He leaned forward to kiss her, lowering his head until their lips almost touched, stopping a hair's breadth away, holding the moment, deepening the expectation. He gazed at her moist lips, wide and open, watched the tip of her tongue lick them as if they were dry, and saw the dewy wetness left behind. Her eyelids fell halfway, showing long, dark lashes. Short, fast bursts of air left her mouth and tickled his lips.

For the first time in his life his head spun, the mixture of her minty breath blended with the scent of the sweet and sour Chinese food and her subtle perfume, something flowery, light. After what seemed an unbearable length of time Brad slowly ran his tongue over her mouth. He tasted her lips, finding them full of heat and passion and burning desire. He sucked Betty's bottom lip into his mouth and drank in her sweet flavor.

Without letting go of the bags of food, Brad and Betty sank to the floor, Betty's back against a wall to keep them upright. Their lips never parted. Patience gone, he pushed his tongue inside her mouth, tangling it with hers. With slow, precise movements he stroked her tongue with his, touching and tasting. He withdrew, then entered again, showing her how much he wanted to be doing the same thing with his raging erection. Betty moaned and Brad let go of the two bags, not caring that the white boxes tumbled onto the floor, not looking to see if any food spilled out. Brad cradled Betty's head between his hands, felt her soft curls, rubbed her scalp. He plunged his tongue into her mouth again and again, fully sweeping the inside, desperate to taste all of her.

He didn't stop kissing her. Couldn't. He needed to feel the strength of her tongue, taste the minty flavor of her mouth, feel its softness, wetness. He wanted to be inside Betty, her mouth, and her body. She felt right, fitted him perfectly. No one had been his match, no one. When Brad pulled away with a light nip on her bottom lip he said, "God. I hadn't realized how much I needed to see you, touch you, kiss you." He tenderly stroked her face, her

jaw and her now swollen lips. “Then you opened the door and I saw how beautiful you were standing there, waiting for me. You looked like an angel.”

Betty didn't respond. Brad's chest squeezed tight when he saw the glint of tears in her eyes. He'd touched her, as he'd wanted to. But this touch was deeper, the kind of touch that only words could convey. Not a physical touch. An emotional one. She swallowed as if she couldn't speak. Her chest rose and fell with short breaths. He too had a difficult time breathing. Why did it mean so much to him that he wanted her to know she was beautiful? Because Betty's beauty was on the inside and her family hadn't accepted that. He wanted her to know he saw who she was inside as well as outside.

Brad pulled her close and kissed her again, not giving her time to respond to his comment. Betty reached out to him, but before she could touch him, he slid his hands down the neckline of her blouse and fondled her breasts, stroked them, teased them. He pulled away, just wanting to torment her for a minute. She wore a slinky soft midnight blue dress with a low, draped neckline that teased the tops of her nipples, showed a bit of cleavage. Brad couldn't get enough, had to see her beautiful breasts, and ran one finger along the neckline, dipping it into the crevice. Betty moaned and wrapped her arms around Brad's neck. He plunged his hands into the bodice of her dress and rolled her nipples between his fingers and thumbs. With one hand he pulled the demi-cup down, exposing the round globe to his sight. The skin around the nipple puckered, whether from the cold or arousal he didn't know. Then he dipped his head and took her turgid nipple into his mouth. First, he sucked, pulling with strong, yet gentle motions. Then he licked the sensitive bud. Betty groaned and arched her body into his chest.

Neither one noticed the hard floor, smelled the food, or heard the soft jazz playing in the background. Brad knocked a white box aside as they stretched out so he could stroke Betty's waist, move down her body, pull the skirt of her dress up and reach the juncture between her legs. Betty leaned into his hands, her sighs coming from deep within. Her body melted into his hands as if she needed to be closer, as if she craved his touch.

Brad kissed Betty like he'd never kissed another woman. He hadn't been emotionally involved with any of them, he now realized. He'd thought he had when he'd married, but his feelings for Betty outweighed every feeling he'd had in every prior relationship. No on-screen love scene or off-

screen romance could match the intensity pouring between them. Brad's mind emptied of all but Betty. Her rounded hips, her long, slim legs, her perfect breasts. She felt right, fitted him perfectly, needed him desperately.

He needed her just as much. Maybe more. No woman had ever forgotten who he was, who his family was. Betty hadn't heard of him before they'd met. That let her get to know the real Brad, the man inside the celebrity.

With slow and deliberate care, he removed her silk panties, drawing them down her legs. He stroked the soft skin, licked her where he'd just touched her and left a wet trail along the inside of one leg. Betty fumbled with his zipper, her shaking hands making it difficult to undo his pants. He kicked off his shoes and shimmied out of his pants to free his legs. She wore impossibly high heels that elongated her already long legs and screamed sex, turning him to mush. "Leave the shoes on," he ground out between kisses. When he touched between Betty's legs, she reared off the floor with a moan, her back arching high into the air. She was so responsive to his touch. He felt special, as if only he could give her this pleasure, these sensations. As he continued to stroke her, he felt her body tense. Betty's breathing became ragged as her eyes lost focus. He stroked faster, pushed the hard button with tender, sure strokes, felt her heart pounding and knew she was near her peak. In a moment Betty's eyes flew wide open and with a guttural groan she cried out in delight. Her arms tightened around his neck, her fingers spasmed in his hair and Brad knew she was shocked at the speed and intensity of the orgasm as contractions radiated through her body.

"It's good, it's okay," he murmured in her ear. "Feel the release, feel my touch. I'm here. Right here."

When her body settled, Betty reached for his penis but he held her hand away. "Not yet." As incredible as the lovemaking was, he wanted to get them off the floor. Leaving their food scattered on the hardwood, he picked her up and carried her to the couch in the living room. With a crooked grin he lay on the soft cushion and pulled Betty on top of him. They weren't even settled before Betty took his pulsing erection in her hands. He couldn't keep the moan from slipping out as she stroked slowly up and down, around the tip. To Brad the fact that Betty moaned as she stroked him told him it turned her on to give him pleasure. That pushed him higher. His need for her, for release, ratcheted up, tightening his thigh muscles. He became even harder, more desperate for Betty to touch him, hold him. He covered her

hand with his and moved it to his balls. She stroked them, fondled them. Brad didn't even wonder that her motions nearly unmanned him. He groaned with the effort to hold back his release. He wanted more, more of Betty, more touches, more pleasurable pain. He wanted to be inside her, feel her slick heat, her tightness. His body jerked from the strain of holding back, he felt his neck muscles bunch. She bent over to kiss him, but Brad took control, his mouth insistent, his hands firmly on either side of her face. He was desperate for release, for any and every touch of Betty on his body. Brad knew he could be rough, was on the verge of punishing her lips. Instead, he kissed her long and tenderly, gently. He forced himself to hold back.

His moans came out deep and agonized and Brad wondered who made those sounds. He'd never heard that type of desperation before. His body was taut, hard, ready for release. His hands clenched her arms, bruising her, he was sure. He was sorry but unable to stop. Then she leaned down and placed her mouth on his penis and the world momentarily slipped away as his body rocked and bucked.

With a terrible groan Brad found the strength to pull away from Betty.

Before she could protest, he flipped them over and entered her. Betty was ready, hot, and slippery, tight, and inviting. Brad had never known that giving pleasure to a woman could cause him to become so needy, so desperate. He had to be inside Betty as much as she needed him to be inside her. He felt it in her movements, her groans, her passion.

Need raced through his body. He couldn't get enough of Betty. Her skin was soft and silky. Her lips firm and plump. Her thighs were strong and steady. Her musky scent enveloped him as he raced to reach the stars. Friction built between them as their desire increased. Brad's body was hard and punishing, then soft and tender. Each thrust hit home and Brad shouted with joy, shocked with the level of desire flowing through him. He knew he couldn't last much longer. He heard Betty's gasps and moans, felt the tautness of her body, and knew she too was nearing the peak.

With a rush of desire so strong he couldn't stop it, Brad pushed them both over the edge. He felt Betty's contractions around him and poured into her. They cried out from release and wonder at the intensity of the waves that flooded them. Their breaths were ragged as they sucked in air, their bodies slick with sweat.

Never in his life had Brad experienced such a perfect match. Never.

Before he could stop the thought, it popped into his head. He'd found his mate. He knew it. As he held Betty, he waited for the panic to set in. The urge to flee to overcome him. No panic filled his heart and mind. And he wanted to stay. Forever. He hadn't been looking for a permanent relationship, on the contrary, just the opposite. But Brad knew he'd found one. And for the first time in his life, all was right in the world.

"Will you come to work with me tomorrow?" Brad asked later. They had taken a shower together as the Chinese food reheated in the microwave.

Happiness flooded Betty. "I'd love to. I've never been to a movie set before."

"You'll either be fascinated or bored," Brad said as he took a carton from the microwave and put in another.

Betty took down her luxurious Corelle "china" and placed her flatware on placemats on the table. She uncorked a bottle of chardonnay and pulled two wineglasses from the cupboard.

Once dinner was on the table they sat down to eat. Neither one spoke for a few minutes. Betty was a bit stunned by the intense passion she and Brad had displayed for each other. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before. For a moment she felt disconnected, as if she were living a lie. And setting up the dinner had added to the unreal situation because it felt normal and comfortable, like they were a married couple. It seemed out of place after the incredible intensity she'd just experienced. A niggling of concern, worry that this was just a phase, a momentary release for Brad, wormed its way into her thoughts and she ruthlessly pushed it aside, not willing to let anything disturb the incredible evening she was having.

Brad glanced at Betty a couple of times. "You're too quiet. Is everything all right?"

Betty placed her fork on her plate and smiled at him. "Everything is wonderful. I'm just a bit bowled over by our lovemaking earlier." She stared into her wineglass, not seeing the pale gold color. After a bracing sip, she decided to jump into the deep end and asked, "Did you feel the magic the way I did?" Betty stared at Brad, not wanting to miss a second of his

reaction to her question. If he looked away, she'd know he didn't feel the same. She prayed he'd say yes, knew she'd be devastated if he didn't.

With a steady look, Brad put his glass on the table and took her hand in his and held it tight. "Yes. This was the most beautiful lovemaking I've ever had." His eyes never left her face and he leaned forward. "From the moment I met you I felt a connection, but nothing in my life could have prepared me for this. No movie love scene or past romance I've ever had has compared to what we shared tonight."

She felt the same but couldn't have explained it as well as Brad had. Tears pooled in Betty's eyes before she could stop them. She felt like a silly emotional female, but she'd never had such an incredible experience. Not only was Brad a tender and passionate lover, he was kind. He took his time to make sure Betty was satisfied. He put her first, something that had never happened to her before. She thought she might be falling in love with him and wanted to hold on to the feeling. Betty knew that no matter how good the sex was a man could make love and walk away, happy to be "serviced," without the need for love or entanglements. She was supremely glad Brad wasn't one of those guys.

Brad stayed the night. They made love again, another incredible experience. In the morning they drove to the studio where he was filming an epic World War II romance. Brad introduced her to the director, some of the grips and cameramen, then sat her in a chair to watch the filming. A production assistant fussed over Betty, gave her a bottle of water, asked if she needed any food, told her that there were snacks outside the door and mentioned a catering service would be along for lunch.

The woman who played Brad's love interest in the movie came onto the set to have the lighting properly aligned. She was stunning, as beautiful a woman as Betty had ever seen. Jolie Kensington. Tall, blonde, slim, with large breasts and a set of pouting lips to match. Her eyes were deep-set and showed incredible expression. Betty would have hated her on sight if she hadn't had the day before with Brad.

The crew finished setting up for the shot and Brad came out in a bathrobe. He smiled when he saw her, his eyes lighting with pleasure and warmth. Her breath quickened; her heart raced. A deep sense of happiness filled her. Betty knew at that moment she had fallen in love with him. It was too soon, so she promised herself she wouldn't say anything to him. No

matter what happened, she had her memories to treasure and they were hers alone.

Brad and Jolie got into the bed and waited until the director called “action.” His hands wound through her long hair, he cupped her heart-shaped face and kissed her. Jolie moaned and stroked Brad’s face, her polished nails gleaming in the light.

Listening to the two in the throes of passion brought back the night before and Betty felt desire course through her. She closed her eyes and pretended she was in the bed with Brad. Sighs and groans rent the air.

Just when she thought they would actually make love the director yelled “Cut!” Brad and Jolie pulled apart as if they’d never been kissing each other. Betty, still turned- on by the scene, was amazed to see them act as strangers.

Brad got out of bed and headed toward Betty. The makeup woman stopped him, touched up his face, then he walked toward her. Brad stroked a knuckle down her face and with a wary look he said, “Well? What did you think? I want you to know I thought of you while I was holding Jolie. You were the one I was making love to.”

Betty stared into his beautiful eyes and smiled. “Good. Because I pictured me in your arms, not Jolie. I’m so hot,” she whispered. “I mean it. Touch me and I’ll explode.”

Betty could see by Brad’s raised eyebrow that he hadn’t expected her reaction. “You’re not upset to see me kiss another woman? Pretend to make love to her? Betty, I was nearly naked in that bed with her.”

“I would have been if we hadn’t had last night and this morning, Brad,” Betty said softly. “Now I have to sit here all day with a woman’s version of a hard-on. Can you take me fishing?”

“What?” Brad laughed.

“You know, catch and release me? I’m already caught so I need immediate release—now.”

Betty’s outrageous comment caught Brad completely off guard, exactly what she’d planned. She watched his face relax and his shoulders slump as relief poured through him.

He leaned forward and whispered, “I think I’ve finally found the special woman I’ve been searching for.” He glanced around to see if anyone watched them. Betty noticed no one paid them any attention. Brad bent down and kissed her, hard and brief, but highly passionate, nonetheless. She

sighed with longing and contentment. When he pulled away their breaths were ragged and she wanted him to take her right there in front of everyone.

He grabbed her hand and stroked the soft underside of her wrist. Neither one noticed Jolie stroll up behind Brad.

“Who’s the girl this time, Brad?”

Brad slowly dropped Betty’s hand. Obviously, Betty thought, he didn’t want Jolie to see they had been holding hands. She wondered if the actress had seen them kissing.

“Jolie Kensington, this is my friend Betty Hammond.”

“She’s not your usual type, Bradley. Where’s the glamour in this one?”

Betty flushed with embarrassment and anger. The embarrassment came from Brad’s “friend” label. It didn’t explain how she felt about Brad nor how he felt about her. Second, it reminded her how he’d treated her after he walked off the airplane when they’d first met. First with passion, then as if she didn’t exist. She sighed and decided to find out Brad’s reasoning behind the generic comment before she reacted to it.

The anger came from the insult the actress had just dealt her. It wasn’t like Betty to ignore an insult, so she said, “I was wondering the same thing, Ms. Kensington. Did you forget to pull the glamour out of your closet this morning when you woke up on the wrong side of the bed?”

“How dare you speak to me like that?” Jolie hissed. “Don’t you know who I am?”

Betty saw Brad open his mouth to intervene, but was faster with her comeback. “Er, no. Are you someone important? Did you by chance invent the internet or...oh wait!” Betty snapped her fingers. “I do know who you are. You’re the woman who flushed the toilet in the middle of the night causing the whole apartment complex to flood. Now I remember. I read about it in the Enquirer.” Without waiting for Jolie’s reaction, Betty stood from her chair and reached a hand to the actress. “Boy, it’s real nice meeting a bona fide celebrity. Can I have my picture taken with you?”

“Brad, Jolie,” the director shouted. “Time for the next take.”

The rest of the day dragged by. Betty watched Brad do take after take. She could feel the tension between Brad and Jolie and wondered how angry he

would be when he finally had the chance to talk to her. He didn't get to eat lunch with her because the director talked to him about the upcoming scenes and they went through the "dailies," the scenes they'd already shot. Betty overheard the director mention to Brad there seemed to be some tension between him and Jolie and he liked the way it came across on the screen

They wrapped up shooting for the day long past dark. Betty was exhausted from wondering about the reception she would get from Brad and she was hungry. Brad had sent the production assistant over to ask her if she'd mind waiting until they wrapped so he could take her out to dinner. Betty hoped that meant he wasn't too angry with her.

When Brad appeared he'd showered, shaved, and changed into jeans and a sweater. He came over and took her hand, drawing her up and leading her out of the studio. His face was a chiseled mass of bone and she couldn't read anything in his expression. Nothing was said until they pulled up to a small dark Italian restaurant. The valet parked the car and Brad led her inside. The maître'd welcomed Brad by name and showed them to a table in the center of the room. Brad asked for one off to the side. That didn't bode well to Betty and she worried her bottom lip that she had ruined everything by opening her big mouth.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Once they were seated and the menus handed to them, Brad burst out laughing. "I can't believe you told Jolie that you had read in a rag magazine that she'd flushed a toilet and the apartment complex flooded." His shoulders shook, he clamped a hand over his mouth, his eyes watered. "That was the best thing I've ever heard. You are so witty, Betty."

Relief weakened Betty and her hands shook. "Can we order drinks? I think I need a drink." Without waiting for a reply, Betty waved over a cocktail waitress and said, "Scotch, neat, a double." She was so relieved her limbs trembled. She folded her hands in her lap so Brad wouldn't notice her reaction.

"You're drinking scotch?" Both of Brad's eyebrows had risen.

She studied his surprised reaction for a long moment, then nodded, because she couldn't speak since her teeth were chattering from the aftereffects of the adrenaline coursing through her.

"Make that two," Brad said to the waitress. When she left he gave Betty a steady stare. "You are brilliant, you know that, don't you?"

Betty shook her head no, still not able to speak. Where was that damn waitress with her drink?

“Are you all right?”

Betty noticed Brad’s concern. She hadn’t laughed with him when he’d mentioned her toilet comment.

The cocktail waitress brought the drinks and Betty took a big slug.

“Whoa there. Easy. That’s strong stuff,” Brad said with a grin.

Betty saw his eyes linger on her shaking hands. It didn’t help that they shook so badly she had to use both hands to get the glass to her mouth.

The scotch burned all the way down. She coughed. Too big a sip. But she needed it desperately. Not that Brad would know, but Betty could drink all kinds of liquor—straight. She didn’t do it often, but tonight she needed the fortifying punch the scotch gave her.

“You thought I’d be angry.” His statement was flat, a foregone conclusion, his eyes were sparkling with something she couldn’t define.

“Yes,” Betty said as she nodded. “I thought you’d be furious.”

Brad laughed and took her hand in his. “My sweet Betty. Jolie Kensington is a bitch of the first degree. She is out to promote herself and will steamroll over anyone in her path. She feeds on innocent people and loves to make them feel inferior. The only reason I’m doing this movie with her is because I promised the director, a very good friend of mine, that I would. She hates me because I would never date her.” Brad shuddered. “After this movie I’m done with her.”

Betty finished her scotch and ordered another. “Thank God. Brad, sometimes my mouth opens before my brain kicks in. She had insulted me, and I wouldn’t put up with it. No matter who the person is, I won’t tolerate being insulted.”

“Bravo, my sweet. Bravo.” Brad clapped his hands with joy. “I’m behind you one hundred percent. That was the best thing I’ve ever witnessed. I’m very proud of you.”

Flying

Brad was on set in Germany for three months. He hated being away from Betty. Their relationship was so new, so fragile, that he wondered if it would survive the separation. He called her once a week, emailed and texted daily.

He thought about her constantly and that was something new to him. In past relationships he'd had fun but never became emotionally involved. With Betty it was different. Her offbeat humor was the core of her personality, but she had integrity, honesty and an alluring shyness that drew him to her. She was a regular, down-to-earth person and it suddenly occurred to him that she had his mother's traits. Brad knew he'd been looking for those attributes in a woman for as long as he could remember.

Betty had given him her schedule so he wouldn't waste his time calling her when she was on a flight. Texting was great, he loved the immediate responses. Betty texted and emailed the way she spoke and Brad found himself laughing more times than he would have thought at incidents that happened on her flights. She'd finally told him about the singer that threw the tray at her and the way she told the story had Brad roaring with laughter during a break in filming.

"What's so funny, Brad?" Jolie Kensington asked. She sat right next to him on the settee in the studio without asking Brad if he minded. Brad

shifted his laptop and scooted away from her. “You’re invading my space, Jolie.” He said it softly but firmly. He also didn’t answer her question. It was none of her business. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jolie frown and knew that her radar had kicked in.

She put on a false smile and faked a laugh. “Oh, come on. Who’re you hiding from us? Some new girl that wants you for your family connections?”

Brad frowned at the computer screen. He really didn’t like Jolie and prayed that the film would wrap on time. If she kept this up, he’d run screaming from the set as soon as the director hollered, “Check the gate, that’s a wrap for production.” Check the gate meant check the last bit of film they had shot. If that was okay then the film was finished.

“I’ve never seen you so happy, Brad. Between takes you run to your computer or pull out your phone. The cast is dying to know who she is.”

Brad glanced up from his computer. Jolie had leaned forward, ready to get the dirt on him. “You know I don’t talk about my personal life, Jolie. If I told you, you’d sell the information to the paparazzi like that.” He snapped his fingers. “And the cast isn’t dying to know, you are.” The frown on Jolie’s face showed her real age. A few lines marred her beauty. Brad thought of Betty’s natural, glowing skin tone. Fine lines around her eyes and on either side of her mouth crinkled when she laughed with joy, which was most of the time. Her skin was smooth and soft, and his fingers twitched on the computer keys. He wanted to touch and stroke Betty right now.

He finished typing and closed the computer. Ignoring Jolie, he got up, went to his trailer, locked his laptop inside then went back to the set. Brad didn’t realize he had a silly grin on his face. He shook his head as he laughed at Betty’s latest email. A female passenger in business class had been waiting for the restroom when the door opened and the woman sitting on the toilet leaned out and said, “I’m constipated. It’s going to be a while.” The woman slammed the door. It turned out she was a B actress and had been arrested for assaulting her boyfriend a few months ago while onboard a flight.

Filming was slow that day. The scene was an action scene where Brad had to rescue his ladylove from the Germans. They had kidnapped her, hoping to capture Brad’s character, a high-ranking general, and use him for bait to get the Allies to turn over a critical bit of information needed to turn

the war effort around. Jolie whined and kept forgetting her lines. Finally, the director told them to go back to the hotel. The light had faded for the afternoon shot.

Back at the hotel Brad showered and ordered room service then called Betty. “Hiya, sweetie. What are you doing?”

Betty’s small screech of happiness reverberated clearly across the phone line. Her reaction wound through him, warming his heart, causing it to speed up a bit. If just the sound of her voice excited him, he knew he had seriously fallen for her. “I just got home from New York. Long flying time. How was filming today?”

Brad sighed. “Jolie continued to screw up, so we had to stop when the director lost the afternoon light. I don’t know if we’ll finish on time.”

The long silence spoke volumes to Brad. He was as disappointed as Betty. He didn’t know when it’d happened, but he now had a continuing desire to be with her, touch her soft, silky skin, smell her womanly scent, laugh with her.

“No worries. Just be safe and come home as soon as you can.”

Her kindness came across the line and created a deep longing inside him. “I miss you.” Brad held the phone closer to his ear as if he could physically touch Betty. He held his breath while waiting for her response.

“I miss you too, Brad.” Her voice was low and soft, as if she were just learning the truth, the truth that she too needed him, wanted him.

It was what he needed to hear. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath until he let out a long sigh. Brad ran his hands through his hair. He had it bad. “Anything interesting on your flight today? I loved your email about the woman in the business class lav.”

Betty laughed. “That was one for the record books. No, nothing today, just a normal, boring, routine flight, thank goodness.”

“Good. I’m grateful for every safe flight you have.” He turned to look out the window at the dark night. “Well, I’ll be going now. I’ll call you in a few days. Fly safe.”

“Thank you, Brad. I will.” She hesitated and Brad clutched the phone, wondering what she was about to say. He smiled, knowing Betty’s sense of humor, and braced himself for another zinger.

“Hold on a minute. I’m looking for my pins and needles. Might as well use them until I hear from you again.”

He laughed, picturing Betty sitting on a cushion filled with pins and needles, and said, “Just don’t injure yourself. Keep that luscious rear end safe from harm. “He felt the same way though. He counted the minutes between calls, texts, and emails. And just hearing her voice soothed him.

Betty humphed. “You know me and my bottom well enough by now to know I always injure myself on my specially altered pin cushion. It’s who I am. Get used to it.”

“Gladly,” he laughed and hung up the phone.

Betty put the phone down with a grin and stared at the ceiling. She missed Brad with every bone in her body. She felt alive when she was around him. Her body hummed with unseen tension like electricity flowing along the lines above ground. If she listened closely, she could hear the force, feel the magnetic field. She loved to hear the timbre of his voice, snuggle up to his hard, wide chest, see the light in his eyes when he laughed at something funny. Her grin faded when she thought about the nature of his job and how it took him away for months at a time. Once he was home, he’d have weeks or months before he had to leave again. She hoped they’d have a relationship that lasted long enough for her to get used to his schedule.

And his fame. Betty knew his fame was something she would have to deal with if she wanted to make their relationship work. Brad was such a public figure and she’d been a hermit most of her life. Oh, she had a great time with her flight attendant friends, but once home from a trip she wanted to be alone, have peace and quiet. With Brad in her life there’d be no quiet, very little peace. She sighed. She really didn’t know what to do about their opposite lifestyles. When she was with Brad, she felt beautiful, strong, wanted. When she was away, she had doubts that a mega celebrity could make a “normal” relationship work. Would the press allow it? Would the world intrude? Brad’s fans were rabid. Would they accept any long-term relationship he had? She pushed the thoughts away for now. There really wasn’t anything she could do about them at the moment anyway.

Her next trip took her back to New York. After the meal service, she picked up a celebrity magazine someone had left on the counter. Idly flipping through it, she stopped when she saw a picture of Brad with Jolie

Kensington clinging to him. Betty glanced at the date on the magazine. It was the latest issue. The article stated that Brad and Jolie had become an item during filming in Germany. If Brad hadn't emailed her about what a pain Jolie was on the set, she might have thought the article was true. But she remembered a celebrity once telling her that she'd read a complete article about herself in one of the most popular magazines with quotes and everything and the woman hadn't given that magazine the interview. She'd told Betty that the quotes were taken from older interviews and pieced together to make a plausible-sounding piece that was wholly untrue.

Betty tossed the magazine on the counter and pulled out her suspense book. No matter what turn her life had taken recently, she was still a bookworm at heart and she knew her immediate world would disappear and she wouldn't have to think about her concerns for a short while.

The captain broke the bad news to the passengers that they would be circling New York for an hour in a holding pattern due to bad weather. Betty refilled drinks and chatted with the first-class passengers. They weren't happy about the delay but understood it wasn't the airline's fault. Betty had just given a gin and tonic to a female passenger when the woman gave a small gasp. The woman was leaning forward to stare at a news website she had pulled up on her computer.

"Is there some bad news you're reading about, Ms. Lilly?"

"Betty, do you know the famous actor, Bradley Moore?"

Betty's heart flipped over and landed in her stomach. "I've heard of him. Why?"

"It says he had a bad accident on the set of his new movie today. Seems the director shut down filming indefinitely."

Betty's trembling hand flew to her mouth. Oh my God. She had just spoken to Brad before her flight that morning. Betty bent down and read the article on the woman's computer. No more information was known about his injuries, it said, but Brad was being flown back to the States to get the immediate medical attention he needed.

Tears welled up and Betty turned away. The passenger wasn't paying any attention, she'd moved on to other news. Betty felt the airplane turn and knew they were in the holding pattern. She wanted to see Brad, touch him, comfort him but she was stuck up here in this aluminum tube. For the first time in her life Betty wished she had never become a flight attendant. But she wouldn't have met Brad if she hadn't taken the job.

Conflicting emotions raced through her. She loved her job, she wanted to be home. She liked dealing with people, she wanted to be alone. Never before had she been away from home when someone she loved was injured or ill. Someone she loved. The truth slammed into Betty. She loved Brad. She'd thought she might be falling for him and now the seed was planted firmly in her heart.

God, she wanted to get off.

The lavatory beckoned and Betty nearly slammed the door when she stepped inside. Sinking onto the closed toilet lid, she buried her face in her hands and cried. She sent up a prayer that Brad would be okay and hoped the online article had made the accident sound much worse than it was.

One hour later the captain announced that they would be delayed another half hour. He also informed the passengers that if they weren't released from the hold by then they would divert to Syracuse for fuel.

Even though pain radiated through his body, Brad was more pissed at himself than he'd ever been in his life. He should have known better than to try that stunt. He wasn't in his twenties anymore and a younger, trained stuntman wouldn't have injured himself. Now he flew in a commercial jet to New York where he'd be transferred to a flight to Los Angeles. It seemed that all the private jets were taken. The stop in New York was the quickest route home at that time of night.

At first the doctor had refused to let Brad leave the hospital, telling him he needed immediate surgery. Brad had stubbornly balked, arguing that he wouldn't have it done in Germany and stated that his own doctors would take care of him back in Los Angeles. Not that he felt German doctors weren't good. He just wanted to go to the doctors who knew him best, the ones he'd been going to for years. The German doctor had frowned as he put a brace on Brad's left leg to immobilize it then grunted disapproval but told him he could fly home. The x-rays Brad brought back with him showed that he had multiple fractures.

He'd been given pain medication to get him through the flights and now he tried to sleep. But images of the accident wound through his head like a broken video. He'd been running down the street, his character had to get

critical information to the Americans. A roadblock had been set up at the entrance to a bridge. Across the bridge the Americans were waiting. In order to get around it, Brad's character was supposed to jump onto a car hood, run over the top, and jump over a barricade. But he'd tripped and fallen off the car and the bridge, falling twenty feet to the ground. He broke his leg and now was going home for surgery. He felt eighty years old instead of thirty-eight.

Brad wondered if Betty had heard what happened. Too tired to figure out if she had landed in New York, Brad only hoped she wouldn't hear it on the news. He had told his manager to call her. The man had nodded his head and through the pain Brad could tell there were questions behind the silent acknowledgement.

A sharp pain radiated up his leg and Brad sucked in a breath. He tried to move his leg to a more comfortable position on the footrest but that only brought more pain. Brad closed his eyes and pictured Betty, soft, serene, smiling. He felt his heart rate slow and finally fell asleep in the uncomfortable first-class seat knowing that he'd soon be seeing Betty and she would take care of him.

Betty wiped the tears from her face and wished she had brought her makeup bag into the lav with her. She did her best to look presentable, took in a few huge gulps of air to calm herself, and then left the lav. Ed, today's purser, was a good friend. Engrossed in his sudoku puzzle, he didn't even glance at Betty when she walked past him.

Nothing appealed to Betty. She couldn't read, didn't want to do a puzzle, couldn't look at a celebrity magazine. If she saw a picture of Brad she'd burst into tears.

No one knew that Betty was dating Brad, not even her sister. And Betty hadn't told anyone she thought she was falling in love with him. Now that she did love him, she held her pain and anxiety close to her chest and wanted to curl into the fetal position. Just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore she felt the airplane begin descent. The captain came on and said they'd been released from the hold and they'd be landing at JFK in thirty minutes.

Betty heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe someone had gotten a message to her about Brad's condition.

When they deplaned, it seemed everyone was talking about Brad's injury. Passengers got messages on their phones and commented that the accident seemed very serious. The hotel van driver said that Brad was unconscious and in critical condition. Betty balled her hands into fists and hid them in her blazer pocket for the short ride to the hotel. She didn't have time to check her computer until she reached her room.

As soon as she was inside, she grabbed the computer out of her suitcase and turned it on. There were messages, but none about Brad. Betty turned on the TV, brushed her teeth, washed her face, and climbed into her pajamas while she waited for the news.

He was the lead story at eleven o'clock.

"Legendary entertainer Bradley Moore is being flown from Berlin, Germany to Los Angeles where he will be undergoing surgery for a broken left leg. Mr. Moore was doing his own stunt on the set of his World War II epic, *Between Heaven and Hell*, when he fell off a bridge and plunged twenty feet to the ground. He has other cuts and bruises and was very lucky to have not broken other limbs or his back in the fall." Betty cried out and both of her hands flew to her mouth. "According to eyewitness reports Mr. Moore refused a stuntman. The accident is being investigated by the authorities to make sure all safety regulations were followed. Director Denton James has called an immediate suspension of filming and sent the cast home. No one knows when filming will resume."

Betty let the tears fall. She checked her email again but there wasn't anything from Brad's manager or anyone associated with him. Well, why would there be? He hadn't told them they were dating, had only introduced her as his friend. Betty turned off the light, balled the pillow up under her head and rocked herself to sleep.

The flight home the next morning was full and catering came late so Betty rushed to get set up before takeoff. Near departure time she heard a commotion at the forward entry door and opened the galley curtain to see

what it was. Brad had been wheeled to the door and was levering himself out of the chair to hop to his front row seat.

“No, I don’t want help, I can do it myself,” he barked.

Betty’s heart soared and her hands shook. Brad was a sight for sore eyes. Without thought she rushed to him, ducking under his armpit so he could use her for assistance. “Mr. Moore, company regulations require that you be assisted to your seat. I, being part of that company, insist that you take me and use me however you wish.”

Through what was obviously constant pain, Brad raised an eyebrow. His mouth tilted up at the corners. “You rushed to my side,” he whispered on a groan. He squeezed her shoulder as relief flooded through her. Betty was so glad she happened to be on this flight home. A small chuckle escaped beneath Brad’s breath and he mumbled, “Well with an opening like that I’ll have to consider all my options.” Then she heard him suck in a breath as a spurt of pain obviously lanced through him.

“Consider that you will be lying as flat on your back as your seat will allow for over five hours, then get back to me with your request,” Betty shot back. “Know that this airline only wants what’s best for you in your time of need.”

Brad nodded and hobbled slowly to his seat. He sank into it with a grateful sigh and a groan. Betty shifted the pillow behind his back until he was comfortable then stroked and squeezed his hand. With all of the hubbub around him, no one noticed the gesture. He clutched her hand back for a moment then closed his eyes, tired from the ordeal.

The special services employees, people expressly hired to assist celebrities and the wealthy, had helped Brad transfer airplanes, and stood uselessly in the doorway. Everyone seemed enthralled that Bradley Moore was on this flight. Betty shoed them off the airplane, checked to make sure the cabin and galley were ready for departure and again thanked the heavens that Brad happened to be on her flight. She didn’t have to worry about what condition he was in, she could see for herself.

He slept fitfully for the first hour and a half. Betty checked on him constantly, repositioning his pillow when it fell onto the floor and making sure his left leg was protected from being accidentally jostled by his seatmate. When he woke up, she brought him a cup of coffee and a bagel with cream cheese.

“Thank you, my angel,” Brad said.

The endearment rolled through Betty like hot liquid. She wanted to kiss him, stroke away his pain, but knew that would be impossible. “Let me know if you need anything, Mr. Moore.” Betty stepped into the galley and let out a long sigh.

“He is dreamy, isn’t he?” Ed asked. “You’re doing a great job of taking care of him.”

Ed was gay and Betty laughed. “I don’t think he goes for your type, but if you want when he’s more awake I’ll ask him if he’s interested.”

“No! Don’t do that. I know he’s straight, but a guy can dream, can’t he?” Ed pantomimed dancing with Brad while holding on to his broad shoulders. Betty kissed him on his cheek then glanced into the aisle.

Brad winked at her. Good. He must be feeling a bit better. Using the excuse to reoffer coffee and clear away his dishes, she stepped to his seat. “Would you care for anything else, Mr. Moore?”

“Yes.” Brad leaned forward with a wince. His face grayed a bit more. He shifted his leg until he found a better position. “You offered me your services earlier and now I’m taking you up on your offer.”

Betty’s heart pounded at the look in Brad’s eyes. “I’m sure I have no idea what you mean, sir. I was only being polite to an injured man during boarding. Maybe the pain medication you’ve taken caused you to hear voices or unusual comments.”

A frown marred Brad’s beautiful brow. “No... I’m quite sure you offered me your body earlier. I’d like to take you up on that right now.”

Pretending indignation, Betty crouched down to talk to Brad more intimately. “My body is not for sale. I need it for personal reasons.”

Brad’s lips quirked as he leaned forward with a fake frown. She knew he loved this quick interplay. For a minute he looked as if he didn’t feel any pain in his leg. “I’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Only Brad would lead with a line like that. The tried-and-true classic saying from the movies. Betty glanced at the passenger in the seat next to Brad and saw he was sleeping. With a quick look around the cabin she saw most of the other passengers were sleeping too. Thank goodness for early morning flights. Only one man was awake in the row behind them and he had his face buried in his laptop.

“I’m listening.” Betty leaned forward and stroked her hand along the thigh of Brad’s good leg. She felt the muscle tense and bunch, heard his sharp intake of breath. “Ah, I see you may be on pain meds but your body

reacts as if everything is fine. I wonder if your medication heightens any sensory touches, you may be receiving.” In case anyone nearby wasn’t really sleeping she said in a slightly louder voice, “No, sir, I can’t do that right now. Is there something else I can get you?”

Brad choked on a laugh, which was followed by a groan of pain. “You’re driving me crazy, Betty,” he whispered. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Betty smiled as the compliment slid all the way to her toes, weakening her legs. She held on to the armrest with a white-knuckled grip. “You had a proposition for me?”

Brad grinned, although Betty saw the strain around his eyes and mouth.

“Yes. I will marry you if you take me to the bathroom.”

Stunned at the unusual statement, Betty’s mouth dropped open. Her eyes widened, her heart raced and her hands shook. She stared at Brad with unfocused eyes.

His low laugh broke her trance.

“What? You’ve already cornered me in an airplane bathroom, if I remember,” she said softly. This was the second time Brad had mentioned marriage.

Brad rubbed her white knuckles. “Oh, I remember.”

The deep, low resonance of his voice sounded like rough whiskey. Betty’s heart raced and she felt sweat form in the palms of her hands.

“But not this time, angel. I really need to use the lav.”

Idiot, idiot, idiot.

Brad wasn’t making a play for Betty and he wasn’t asking her to marry him. He was injured, needed to use the bathroom, and couldn’t get there by himself. The pain meds must be making him loopy and she hadn’t seen it. She smacked the side of her head in front of Brad and rose as he laughed. “I’m so sorry. I should have realized you weren’t, uh,” she whispered, “propositioning or proposing to me.”

“Don’t be too sure on either count, angel.”

The startled look on Brad’s face plainly told Betty that he’d surprised himself with those words. It was too soon to think of marriage, but a proposition, well, she’d reserve that for when he had two good legs.

Betty lowered Brad’s footrest and gingerly helped him to his feet. He draped his arm around her neck and shoulders and they hobbled to the forward lav. The aisle was narrow so Betty led the way. Once they reached

the lav Betty opened the door wide so she could step out of Brad's way and let him enter. When he had hobbled inside, she closed the door behind him.

The man unnerved her. Her body reacted with lightning speed when she was near him, hot need coursed through her, adrenaline pumped through her veins and his comments scorched like fire. She needed to douse the flames with common sense. Betty heard a thump and then an expletive. Brad must have hit his leg against something. The toilet flushed and Betty stepped back when the door opened.

The lines around Brad's eyes had deepened, his skin was chalky. His lips were strained into a tight line. A few drops of sweat accented his hairline, causing a damp curl to stick to his forehead. The man had never looked more handsome as he fought his pain-racked body.

Betty helped him back to his seat, where he collapsed into a heap. She gently lifted his bad leg and placed it on his footrest. After repositioning the pillow behind his neck and replacing the one under his leg, she tossed the large gray blanket over him, gave the back of his hand a soft stroke and left him to nap.

Chaos. Paparazzi flooded the arrivals area, all pushing and shoving to get the first picture of Brad. Los Angeles airport police tried to hold them back while Brad's manager, publicist and brother tried to get to him. Betty would have stayed on the airplane while Brad was wheeled off but he had whispered to her to walk with him. An ambulance had been called and two uniformed men stood by a gurney, ready to wheel Brad to their waiting truck.

As soon as they entered the terminal, thousands of flashes blinded Betty. She covered her eyes with her hands and stumbled behind Brad's wheelchair. When his manager met them, Brad said under his breath, "Thank you for notifying Betty. I hadn't wanted her to hear about the accident on TV."

"What?" Betty asked. "I never got any notification. I sat in my room watching the eleven o'clock news, which, by the way, said you were lucky to have not broken your back."

Brad frowned at his manager. “We’ll talk about this later.” The press screamed questions and jockeyed to get better positions to take pictures. Brad was loaded onto the gurney and with his brother by his side, the ambulance attendants wheeled him out of the airport. Betty wanted to wish him well on his surgery but couldn’t get close enough to say anything. The man she loved had been taken away, and the only way she would hear how his surgery went was by watching the nightly news.

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Hospitals

“Megastar Bradley Moore underwent surgery this morning at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center for a fractured left leg he injured on the set of his latest movie, *Between Heaven and Hell*. According to his publicist, Mr. Moore is doing well and will be in the hospital for a few days,” the announcer said.

Just as she’d expected, the only news Betty had heard about Brad came from the latest news report on TV. It didn’t say much, not that she’d thought it would, and she wondered if Brad was in much pain.

Three days off loomed ahead and she wondered how she’d fill her time. In the old days before meeting Brad, once her errands were finished Betty would happily curl up on the couch and read a book. Hours would go by before she realized the light outside had faded and the shades were still open. Now she wandered her house, touching her dust-free tables. How many times could a person dust in one day?

Then a thought popped into her head with sudden clarity. She rushed up the stairs and changed into jeans and a sweater. Well-used tennis shoes finished the outfit and Betty grabbed her purse, in a hurry to leave her house and be on her way.

Traffic clogged the freeways, but she made it to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in only two and a half hours. Good timing, considering it was ten in the morning. Betty parked in visitor parking, then sat in her car thinking.

She knew if she asked to see Brad, they wouldn't let her in. And how could she prove she really knew him? Only a few people had seen her on the set when he was filming in Los Angeles, including the director, Denton James, the witchy actress Jolie Kensington, and some workers she hadn't really talked to.

Betty stared at the front door, not really seeing the people coming and going until a group of four people laughed as they walked to the door and Betty recognized Denton James and Jolie Kensington. She jumped out of the car and made her way over to the entertainers.

"Excuse me, my name is Betty Hammond. May I speak to you for a minute?"

Jolie spoke first. "Oh look, Denton. Isn't that the little girl Brad brought to the set a while ago?"

Betty bristled at Jolie's rudeness but held her tongue. She wanted to see Brad and antagonizing these people wouldn't get her in.

"Is there something we can do for you, Ms. Hammond?" James asked.

"I would love to see Brad. Would it be possible if I went in with you? I promise I won't stay longer than a minute."

Hesitation crossed James' features as his brows lowered and his mouth formed a straight line.

"Don't let her in with us, Denton," Jolie whined. "I want to see Brad by myself. You know we're seeing each other now and I wouldn't want the press to get the wrong impression."

Betty knew that Jolie lied but wouldn't confront her about it right now. Biting her bottom lip to keep from lashing out, she waited with sweaty palms, swaying back and forth to release the tension.

Before James could answer her, a reporter ran up to their little crowd. "Mr. James. Are you here to visit Mr. Moore? How is he? Will he be okay? There are rumors he may not have full use of his leg, even after the surgery." In the blink of an eye more reporters surrounded them. Soon there was a crowd of twenty people shoving microphones in their faces.

A sob caught in Betty's throat. No report had said anything about him being permanently disabled from his fall. Oh, how she wanted to see him, be with him. She had to know how he was! Before she could react any further the director grabbed her arm and dragged her into the hospital. Over his shoulder he said to the reporter, "I've heard no such rumor. I'll let the

doctor speak on Mr. Moore's behalf when he makes his statement later this evening."

They rushed to the nurse's station and gave their names. Betty's wasn't on the approved list, but James sponsored her and the nurses let her through. When they arrived at Brad's private room Betty stood back, just outside the door, to let Denton and Jolie see him first.

She heard voices and a female sob. Betty wrung her hands. Was Brad permanently injured? She couldn't see anything through the shaded window between his room and the nursing station. Raised voices pulled her from her thoughts.

"Get out, Jolie. I don't want you here," Brad said.

To Betty his voice sounded like honey even though he sounded more angry than in pain. She could hardly wait another second to see him.

"But Bradley, sweetheart..."

"Don't sweetheart, me."

"I only want what's best for you," Jolie whined.

"Then get out."

Jolie was ushered out by Denton and Betty grabbed her opportunity. She slipped past two other arguing people into Brad's room just as they left with Jolie and Denton.

"Brad."

He'd been staring out the window that overlooked the parking lot, his lips turned down and his brows furrowed, a muscle jumped in his chiseled jaw. At the sound of her voice his face cleared, erasing lines of pain, and a relieved smile broke across his features. "Thank God."

Betty moved to his bedside and took his hand in hers. "Denton let me come up with him. How are you feeling?"

"Better now that you're here." Brad pulled her closer. "Let me kiss you."

Betty's heart pounded with joy as she leaned down for his kiss. Lightness filled her soul and she couldn't stop smiling. She thought it would be a little thank you kiss for coming to visit him, but the minute his lips touched hers she moaned and opened her lips for him. Her fingers curled into his hair, stroking and massaging, feeling the coarse texture, the fineness of the strands. She inhaled his scent, an earthy smell mixed with the antiseptic hospital odor. Brad plunged his tongue inside, touching her teeth, her gums, her cheeks. He licked and sucked her tongue, causing hot

tingles to pulse through Betty's body. She felt desire all the way to her womb and cried out with need. The moan that came from Brad's throat could have been pain or arousal, Betty didn't know. She tried to pull away, but Brad gripped her shoulders and wouldn't let her go.

Forever. The kiss was a lifetime of promises. Promises of love, desire and need. They only broke apart at the sound of a cough. A nurse had entered the room.

With a quizzical expression on her face she said, "Time for your blood pressure check. How's your pain situation? Need more medication?"

Brad leaned back against the pillows and laughed. "Nope, I feel just fine. Just had a dose of good old happiness to take away any and all pain. Plus, I took some medication a while ago and I'm high as a kite." Brad gave the nurse a loopy smile and winked at Betty.

The nurse gave Betty a hard stare and narrowed her eyes. Betty felt as if she were under a microscope. The flush started at her neck and moved to her cheeks.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

Nothing like giving away her feelings about Brad to a gossipy nurse. Not that it mattered, the nurse had seen them kissing and knew she was Brad's flavor of the moment. Betty ignored the nurse's gaze and asked, "What's your prognosis? Any lasting aftereffects?"

"Nope. 'Cording to the doc, I'll be good as new in three to six months. Sounds like a great vacation t'me. Don't think Denton's gonna like it much." Brad patted the bed beside him. The nurse noted something on his chart, took his blood pressure, then left the room, but not before giving them one last glance before she closed the door behind her.

Betty gingerly sat on the bed next to Brad. He gave her a lascivious grin and she laughed.

"I'm so glad you came. I've missed you." Brad shifted and groaned. "Damn leg. I shouldn'a tried that stunt. Now look at me."

White lines radiated from his eyes. The happy look had dulled. "Don't keep beating yourself up about it, Brad. It's done. You need to focus on your recovery." Betty touched her finger to his lips. Soft and supple, slightly wet from their kisses. They were drawn in a straight line and she wanted to see them curl up at the sides. She slowly stroked his lips side to side, then kissed each corner. She felt his sigh before she heard it. Brad's chest moved, expanded then contracted. He ran a hand under her blouse and

found her nipple, hard and ready. Brad's mouth softened and the corners turned up. She knew she'd had the desired effect. He'd momentarily forgotten his pain. "How long did the doctors say you'd be here?" Betty had to force the words past her arousal. He kept pulling and squeezing her nipple, bent forward to suck it into his mouth then laved the wet bud. Wild, hot sensations raced through Betty and the world soared out of focus.

"A week."

The insistent tugging of his mouth on her breast undid her. Betty moved closer to make it easier for Brad to touch her. She unzipped her jeans, shoving them down to the tops of her thighs and gave in to the luscious feelings coursing through her. He laved and sucked and blew lightly on a nipple then flicked the pad of a finger across it. His hand moved down her abdomen and found her wet and needy. With a few strokes of his finger, her orgasm came rapidly, stunning, and shocking in its intensity. When her body calmed, she glanced at Brad. He wore a loopy, self-satisfied grin and naked desire blazed from his eyes. But a moment later she saw when his pain came back and knew her distraction had worked, if briefly.

"May I come visit you again? I have to fly a trip in three days but I'd love to come back tomorrow and the next."

Exhaustion claimed Brad's features. He pressed the button to administer more medication and soon it kicked in. Brad's eyes closed then opened. He needed to rest.

"Please," he said slowly. "I'll put your name on the approved list so you don't have any trouble getting in." He weakly squeezed her hand as his words faded to a whisper. His eyes remained shut and his head fell to the side. Betty knew he'd fallen asleep. She took the remote and lowered the bed so Brad could be more comfortable. With a light kiss to his temple, she stroked his cheek and murmured, "Get well. See you tomorrow."

Brad progressed faster than the doctors expected and they sent him home after five days. He needed crutches and a walker for balance and a wheelchair for long distances.

Betty was glad he was home.

The hospital staff was miserable.

They'd loved having the handsome actor liven up their days with quips and comments that had them roaring with laughter. Brad had been the perfect patient.

Until Jolie Kensington came to visit. Then the nurses and orderlies scattered, and one time a security guard came to escort her out. It wasn't a quiet or pleasant experience. She ranted, raved, and yelled that she was his fiancé, then threatened to sue the hospital after each shortened visit.

Brad had been home for a few weeks, recuperating faster and faster. Betty worked her flights to New York but wished she'd stayed with him. This flight progressed with the usual normal monotonous pace. She and Janet, the purser, served the first-class passengers their lunch then sat down to eat and read. They checked their passengers regularly, visited the other flight attendants and waited for the flight to land.

Betty had a headache and wanted to lie down. The thrumming engines vibrated in tune with the insistent pounding. She'd taken aspirin but it wasn't working. Not one to get headaches very often, Betty toughed it out and wished for the flight to end.

The interphone rang the emergency call and Betty's heart sped up. Janet grabbed the handset off the base in a rush. "Janet, 1 L." Most flight attendants answered the interphone by stating which door or window exit they were nearest to on the airplane. Janet was at door one left, the forward entry door on the left side of the plane, the door through which the passengers boarded.

"Janet, this is Bob," the captain said. "Please come to the cockpit, we've lost our center hydraulic system."

Janet hung up the phone and said to Betty, "The captain says we've lost the center hydraulics. I'm going into the cockpit. Call the others and tell them I'll give them more information after the briefing."

"Figures. Why does this always happen when I have a hot date? Do you think the bathtub will give me the cold shower when we land?" She didn't have a date in New York, the only date she wanted was healing in Los Angeles.

Janet laughed at Betty's attempt to ease the tension in the air. "Thank you, Betty, you're a dream to work with." They set up carts to block access to the cockpit and Betty called the other flight attendants.

Now on high alert, every flight attendant silently reviewed his or her emergency procedures. Betty locked everything in the galley, preparing it for their descent. She knew they'd be diverting to get the airplane on the ground as quickly as possible. As soon as she thought that, she heard the sound of the engines shift and felt the airplane nose down for descent. Her heart beat rapidly, all thoughts centered on what might happen when they landed. For a moment Betty realized she'd forgotten about her headache.

Janet briefed them over the interphone as soon as she entered the forward galley. "We still have two redundant systems to guide us down, but we'll have to land fast. There's the possibility of blowing a tire and running off the runway. The captain wants us to prepare the cabin for an evacuation and we have twenty minutes to do it. He's going to make the announcement...right now," Janet said as her eyes rose up to look at the nearest speaker in the galley.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Robert Clark. We are diverting to Chicago due to a mechanical issue with the airplane. We have lost our center hydraulic system. I want to reassure you that we have two other systems to keep us safe, this is just a precautionary measure. Please give your complete attention to the flight attendants as they explain what will happen next. I'll be back to update you soon."

All nine flight attendants on the Boeing 767 followed procedures to prepare the cabin and passengers for an emergency landing. Twenty minutes later the captain came over the loudspeaker. "Flight attendants, prepare for landing."

Strapped in her jumpseat, Betty tightened her harness. The airplane flew straight and level. She thought about the United Airlines incident years before in Sioux City, Iowa, when they had lost hydraulics and sent up a quick prayer for the safety of all onboard this flight.

Then she thought about Brad. She loved him. She hadn't told him because it was too soon. But she knew it, accepted it, and held it to her heart. The possibilities of inflight emergencies were part of her job. Losing center hydraulics was a serious situation, no matter the redundant systems onboard. She heaved a sigh and wondered why life-altering thoughts

happened during emergency situations. Was it because everything could change in a moment?

The captain called Janet. Betty grabbed the interphone nearest her at the same time Janet grabbed the one by her jumpseat. “Thirty seconds to touchdown.”

Nothing could have been more reassuring to Betty. If the captain had time to call them and tell them they had thirty seconds to touchdown, he had everything under control. Following procedures, the flight attendants shouted, “Heads down, stay down, heads down, stay down.” Without direct view of the cabin from her jumpseat, Betty hoped the passengers were following directions.

The airplane hit the ground hard with a loud squeal. The captain jammed on the brakes and Betty would have flown out of her jumpseat if it weren’t for her shoulder harness and lap belt. As it was, her head snapped forward then back and she knew she would have a case of whiplash in the morning.

Then everything happened at once. First, she smelled rubber burning. The floor beneath her seat became warm. Then airplane lurched to the right and ran off the runway. The wing hit the ground and crumpled, leaving a trail of jet fuel in its wake. Passengers screamed.

All of Betty’s emergency training kicked in. She felt calm, her procedures and commands ran through her mind like an old videotape. The airplane stopped with a sharp jerk and settled at a funny angle, the right side high, the left side lower to the ground. Betty waited a moment more to make sure it was the final stop before she began her evacuation. Just before she jumped out of her jumpseat the captain came over the PA. “Do not use doors 1 R, 3 R or the window exits on the right side.”

Her exit was unusable.

She blocked her exit with her body, her arms stretched out as a visual reminder the exit wasn’t usable. She redirected the passengers to the exits on the left side of the airplane, shouting to them to leave their belongings behind.

Brad hobbled to the kitchen to get something to eat. Tuning out the noise from the television, he focused on getting his food and himself back to his chair safely.

“We have breaking news,” the announcer said, cutting in on a commercial. “A Global Airlines airplane has crashed at Chicago O’Hare International Airport. There are injuries but we’re not sure how many or how severe. Fire and rescue vehicles are on site. Stay tuned for more updates on this accident.”

Brad stopped and turned awkwardly toward the TV. “Oh my God.” That’s Betty’s airline, he thought. His heart raced with fear. It isn’t Betty, he thought, trying to calm himself. She doesn’t fly to Chicago. Don’t panic. He dropped a crutch, fought to pick it up and hobbled back to his chair, food forgotten. With a groan, he fell into the chair and propped his casted leg on an ottoman. Pain lanced up his leg from the rough treatment and he sucked in a sharp breath.

The news station interrupted another commercial. “Global Airlines flight 738, scheduled to fly from Los Angeles to John F. Kennedy International Airport, lost hydraulics inflight and made an emergency landing at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport,” the announcer said.

“Oh God,” Brad breathed. He wondered if it was Betty’s flight. He knew she was going to New York today. He leaned forward as images of a broken and burning airplane covered the screen. The news vans shot pictures of people jumping down the yellow emergency slides and walking or limping away from the airplane. Black smoke rose from the right side of the airplane.

Brad reached for his cell phone and dialed Betty.

The call went straight to voice mail.

The news anchor continued his report, “We have a man on the scene right now,” and turned to the reporter. “Do we know how many casualties there are, Warren?”

With a shake of his head the reporter said, “Not at this time, John. Passengers are still evacuating the airplane. That seems like good news to me. According to Global Airlines there were one hundred and thirty passengers onboard and eleven crewmembers. If you take a look at the scene behind me, there are three emergency slides on the left side of the airplane being used. The right side is engulfed in flames. Passengers are jumping out of the airplane in a steady stream. Firefighters and ambulances

are lined up nearby and all the injured passengers will be taken to the nearest emergency rooms available. Every hospital in the Chicago area is on standby, ready to tend to the injured.”

Brad’s heart raced with fear. He loved Betty, needed her. She would be okay, it wasn’t her flight, there were many flights, one almost every hour, leaving for New York.

The anchor nodded his head then put his hand up to his ear. “I’ve just received a preliminary report that sixty people are injured, no deaths reported yet.”

The reporter on the scene turned to look at the burning airplane. “Looks like the evacuation might have ended. I don’t see anyone coming down the slides anymore.”

“Show the flight attendants, you dolt!” Brad yelled at the TV. He winced, forgetting about his leg for a minute. With a curse, Brad reached over and popped a pain pill. He didn’t want to get foggy so he only took one. Then he tried Betty again.

The evacuation went smoothly until a large man ran up to Betty’s door. “Let me out! Let me out! The damn airplane’s on fire. I can’t breathe!”

“Use that exit.” Betty coughed as she pointed to the one right across from where she stood, about six feet away. Smoke crawled into the cabin, making it harder to breathe.

The man’s wide eyes rolled around and Betty knew he wasn’t seeing anything, ruled by blind panic. She pushed his broad shoulders toward the exit, hoping the man would move in that direction.

“Don’t touch me!” the man yelled. Then he swiveled around, picked Betty up and carried her to the exit. Before she could take a breath, he pushed her down the slide and jumped out after her.

Betty tumbled face first down the slippery slide, screaming the whole way. Luckily, she stayed on the slide and didn’t fall straight to the asphalt. She rolled to the bottom in a heap and tried to untangle herself before the man fell on her. Firefighters fought to help her but the large man toppled onto Betty a second later. She felt her right arm break, heard some bones in her right-hand crunch. A red haze formed before her eyes. Betty felt a

moment of relief, hoping the man had been hauled off her, then heard the firefighters call for a paramedic.

“Look at this picture,” the reporter, Warren, said. “The cameraman got a close up of a passenger pushing a flight attendant out of the burning airplane.”

Brad squinted at the screen trying to see if it was Betty. He couldn't tell from the grainy picture. He reached for the remote and rewound the scene, playing it slowly, stopping it when he could. He couldn't tell who the flight attendant was and prayed again and repeatedly that it wasn't her flight. He prayed that if it was, she was safe, unharmed. The picture cut to the burning plane. Brad leaned back, briefly closed his eyes. Then he reached for his phone again.

By early evening the news reported that no one had died on flight 738 but there were scores of serious injuries. Four flight attendants were hurt, yet the airplane had been evacuated in less than ninety seconds using half of the plane's emergency exits. The airline, pilots and news media called the flight attendants heroes. So did the passengers.

Brad had not heard from Betty. He called his manager and ordered him to get the names of the flight attendants working the flight, but the airline wouldn't release them. In a fit of desperation, he called the 800 number the airline had set up for relatives and asked about Betty. Lying to the operator, he told her he was her husband. Saying the word felt right, normal. He wanted her by his side for the rest of his life and it took this airplane emergency to get him to admit it to himself. The woman then informed Brad that Betty had worked the flight and named the local Chicago hospital she'd been taken to. The hospital wouldn't put him through to Betty, saying she was in surgery. He left them his phone number.

Many frustrating hours later Brad found the phone number for one of Betty's two sisters. Patti, the one she'd told the stories about, had flown to Chicago and a news reporter had interviewed her. She gave out no information about Betty. Because the reporter had given Patti's last name, Brad called everyone with that last name in the Orange County area and finally found Patti lived in Anaheim.

Patti's husband wasn't giving out any information though. Brad ran his hands through his hair, frustrated at all the dead ends. After gritting his teeth and thanking Patti's husband, Brad hung up. He hopped to the bathroom and glanced in the mirror. He looked old and haggard. Bags had formed under his eyes, dark circles making them look like black balloons. His hair stood up on end from the numerous times he'd raked his fingers through it and he was startled at the tear that slipped down his cheek.

When had he fallen in love with Betty? Brad wiped away the tear. The first time he'd bumped into her in the galley of the airplane a few months ago. He'd known it then, but wouldn't admit it to himself. Now, because of his fear that the press would hound her, he hadn't told anyone close to him that he loved her, and she obviously hadn't told her sisters and brother-in-law.

He didn't blame her for not telling them. They would think her nuts for dating a "legendary actor." Brad grimaced at himself in the mirror. He hated that term. Legend belonged to dead people. He was very much alive and felt every inch of it, from his throbbing leg to his throbbing head.

God, he needed to know if Betty was okay.

After splashing cold water on his face and brushing his teeth, Brad hopped to his bedroom. He sank onto his bed and wondered if he should have called for someone to care for him while he recuperated. He hadn't, because he wanted privacy. Betty was going to come over on her days off anyway. Now he wondered if she'd be able to.

He fell into a fitful sleep, tossing and turning and dreaming of burning airplanes. The phone woke him at two in the morning. "Hello."

"Is this Bradley Moore?" a female voice asked.

Brad sat up. He didn't know why but he knew this call was about Betty. "Speaking."

"Mr. Moore, my name is Patti Gelson. I'm Betty Hammond's sister."

"Oh my God. How is Betty? I've been going crazy trying to contact her."

There was a moment of silence and Brad felt tears slide down his face. This couldn't be good.

"How much do you care for her, Mr. Moore?"

"I love her."

More silence. Brad couldn't take it and slapped at the tears coursing down his cheek. "Well?"

“Betty will be fine—in time,” Patti said in a quiet voice. “She has a broken right arm, two of the fingers on her right hand were crushed, she has whiplash, a concussion, a sprained right ankle and some internal injuries. It will take a long time, but all will heal.”

Brad bowed his head and thanked God that Betty would survive. He couldn’t speak.

“Mr. Moore?”

“Yes,” he croaked.

“Betty said you were the famous actor.”

“I am.”

“Are you doing well? I heard you had surgery after an accident.”

Touched that Betty’s sister asked about him in the midst of her own crisis, Brad said, “I’m better now that I know Betty survived that horrible accident.”

“You were the first person she asked for when she came out of surgery.”

Brad raised his head and stared at the ceiling then closed his eyes in thanks. He bunched his fist in the bedding. “I wish I could be there, Patti. Please tell Betty how badly I want to be with her.”

“I’ll do that. Here’s my cell number. Call me whenever you want. When Betty’s feeling better I’ll have her call you.”

“Thank you, Patti. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your kindness.”

Two days had passed by in a blur for Betty. She remembered every bit of the accident and the passenger shoving her out of the airplane. She’d gone through stages of gratefulness to be alive, anger at the passenger for injuring her and loneliness, wishing that Brad were there to comfort her.

Stupid wish, she thought. Brad was recovering from surgery himself. The good witch Glinda couldn’t bring Brad to her right now.

“You have a visitor!” a nurse said with a cheery voice. Betty didn’t want to see anyone. She hadn’t had a shower in three days. Her hair lay matted and curled next to her face.

“Who is it? I don’t want to see anyone while I look like this.”

“Good!” the nurse chirped. “You’re starting to feel better if you care how you look.”

Betty grimaced. “Do you have any earplugs?”

“Why, whatever for, Betty?” The nurse bustled around, straightening her bed sheets, clearing away dirty dishes, and refilling her water glass.

To tune you out, Betty thought, a bit disgruntled, but said instead, “There’s too much noise in this hospital. I haven’t been able to sleep very well.”

“I’ll go look for some. In the meantime, here’s a mirror. Try to do something with your hair. I’ll tell your visitor that you’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

The chirpy nurse fluttered out of the room while Betty gathered her nerve to look at herself in the mirror. “Just get it over with,” she muttered. With a flick of her good wrist, Betty held the mirror to her face. Then she screeched. With only one useable hand, Betty dropped the mirror onto her lap and began to fluff her hair. She glanced around for a napkin but the nurse had taken away the dirty dishes. She took a corner of her sheet, pulled it up and dipped it into the water glass then rubbed it under her eyes, hoping to get all of the dried black mascara off her face. She picked up the mirror again. The mascara was gone but her hair was beyond repair. With a sigh she put the mirror down again. Who cared who came to visit? If it wasn’t her sister then it was probably someone from the crew. Betty knew the pilots had walked away with only bumps and bruises, two flight attendants were still in the hospital like she was, and the other one had gone home to nurse a broken foot.

“Here’s your company!” old chirpy said.

Betty gasped when she saw Brad hobble in on crutches. Her hand flew to her face. “Oh my God, Brad. You flew out here to see me?”

He placed the crutches against the small dresser and sank onto the side of the bed, staring at her for a long moment. Then he reached out his hands and cupped her face. With a tender touch he stroked her eyebrows, her cheeks, and her lips. He continually stroked her face, her jaw, her neck. After long, agonizing moments Brad dipped his head and kissed her.

Never had tenderness been so sweet. Never had it been so hot. Betty’s bones melted and she gave in to Brad’s drugging kiss. He nibbled on her bottom lip then soothed it with his tongue. He ravaged her mouth, his

tongue touching every part he could reach. All the while he held her gingerly, close to his chest. Betty felt loved and cherished.

Careful not to jostle her neck, arm or hand, Brad stroked her face and kissed her again. The kiss lasted forever and Betty felt as if he had to tear himself away from her, not wanting to end the kiss. And when he did Betty saw tears in his eyes. "I love you."

Three words. Three simple words.

Three words that rocked her world.

Her heart rate, already elevated, jumped into high gear. The palms of her hands itched. Her mouth opened and ragged little breaths came out. She wanted to say something, but a dry lump had formed and she couldn't get any words out. Forgetting that Brad was a megastar, Betty marveled that this handsome, kind, sexy man loved her. "I love you too," she whispered. His grin turned up one side of his mouth and Betty's stomach clenched at the crooked, sexy smile. "You flew out here, in a cast."

"Actually, in a private plane. A cast would have been far too small for me." He grinned and a light crinkling accentuated his penetrating blue eyes. But something deeper lurked behind. For a moment Betty thought it was fear, but the look disappeared and she wasn't sure she'd seen it. "I needed to be with you, see you. I had to touch you."

Suddenly Betty couldn't stop the tears that fell. She hadn't cried since the accident. She'd been too busy telling herself to be strong for her sisters, for her coworkers, for herself. But Brad's kindness and gentleness brought out the fear she'd been holding inside. She could have died. She leaned into him and let the cleansing tears finally fall.

Brad wrapped his arms around her, careful not to hurt her. He held her and rocked her without saying a word. Betty didn't see his tightly closed eyes or the silent tears that fell down his cheeks. She just soaked up his warmth, thrilled he'd put aside his own injuries to come see her.

News

Brad decided to stay until Betty was released from the hospital. He didn't want to leave her. The hospital staff thought they were cute together, he hopping around with crutches, she walking like she'd aged twenty years, hunched over a bit, and sporting a casted arm, bandaged fingers and assorted cuts and bruises.

Global Airlines and the FAA sent investigators to interview her. Of course, the airline held separate meetings from the FAA. Each meeting exhausted Betty, so many of the questions were repetitious. Betty told Brad the interviewers had to ask the questions; how else would they find the cause of the accident? Counselors were sent in for Betty and those sessions were emotionally draining too.

Brad stayed at his hotel during these interviews, wanting to be with Betty but not distract the investigators from their task. He acknowledged she'd need counseling and was glad the airline provided it.

Three days later, bored, and itchy, Brad grabbed his crutches and moved around the hotel room. He'd gotten a suite so he could maneuver around larger spaces, but now he needed to see a different view. He lumbered downstairs to the lobby, wanting to grab a cup of coffee and read the sports and entertainment sections in the local newspaper.

After settling into a booth in the back of the coffee shop, Brad ordered his coffee, pulled his baseball cap down to hide his face and opened the newspaper. All of the Los Angeles sports teams had lost yesterday. The sportswriters were in a tizzy criticizing every play. Brad laughed at a few comments one sportswriter made then turned to the entertainment section. Staring at his own face, he read the caption underneath the five-year-old publicity photo. Megastar spotted in Chicago on crutches! What compelled him to fly with a broken leg? Great. Someone at the hospital must have called a magazine about him.

The further he got into the article the angrier he became. Speculation and innuendo raged about the woman he had come to see, a woman he had so desperately wanted to be with he couldn't wait until his leg had healed. The article didn't mention Betty, a flight attendant or the airplane crash but did say he'd been seen at a local hospital. That meant they weren't sure which hospital, thank goodness. Brad glanced around the coffee shop. No diners were nearby. He called his publicist and told him about the article.

Brad held the phone away from his ear as Norman Bagley told him in no uncertain terms what he thought about his stunt. He wasn't pleased.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Brad. What were you thinking? The hospital staff has probably told everyone they know that you're seeing a stewardess. The paparazzi will go postal! I knew you'd taken a private jet somewhere, but to see a stewardess?" The man almost had a nervous breakdown over the phone.

Instantly irritated with his publicist, Brad defended Betty. "She's a flight attendant, Norm. Never use the word stewardess as a slur again." If he weren't the best publicist in the business Brad would have put him on notice. "I care about her very much. Get used to it, and keep her in the loop when I ask you to from now on." Norm had dropped the ball when Brad asked him to tell Betty about his accident. He'd not wanted her to find out about his injury from the news media and that's exactly how she'd found out.

"All right, all right. Let me do some checking and see how much damage this article has done. Does the girl know what she's getting into by dating you?"

Brad sighed, annoyance rushing through him. He lifted his baseball cap and ran a hand through his hair then replaced the cap on a tousled mess.

“The girl’s name is Betty Hammond. She’s a lovely woman. Give us a little time, will you? We’ve only been seeing each other for a few months.”

“Right,” Norman said in a dry tone. “Okay, let me get on this. I’ll get back to you when I have some news. When are you coming home?”

“When the hospital releases Betty. I’ll give her a lift on the jet home. I’ll call you before we leave.” Brad hung up the phone.

Damage control. Brad knew there’d be massive publicity when it came out that he was dating a flight attendant. The entertainment world would have a field day. Many cruel things would be printed about Betty and himself. He hoped that she could deal with it.

Tapping his fingers on the table, Brad stared into space for a long minute. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. He’d prepare Betty for the onslaught while they both recovered. Then, once Betty seemed ready, he’d get the public used to them as a couple by taking her out for coffee, to lunches and dinners. They’d give short interviews that would show off her quick wit, her warmth. Over time Brad hoped Betty would get used to being in the limelight and the public would accept them. His good foot moved restlessly under the table. Time. Patience. Those were the keys to Betty’s acceptance by Brad’s fans. He mentally shrugged. He needed to take his own advice and be patient. Brad pushed the worrisome thoughts out of his mind, took a sip of his coffee, picked up the newspaper and continued to read the entertainment section.

Three days later the hospital kicked Betty out. The nurses and doctors all came around to say goodbye. Betty was sure they also wanted to see Brad one last time. After all, how often did a huge movie star visit their hospital? Most of the staff had been polite to him, not showing too much curiosity. Brad endeared himself to them all, using their names, making them laugh, telling stories from his past. If she hadn’t already fallen in love with him, his behavior toward everyone at the hospital would have cemented it. Brad was an innately kind man, and it seemed that no matter his worldwide fame he knew who he was and didn’t take himself too seriously.

As per hospital rules they wheeled Betty out to the front. To make it easier for Brad they wheeled him out too. By the time they reached the front

door the hospital volunteers pushing their wheelchairs were laughing so hard they almost knocked Betty's and Brad's chairs together. No one complained. The story Betty had just told had been so funny they didn't care.

The hospital doors opened electronically and flashbulbs blinded them. A crowd of photographers shouted to Brad.

"Who's the girl, Mr. Moore?"

"Why'd you come to visit her?"

"How long has the relationship been going on?"

And one reporter screamed over the rest, "What's your name, honey? And how did you snag superstar Bradley Moore? Good in bed, are you?"

The group roared with laughter. Brad leaned over and murmured to Betty, "I'm so sorry. Ignore them."

Betty smiled at Brad. She'd known this would happen at some point, she only wished it hadn't been now. "May I answer the last reporter's question?"

Brad frowned. "I don't recommend it."

Betty gave Brad a bland look. "Let me try this once. If I flop, I flop. They're going to find me anyway, right?"

The reporters were still shouting questions. Against his better judgment, Brad nodded. "Okay. Trial by fire. Give 'em your best shot."

Betty waved to the crowd to get them to quiet down. When they didn't, she sat in her wheelchair and smiled. When the reporters realized that no one was saying anything they stopped asking questions. Soon the front of the hospital was quiet.

In a normal voice she said, "Thank you all for your concern and interest in me. I'm fine, and will be one hundred percent in a few more months." Betty hoped to disarm them by being polite and kind. She wanted them to realize that their interest came on her terms, not theirs. "It does my heart good to realize you want to get to know me, not Bradley Moore. He's had many years in the spotlight. Now maybe I can grab a bulb or two away from him." Some of the reporters laughed, as Betty had intended.

"To answer the question on everyone's mind, my name is Betty Hammond. I work for Global Airlines and was on flight 738, hence the attractive hardware on my arm and hand." A few gasps could be heard from the reporters. "Mr. Moore and I met on a flight some months ago when he rudely bumped into me with his luggage. I suggested he take our short five-

hour training course on how to walk through restricted galleys on airplanes. He took me up on it.”

The crowd roared. Lights flashed, questions were shouted. Brad leaned over and said, “Nice job.”

Betty smiled at him. She held up her hand and again the crowd quieted. “Let me recover from my ordeal. Really, it’s not something you want to experience. When I’m better, I’ll be happy to answer some of your questions. Just not all of them.” A few reporters clapped. Some tried to get closer to Betty and Brad but security staff from the hospital had come out when someone inside called and now they cleared a path for the two wheelchairs to be pushed to a waiting limo.

The limo moved forward amid flashing lights from the police cars that had surrounded them. When the motorcade pulled away from the curb Betty leaned back into the seat. Exhaustion sapped her strength. “What do you think, Brad?”

“I think you’re magnificent. Most women would be frightened of a mob like that. You handled them with grace and humor. Just the reason I fell in love with you. I know you’re tired, but let me say one more thing. You told them the truth. Nothing can come back to haunt you. I’m proud of you.”

Brad leaned over and kissed Betty. Her blood heated, sending warm tingles up her spine. Even exhausted she wanted him and her body proved it. Her hardened nipples tested her resolve with each movement of the limo. Her blouse felt too tight, too rough. She hadn’t worn a bra, the effort of putting it on over her casted arm had been too much. Tiredness washed away amid desire. In a rush of hot need Betty turned into Brad’s arms.

“Wait, honey. Wait until we get on the plane.” He pushed a button and the divider between the driver and the back seat rose to block the view.

“I’m not making love with you on a commercial airplane,” Betty said. “I already joined the mile high club with you.”

Brad’s mouth dropped open. “You did? When? I think I’d remember something like that.”

“When we first met. In the lav. You were so hot I wondered why the smoke alarm hadn’t gone off.”

Confusion turned to mirth and Brad lowered his voice to a whisper. Her sister had brought a pretty flowered print pullover blouse with loose raglan-style sleeves and an above the knee skirt that sat below her waist, snugly against her hips. Clothes that were easy for her to put on. “That was only a

taste of what I wanted to do you to. Just wait.” He tunneled his hand under the hem of the blouse and stroked the sensitive underside of her breast then moved his hand down to her navel. With a soft touch he dipped into the erotic zone, causing tremors to weaken her body. Even sitting in the limo her knees shook. Betty shifted on the seat and felt a slight wetness between her legs. She was hot and ready for Brad.

For the first time in her life Betty felt wanton. She’d never felt sexy, didn’t think of herself as a highly sexual person. The sex she’d had with men had been okay, but nothing spectacular. Now, with Brad, she felt desirable, beautiful, vivacious. Sex with him was earthy, erotic. Betty was becoming a new woman, a sensual woman.

He pulled up her skirt and stroked the inside of her thighs. Each stroke pulled deep within her womb. Her breathing quickened, her eyes closed. She wanted to feel every stroke, every sensation. Brad’s fingers moved higher and he fumbled between her legs, stroking softly until he touched her clitoris.

Betty jerked from the heat that steamed through her body. The scents of sex and man, arousal and need, filled the back of the limo. She forgot her broken arm, her crushed fingers. Betty wished she could stretch out on the backseat of the limo, but there wasn’t enough room for both of them. She sat with her legs spread, her skirt bunched around her hips. She rocked and shifted with each stroke wanting, no, needing to feel the maximum pleasure Brad could give her. No pain racked her body, lightness and passion filled her soul. Brad stroked faster, pushed her clit harder. Her body tightened, she held her breath. Betty was ready, needy, desperate.

“Now, Brad, now!”

Using his thumb and finger, Brad softly pinched her clit. Pulsing contractions exploded through her body. Betty cried out her joy as shudder after shudder wound through her. Groaning her relief, Betty opened her eyes and smiled. The look of pure love on his face humbled her. With contractions still singing through her, Betty reached her good hand to Brad and said, “I love you.” The simple words couldn’t convey her feeling. Her mind swelled with emotion, love, happiness. She felt connected to Brad in a way she’d never felt with any other man. A sense of rightness filled her soul.

They arrived at the airport and Betty found she was flying on a private jet for the first time in her life. Her every need was taken care of, allowing

her to sleep the first hour or so. When she woke up, feeling refreshed, she glanced at Brad and sucked in her breath.

“What?” he said with a smile on his face.

The look of pure love shining from his eyes liquefied her bones. It was that look, that moment, when Betty realized for the first time in her life that a man, this man, truly loved her. Oh, he’d said the words, she’d said them back but, his face told the story. Brad was in love with her and Betty felt as if her life started at just this moment on this day.

She didn’t know how to reply to his question so she went to him and knelt between his legs. She reached up and stroked his chin then dropped her hand to his jeans, where she fumbled to undo the button with her one hand. The button popped and she gave Brad a sultry smile. Probably the first sultry smile in her lifetime. She was changing right in front of her own eyes and it was all due to Brad. “Take off your pants,” Betty whispered. Brad did, knowing Betty couldn’t do it by herself, but he struggled with his bum leg.

She couldn’t help it and laughed a little. “Better hurry or we’ll land before I can repay your kindness.” His eyes darkened with desire and soon the jeans were in a heap around his ankles. “Leave them there,” Betty ordered. She didn’t waste time with foreplay. Brad’s penis stood hard and proud and throbbing, waiting for her touch. She dipped her head and ran her tongue across the tip, sliding it into the slit. Brad’s groan filled the jet’s interior and a bead of sperm rose to the top. She sucked it off then covered his penis with her mouth.

With alternating sucking and bobbing motions Betty brought Brad to the limit then pulled back. His groan of disappointment was followed by a gruff “Don’t stop.”

She ignored the command and placed her hand around his balls. With firm squeezes and light tickles, she rubbed them until he was writhing in the seat. Heavy breaths filled the air and Betty sucked Brad’s penis back into her mouth in one long move. Brad’s hips rose off the seat, his legs stiffened and with a groan of surrender he ejaculated into her mouth. She swallowed the salty liquid and slowly, oh so slowly, pulled her mouth off his penis.

Betty had never realized the joy that came from giving a man a blowjob. She felt sexy and strong. Powerful. His hardness and harsh breaths, his groans and surrender, gave her a confidence she’d not felt before. She

wished she could have taken her time, but she'd slept for some time and the flight was nearing its end. Next time, she thought. Next time.

The plane began its descent as Brad calmed from the blowjob. He ran his hand through his hair and said, "Wow. That was something. Let's join the mile high club another time, but next time let's do it properly. We'll get an airplane with a bed." His eyebrows waggled and Betty laughed.

"It's a date."

She prepared for landing, refreshed her makeup as best she could one-handed, fixed her hair and sat next to Brad for the rest of the trip. She'd become a different woman between the time she left Chicago and the time she landed in Los Angeles. She knew it. Betty had more confidence, more sexual awareness.

Betty had Bradley Moore in her life.

When they arrived in L.A. a black stretch limo pulled up to the airplane, the joy of flying private. The pilots and the flight attendant helped Betty and Brad down the stairs. Once they were settled inside the limo, the driver headed toward Betty's home in Orange County.

"Thank you for taking me home, Brad. You didn't have to. My sisters would have picked me up and you could have gone straight to your house."

Brad touched the blue-black bruise on her cheek, leaned forward and murmured, "It's my pleasure. I wouldn't be comfortable if I didn't see you home." He shifted his leg. It had been resting on the rear-facing rumble seat. Brad's forehead furrowed. "Damn leg. Now it's itching like crazy." He tried to scratch a troublesome area but gave up in frustration.

The ride south was fast due to the lack of early afternoon traffic. To everyone's great surprise the limo pulled up in front of Betty's home and no reporters were staked out on her lawn. They were struggling out of the car when a sedan pulled up and a woman got out of her car.

"Let me help you," she said.

"Patti! Thanks for coming."

Betty's sister guided her up the one step to her front door. "Watch it," Patti cautioned.

"Brad, look, it's Patti," Betty huffed.

Brad glanced up from his crutches and smiled. “Nice to finally meet you.” They’d had phone conversations, but by the time Brad arrived at the hospital Patti had left and gone back to work. By the time he finally made it up the step, Betty’s sister had opened the front door and guided her inside.

“You look different,” Patti said to Betty as they settled in the family room.

Her hand flew to her face when the dreaded blush appeared. Did Patti know she’d become a wanton woman, a slave to sex? Would it show to everyone?

Once everyone had water and soft drinks Betty diverted the conversation by saying to her sister, “It must be the ordeal of the crash.”

“God, Betty, I’ve never been so scared in my life,” Patti said. Betty and Brad sat on the couch with Patti on the loveseat across from them. “Sue told me to call her as soon as I saw you. Hang on a minute.” Patti dialed her cell phone.

“Is Sue your other sister?” Brad asked.

“Yes. She lives an hour away and takes care of our elderly mother. She’s a godsend.”

“Sue! I’m here with Betty. She looks great in a bruised, colorful way,” Patti said. “Hold on.” Patti took the phone to Betty. “Sue wants to speak with you.”

“Hi, sis,” Betty said. “Yes, I’m fine. Or I will be. I already told you what the doctor said. Yeah, I’ll be a new woman in a few months.” Betty nodded her head. “Tell Mom I love her and will come to see her as soon as I can. It’s going to be a while though. Okay. I will. I love you too. Here’s Patti.” Betty handed the phone back to her sister, laid her head on the back of the couch and closed her eyes.

Brad leaned closer and said, “Tired? Why don’t you take a nap?”

“It’s too much effort to climb upstairs. Wish I had a downstairs bedroom in this house.” Drained, Betty felt exhaustion sweep through her. She couldn’t even open her eyes to answer Brad’s question. “I’ll just rest here for a while.”

Brad kissed her forehead and nodded to the limo driver who had been standing off to the side with his hands clasped in front of him. Before she knew it the driver had carefully picked her up and carried her upstairs. Patti followed the man upstairs and turned down Betty’s bed. After tucking her in Patti came back downstairs.

“Thank you, Brad. You’ve done so much for Betty.” Patti plumped a pillow behind her back and settled into the loveseat.

“My pleasure.” Brad saw the resemblance between the sisters. They both had pert noses, arched eyebrows, and very green eyes.

“It’s okay if you need to get home. I’ll be staying with Betty for a few days. She has a doctor’s appointment tomorrow, counseling, and I’m sure the airline will want to contact her. I took some time off from work to be with her.”

Brad nodded his head and heaved a sigh. “I’d love to stay, but I can’t get up and down her stairs easily. And I do have some appointments myself.” He levered himself up from the couch. “When Betty wakes, please tell her I wish I could have stayed and I’ll call her tonight.”

“Certainly.” Patti walked Brad to the door. She realized when she opened it that the limo driver had gone back to the car as soon as he’d taken Betty upstairs. Brad stepped through the door, careful not to lose his footing with the crutches. “Brad?”

“Yes?” He didn’t turn because he couldn’t. The porch wasn’t big enough.

Patti walked with him to his limo. “I know your lifestyle is very different from ours. Betty is really a bookworm, she loves quiet and privacy. I don’t know how your relationship can work, but if anyone is worth the effort, Betty is. You won’t find a smarter, kinder, more considerate person around. And she’s funny. Really, really funny.” Patti grinned.

Brad made it to the door of the limo. The driver opened it and stood by ready to give him a hand. Brad turned and smiled at Patti. “I do have a public life, Patti. But I treasure my time alone. Betty knows that. I will do my best to keep the media away from her. If you saw her news conference earlier today when she left the hospital, you’d know she can handle the attention. Not only that, I think Betty charmed the paparazzi. That’s not something many people can do. I love her and will protect her to the best of my ability.” He gave Patti his widest smile. “And believe me, I know how funny she is, that’s why I fell in love with her.” Brad turned toward the limo then glanced back at Patti. “Oh, one more thing. I’m not a quitter.” With a quick wave Brad levered himself into the limo.

Patti watched it pull away from the curb. “Only time will tell, Mr. Movie Star,” she muttered. “Legends don’t seem to blend well with

everyday people for long-term relationships. But if you really love her, that's what matters."

Two days passed in a blur of doctor's appointments, counseling appointments and more interviews with the FAA, her union, and the airline. The FAA came to her house, the union and airline called, and Patti took her to her appointments.

Counseling was tough but worth it. Betty spoke about the actual crash, her relief that she and the passengers had survived the touchdown then the overwhelming fear and shock when the passenger tossed her out of the airplane. She clenched her good fist and pounded her knee when she told the counselor how impotent she'd felt when she realized, too late, that the passenger was going to toss her down the slide. She should have seen it coming. She'd had her section of the airplane under control and the passenger had jerked that control away from her.

Betty knew she needed time to accept what had happened. A few days and a few counseling sessions were just the beginning of her healing process. After each session she felt better, as if she'd released a poison that churned inside her. She knew she'd be able to go back to work with no problems. She didn't know if she'd trust a passenger not to manhandle her again.

Brad called every day, many times. They talked about their recoveries, politics, family, their likes, and dislikes, even their favorite colors. Betty felt as if she was really getting to know Brad the man, not the superstar.

A week passed and Betty was bored. She wanted food, but dinner was still too hard to fix with her crushed fingers and broken arm so she ordered a pizza. When the delivery boy handed over the pie his face lit up. "Say, aren't you that stewardess from the airplane crash?"

Betty felt her knees begin to shake. She didn't mind being recognized as Brad's girlfriend but hadn't expected to be recognized for the accident. "Yes, I am. Thank you for the pizza. Here's your tip." Betty handed the boy the money and took the pizza in her hand. She turned away, hoping to kick the door closed before the boy could ask her any more questions, but wasn't fast enough.

“You’re a true hero, lady. I’m real proud of ya.” The boy tipped an imaginary hat to Betty, gave her a big smile, and left.

Betty stood at the door with her mouth gaping open. What a gracious remark. She hadn’t expected strangers to comment on the accident, let alone be called a hero. After shutting the door with her foot, Betty took the pizza to the kitchen table and sat down to eat. She opened the box, shook on red pepper flakes, and stared at the pepperoni and cheese slices.

Hero. Never in her lifetime had she thought anyone would call her a hero. Betty had only done her job, followed her training. Before she could stop them, cleansing tears fell down her cheeks. She finally realized her life had changed the day the airplane made its emergency landing. She cried so hard she hiccuped and sucked in a large breath. Closing the top on the pizza box, Betty walked to her couch and curled up into the fetal position. The counselor had told her she needed to cry, let it out. She’d thought she’d done that. Now she realized that she had cried from anger at being injured when she hadn’t needed to be.

Now she cried from the realization she had escaped death.

The phone rang, waking Betty from the nap she’d taken after her tears of gratitude and relief had dried up. A bit disoriented from the long nap, Betty answered the phone with a gruff voice. “Hello?”

“Ms. Hammond?” a male voice asked. “Yes, who’s calling?”

“My name is Norman Bagley and I’m Brad’s publicist. Are you busy, or may I speak with you for a few minutes?”

Betty sat up and pushed her hair from her face. “Is everything all right with Brad?” Betty’s heart fired up from worry that he may have taken a fall and hurt himself.

“He’s fine,” Bagley said. “He had to go to a meeting about his film. The producers wanted to discuss a new release date. The media is hounding the studio about when filming will resume.”

“Oh. Okay. What’s on your mind, Mr. Bagley?” Betty asked. Norman Bagley coughed and hesitated. A feeling of dread filled Betty.

“I have to tell you about some tweets that have been appearing online.”

Betty held her breath for the bad news.

“Er, well, they’re saying online that you shouldn’t be with Brad. That you’re not up to his standards.” Norman Bagley’s voice faded to a whisper by the time he finished the sentence.

Betty knew she was an emotional mess when tears trickled down her cheeks. Her relationship with Brad was worldwide news and celebrities' fans always let the public know what they were thinking. But to hear from Brad's publicist that she wasn't right for Brad hurt. Hadn't she been thinking the same thing all along? Yet, as the months passed and she'd gotten to know Brad, she'd felt more comfortable, more right with him. Now doubts crept back in but Betty pushed them aside. Brad had a more private side than his adoring public knew. Betty loved that side. "People are going to say what they want, Mr. Bagley. There's nothing I can do about it."

"That's very true, Ms. Hammond. I was wondering if you were going to respond to the tweets."

"Are you telling me not to?"

There was a long, drawn-out pause. "I can't tell you what to do, Ms. Hammond, but I will advise you that anything you post online is public domain. Worldwide public domain. Twitter is big. You are already a sensation because of your association with Brad. Antagonizing his fans won't do you a bit of good and may well harm Brad's reputation as a beloved celebrity."

Well, Betty thought. That sums it up. "Anything I may or may not do will be given careful thought, Mr. Bagley. I won't do anything to hurt Brad or his reputation." Of all the nerve. Betty's ire rose. Who did this publicist think he was? She hadn't realized she had begun pacing during the length of the conversation. When had she gotten up from the couch?

"Mr. Bagley? May I ask a favor of you?"

"Certainly, Ms. Hammond."

"Will you be sure to tell Brad's Twitter friends that I won't stop him from posting or keep him away from his fans?"

"What? Now Ms. Hammond—"

"Wait...I want to stress that this superstar's girlfriend isn't going to throw mud on his face or lure him into any unusual positions that might tarnish that glittering reputation. I honor his past, his present and his future. He has given the world a body of work unparalleled in this time. I wish my body was as good as his."

Norman Bagley sputtered but didn't say a word. Betty didn't expect him to. She felt the knot of anger loosen. The man was only trying to do his job the best he could. He didn't know her and obviously assumed she was a bobble-headed nincompoop. "Thank you for the phone call, Mr. Bagley. I

look forward to meeting you in the future.” She almost burst out laughing at the strained cough she heard on the other end of the line. She couldn’t wait to meet Bagley.

“Well, er, goodbye, Ms. Hammond.”

The line went dead before Bagley had finished saying her name. Betty felt mixed feelings. She was insulted that Brad’s publicist would “counsel” her like that, yet felt grateful that he’d called to tell her what was being said online about her.

Later that evening Betty decided to see what this Twitter thing was. She Googled it and was directed to their website. Betty signed up and read some “tweets.” She searched for Brad’s name and found that he was a regular on Twitter. She decided to “follow” him and see what he said to his fans. His latest tweets spoke about his injury, how he was healing and when he would be back to work. Betty scrolled down and read a few negative comments about her. They were hurtful, thoughtless, and mean. One in particular. You can’t date a brainless stewardess. Darkness will hide her looks, but I’m much younger and prettier and would love to satisfy your, er, cravings. Her first thought was to blast off a tweet to the cruel woman who had posted the comment. Betty spent hours figuring out how to use Twitter and found the woman’s so-called bio. The woman sounded like a nutcase. The bio wasn’t about her, it was a tribute to her obsession with Brad. Ugh.

Forget it, Betty thought. That woman would cause tons of trouble if she responded. Eventually, she’ll find something else to rant about. The evening dragged on. Betty pulled out an adventure book she’d been reading before the accident. Within two sentences she was glued to the pages about underwater adventures, stolen antiquities, and greed.

By the next morning Betty had changed her mind and fired off a tweet. Brainless-eat healthy food to spark intelligence. Darkness-we look prettier in the dark. Stewardess-bright, sexy, every man’s wet dream.

About twenty minutes later her phone rang. “I can’t believe you sent that tweet! Norm saw that you’d signed up. He watches everything, monitors my Twitter and Facebook pages, although I don’t know how he does it!” Brad said, laughing. “That was brilliant. Why did you do that? I didn’t even know you knew about Twitter.”

“Seems your worried publicist saw some tweets about me and wondered how I’d react.”

Betty heard Brad mutter a curse. “Norm called you, did he?”

“Yup. Since he and I haven’t formally met, I would like to say I’ll be looking forward to our first meeting with bated breath. I want to give him a big fat kiss in the kisser.”

“Betty,” Brad said, “I’ll talk to him. What did he say to you?”

“Ah, some nonsense about you losing your beloved world-renowned celebrity status if I responded to the tweets.”

“Shit.”

“Actually, Brad, he never mentioned the stuff.”

Brad laughed. “Well, your response on Twitter was great. Showed your sense of humor.”

Betty hung her head in relief. “I’m just glad you’re not upset. I wasn’t going to respond to any negative posts but the one about the brainless stewardess got to me. Really, Brad...my butt is still pretty taut, in a cottage cheese kind of way, right?”

Deep chuckles caused Betty to catch her breath. She suddenly, painfully missed Brad and wished she could be with him right now, hugging him, kissing him, touching him. Her body responded, desire softening her muscles, bringing heat to her cheeks. She touched her cheek, amazed at how fast a few words from Brad could bring on a response. She missed him, wanted to hold him, touch his hard, chiseled face, kiss his soft, supple lips. She wanted to wrap her hands around his hardness, massage his balls and make hot, passionate love to him.

She really had become a wanton, she thought.

In a quiet whisper he said, “I love cottage cheese.”

“Only if it’s fat free,” Betty said. Brad’s deep, sexy laugh conjured visions of them making hot lusty, love in bed amid tangled sheets. She saw his strong, muscular legs wrapped around her, felt his powerful arms gently holding her. And his lips. Sinfully hard and firm, yet soft and pliable. Lips that sent shivers up her spine, caused her knees to weaken and her heart to stutter. Betty could wax poetic about those lips. Not too plump but not thin, they were perfectly shaped to fit her mouth.

God, she had it bad.

Betty wiped sweat from her forehead, disgusted that a phone call could turn her on so fast.

Betty wanted Brad—right now. He’d made her his sex slave, she realized, a bit ashamed, a bit awed. Now all she thought about was steamy sex, stimulating touches and orgasmic releases.

Wanton, wanton, wanton.

“Betty, you there?”

“Hold on. I have to wipe away the dew from my erotic vision of us in bed together.”

“Really.”

“What else could it be? I’m too young for hot flashes. I can’t accept a hot flash at thirty-five years old. Forget it. It was plain and simple lust.”

Brad laughed and they talked for another half hour until there was a knock at her door.

“Gotta go, Brad, someone’s here. Have a great day.”

“I will. You too. Love you,” Brad said.

The feeling those two words produced struck Betty speechless. He’d said them before but this time they sounded different. As if they were married and settled in with each other.

As if they had forever to be together.

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Shopping

When she opened the door, she was confronted by the news media. Flashes blinded like strobe lights. Men and women shouted questions, some insulting, some lewd, others mean. Betty slammed the door and locked it. Panting, she sucked in a deep breath. Her time to recuperate peacefully had ended.

The sharks were circling the bait. She being the bait. How did celebrities do it day in and day out? Betty had a new respect for the lives of the rich and famous. Money couldn't buy privacy. Maybe a mansion surrounded by ten-foot walls, but outside those walls the public had free access to their favorite personalities.

Betty called the police, who dispersed the mob, then she called Brad.

"I'm coming down."

"No, Brad. Your leg's still in a cast. I'll deal with it. I have to learn sometime and now's as good as any. The police shooed away the reporters. I'll figure something out."

They talked for a while longer. Betty decided if she wanted to keep Brad in her life, she would have to accept being part of his. She went upstairs, washed her face, put on makeup, and styled her hair. Not an easy feat for a one-armed flight attendant. Exhausted, she sat down to rest for a short while and wondered when she'd become as old as Ethel Merman.

After twenty minutes to catch her breath, she looked for an outfit that would accept her casted arm. A sleeveless, teal-colored swingy dress that slipped easily over her head fit the bill.

Betty planned her escape. The press wouldn't stay away long. She pictured them sitting in their vans down the street and on the next block. Waiting.

Betty's house stood on a corner lot. Her garage faced the front. She couldn't use her car, she'd be noticed the second the garage door opened. Plus, she couldn't drive with her arm in a cast anyway. Betty left through her back door, wound around the side of her house, and stepped onto the sidewalk around the corner from her front door. The day was chilly and bright so she wore sunglasses and a dark overcoat with a navy, teal, and white paisley scarf over her head. She spied a suspicious white van with no windows down the street and crossed to the other side. It wasn't easy keeping her broken arm from swinging next to her body but Betty held it as carefully as she could. She walked two more blocks and paused at a bus stop. A timetable attached to the small shelter that surrounded the bench told her she had fifteen minutes to wait. She sat on the bench and pondered her next move.

Betty sighed with relief when the ride to the nearest mall went without a hitch. She sat to regroup for a few minutes, grabbing a newspaper and a hazelnut latte at a café.

She turned to the entertainment section and read about upcoming movies, art and television shows. After she finished the newspaper, she called her sister Patti.

"Hi. I'm at the mall. The paparazzi were knocking on my door so I had the police get rid of them. Want to meet me? We can do some shopping. I need to add more sleeveless blouses to my huge selection of none. Plus, I need to figure out how to improve the style of my cast."

"I'll be right there," Patti said with a laugh. "Wait! How did you get to the mall? Did you drive?"

Betty laughed. "I did a Robert Ludlum stunt. Overcoat, dark shades, and I walked to the bus stop. That was an interesting experience."

"Give me fifteen minutes." Patti hung up the phone before Betty could say another word.

She arrived right on time. Neither one needed to tell the other where to meet since the café was their usual meeting place at the mall. Patti sat down

and ordered a cappuccino.

Neither sister said anything until the cappuccino arrived. Then Patti blurted out, “Are you sure you want to live like this?”

Betty knew what she was asking and shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I know how I feel when I’m with Brad, and I miss him terribly when I’m away from him. I treasure my privacy and that’s all been blasted into outer space. I’m not going to make any decisions right now. I’ll see how it goes.”

Patti’s stare didn’t unnerve Betty. She knew her sister loved her and wanted what was best for her. “The man loves me, Patti. I’ve never felt this kind of love before. It rings true, real.”

They tossed their paper cups into the trash along with the newspaper and headed for Nordstrom. Betty tried on different blouses and bought three. “Thanks for helping me get in and out of these tops, Patti. I’m glad I’ll only be wearing one a day. Sounds like a multiple vitamin.”

Patti laughed. “You are such a dork. This one does have a yellowish vitamin-like color to it. Look, it even has dark speckles to make you think you’re getting more nutrients in the material than you really are.”

“How about lunch?” Betty asked.

“Sure. The Italian place? I’m in the mood for angel hair pasta.”

They enjoyed a leisurely lunch until a thirty-something woman at the table next to them screeched, “Ohmigod! You’re the flight attendant who was in the airplane crash and is dating Bradley Moore. Ohmigod!” The woman pulled her chair over and her four friends crowded in around them. Betty tried to pull away from them, but she and Patti were in a booth and had nowhere to go. “What’s he like? Is he great in bed? He must be or you wouldn’t be with him.” Without taking a breath the woman leaned closer to Betty. “You look prettier than in those terrible pictures you see in the rag mags. How old are you? How lucky can you get...Bradley Moore!” The woman ended on a long sigh.

Betty waited until the woman wound down. She’d learned from the mob at the hospital that eventually the questions would stop. She smiled at the group even as she saw the murderous look on her sister’s face. “May I have your name?”

The woman beamed at her. “Oh. It’s Leslie. Leslie Jacobs.” A wide smile showed white but slightly crooked teeth and Betty thought that the

woman would be very pretty if she had those invisible braces to straighten her teeth.

“Leslie, could you do me a favor?” Betty asked. She had leaned forward as if to tell a secret.

“Sure!”

“Could you and your friends,” Betty smiled at the other women, “please move back a shade? I’m feeling a bit crowded and am afraid I’ll jostle my cast.”

Leslie Jacobs frowned. “That’s the big favor?”

Betty didn’t say anything. She knew the woman wouldn’t like the request but didn’t care.

“What a bitch!” roared Leslie as she stood up from the table. People in the restaurant turned to see what the yelling was about. “We only wanted to say hello and you ask us to leave. I don’t know what Bradley Moore sees in a slut stewardess like you, but he’s lost my respect, that’s for sure.” Leslie turned to her friends and said, “Let’s go.”

Betty’s heart hammered. She hadn’t asked for this confrontation but she wasn’t going to back down from it. “Before you leave...” Betty stood up and glanced around the restaurant. Leslie and her friends stopped in their tracks and turned toward Betty. Every eye in the house was on her. “I recommend you look to your own actions before you place judgment or call me rude names. You barged in on my lunch without even an apology.” Betty made sure the people in the restaurant heard her. “You demanded I speak to you and invaded my space.” Leslie turned to leave. “I’m not finished.” Betty said it in a quiet, but authoritative voice that stopped the fleeing woman in her tracks. “I want to thank you for your concern for my well-being after the airplane crash. I’m touched that you asked how I felt.” Betty saw the woman cringe and hoped it was because of her thoughtlessness.

“As for my relationship with Bradley Moore...” Betty softened her voice. “It’s very, very special. He’s a fantastic man with a kind streak that is as wide as this restaurant. I hope you don’t take your anger with me out on Bradley. He doesn’t deserve it.” Betty glanced around the restaurant. Most of the patrons were smiling and nodding. “I have one more thing to say.” The woman crossed her arms and heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Think how you would feel if you were interrupted the way I had been. Would you feel

pleased? And if I'd called you a bitch, how would you have responded? That's all. Have a nice afternoon."

Betty sat down and grabbed her water glass with a shaking hand. She drank the whole glass, her mind in a whirl from the encounter. The women in Leslie Jacobs' group hadn't moved. They looked like deer caught in headlights. As they took their first steps to leave, the restaurant broke into applause. Cheers of "Way to go, Ms. Hammond," and "well said, Betty," were shouted to her. Betty glanced up with surprise. Almost everyone in the restaurant had stood in tribute to her. Patti laughed and reached across the table to squeeze Betty's good hand. Relief coursed through Betty. She might have angered a few of Brad's fans but most of the people in this restaurant were on her side. She stood up and waited until they quieted down. "Thank you. I'm humbled by your support. I know each and every one of you treasure your privacy and there's nothing more private than a lunch out with friends or family. I hope you all have a wonderful day. You've made this one I will never forget."

After Brad heard that the press had bothered Betty, he called a limo and was driven to Orange County. By the time he'd arrived two hours later his publicist had called to tell him about Betty's encounter in the mall. Brad listened to Norm and sighed. Her first trip out of the house after her accident and she couldn't even have a little peace and quiet. It sounded like she'd held her own, but Brad needed to see how she really felt. He saw her sister's car parked in the driveway and was glad she had company. Brad lumbered out of the car and up the step to her front door.

When Betty opened the door, his heart lurched. She wore a teal-colored dress that accented her curved figure and made her skin glow with warmth and light. Her face broke into a surprised smile as she opened the door wider for Brad to come in. Once the door was closed, he dropped the crutches and pulled her into his arms, balancing on his good foot and using Betty to hold him upright.

"God, I've missed you." He'd needed her, dreamed of her, craved her touch, the softness of her skin, the light scent of flowers that wound through his body, leaving him hard with desire. He dipped his head and kissed her

with a passion that had built up over the last few days. The minute Brad's mouth touched hers his body reacted like he'd been struck by lightning. His thighs hardened, his hand bunched in her hair and his arm clamped her closer to his chest. Brad groaned with need. He couldn't catch his breath. He wanted to take Betty to bed and strip off her clothes, run his hands up the inside of her thighs, touch her sensitive center. He didn't take his mouth from hers and pushed his tongue inside. Brad tasted her salty tongue, rough and soft, firm, and insistent. He positioned his mouth so it completely covered Betty's and matched her thrusts as their tongues fought for dominance. She felt so right, so perfect in his arms. Their mouths made a complete seal and for the moment, for eternity, he never wanted the kiss to end.

When Betty pulled away to take a much-needed breath she said, "You missed the distressed part." Her lips were moist and swollen, her breasts heaved from exertion and her eyes were lit with desire and a bit of humor.

"What?" Brad had no idea what Betty was talking about. He'd thought he was used to her quickly changing thoughts, but this change was so odd it confused him. Plus, his body still raged with unfulfilled desire and he couldn't make the transition as fast as she could. As hot desire pulsed through him, he ran his hand down his face and waited for her explanation.

"When a damsel is in distress," she said between rapid breaths, her fingers stroking the material of his shirt before settling over Brad's heart, "the man is supposed to rescue her. I, alas...had to rescue myself—again."

Brad couldn't tell if she was upset. Her breathing had slowed, the dewy redness had faded from her cheeks and her mouth formed a straight line. He searched her eyes for a clue, but she showed nothing in her expression. Feeling remorse for thinking only of his need for her, not what she might be feeling or needing, he said, "Betty—"

"Tut, tut," she said with a wave of her hand. "A modern damsel in distress is forthright, upright and uptight."

Brad burst out laughing with relief and amazement. He had been taken for a Betty-style ride and fallen hook, line and sinker for it. How she did it he'd never know but he loved that part of her humor. Her quick wit threw him for a loop and he never wanted to find the knot. A life with her would never be boring.

The thought sobered him up. A life with Betty. God, he hoped he could have one with her.

“Well, I see you two have kissed and made up,” Patti smiled as she came into the living room from the kitchen. “I knew when it became quiet not to cough, sneeze or fart.”

The laugh burst out of Brad. Both sisters had the same sense of humor. He hadn’t laughed this much since he’d first met Betty.

“Now I must leave the formerly distressed damsel to her late-to-the-rescue boyfriend.” Patti kissed Betty on her cheek, gave Brad a peck on his cheek and left with a smile on her face.

“You two are fantastic,” Brad said. “Does your other sister have the same sense of humor?”

“You bet,” Betty said with a laugh. “We get it from both sides of our family. All our lives we’ve cracked each other up.”

“You are so lucky.” Brad bent down to pick up the forgotten crutches. Betty grabbed one to help him. He hobbled into the kitchen and sat at the oval distressed-style, pine-topped table. Betty put on a pot of decaf and pulled out a plate of chocolate cupcakes.

“So, you rushed in to save me like Custer bringing the cavalry,” Betty said with a smile. “Luckily, we didn’t have the same ending.”

Brad finished his cupcake, gulped a swig of coffee, and leaned forward. He took Betty’s hand in his and played with her fingers for a moment.

Betty’s hand jerked and Brad wondered if she felt the same tingling sensation sear through her that he had. Traces of fire raced through his veins. When Betty moaned, he knew she’d had the same reaction and the burning passion he saw in her eyes confirmed it. Betty opened her mouth to speak but the words seemed to stick in her throat. She pulled her hand away from his, wrapped it around her mug and sipped her coffee. It amazed him that she reacted with such passion yet seemed so shy at times. His heart hammered when he saw the pulse in her throat throbbing.

“You still have the touch,” she whispered.

“That’s it.” He levered himself up from the table. “Couch.”

They made it to the couch—barely, what with fumbling with his crutches and Betty protecting her casted arm and fingers. Once they settled on the couch Brad pulled Betty’s dress over her head and tossed it on the floor with frantic, but gentle hands. Cool air puckered her nipples and Betty shivered from the chill. She fumbled with his shirt buttons, trying to undo them with one hand. She had opened two buttons when Brad lost patience and ripped the shirt off his back. The popping buttons reminded him of

champagne corks flying out of bottles on New Year's Eve. Bubbles boiled through his blood.

He kissed her with hot, wet lips and thrust his tongue inside her mouth, tasting coffee and sugar and desire. His thighs hardened; his penis strained against his jeans. Torture didn't describe the tumultuous riot of need coursing through him. He was hot and harder than he'd ever been before. He rolled onto his back so Betty's arm wouldn't be trapped between her body and the back of the couch and pulled Betty over him, placing her nipples within tasting distance. He fondled one nipple with his left hand, sliding his thumb across the tip then licking it lightly. Betty cried out with need, her body stiffening, her neck straining. Brad glanced into her eyes and saw dilated pupils with desire blazing from them. Good. He wanted her to want him as much as he needed her. He continued to roll and stroke the nipple while delving his other hand down her small waist and over her stomach until he reached the juncture between her legs.

Betty moaned.

"Tell me how you feel right now," Brad growled into Betty's ear. He almost couldn't form the words his mind was so clouded with desire.

She sighed and squirmed on the couch, her legs spread across his groin. "I feel light, as if I'm floating on clouds. Tight as if a storm is brewing inside me and I'm building up energy, nearly ready to burst." She closed her eyes and moaned when he touched her clit. "Bright colors," she murmured. "The way you smell drives me crazy."

Her words inflamed him and Brad entered her swiftly. His penis filled her. There was a roaring in his ears. The fit was tight, complete. Hardness and softness. Yin and yang. Betty met him all the way, his equal partner. They blended together, one force strong and giving, the other strong and taking. Betty's body contracted around his pulsing erection. She inserted her good hand between their joined bodies and cupped his balls, stroking and squeezing, kneading, and loving. Brad's harsh breathing matched hers. He quickened the pace, frantic for release. They strained and moaned, kissed, and stroked. The peak neared. Brad's breath became ragged. Betty's body tightened around and above him as she met him thrust for thrust. She pushed her hips closer to Brad's, took him deeper inside her.

Brad couldn't last much longer. Desperate desire tugged his soul. He wanted to let go, find release. He needed Betty to assuage his passion. He

tugged on a nipple with his lips, circled around it with his tongue. Betty's head fell back and she let out a deep moan.

The sound tore through Brad and he exploded into her on a wave so intense his mind went blank. The only things he felt were the deep contractions pounding through him and the satisfying connection of abundant love.

Betty didn't expect the orgasm to take her breath away, bring blackness to her vision. Brad's last push touched her so deeply, so perfectly, she broke the crest and tumbled down the other side, wonderful spasms racking her body.

It seemed forever before they calmed enough to settle into a tight hug on the couch. Betty lay on top of Brad, her casted arm hanging over the edge of the couch cushions. Brad's broken leg lay on the ottoman that had been pushed up against the couch. They grinned at each other like silly lovestruck teenagers.

"Wow," Brad said.

"Wow." Betty smiled. "Aren't we eloquent. And smart too!"

Brad laughed and stroked a damp strand of hair off Betty's forehead before he tucked it behind her ear. "You are magnificent, woman."

"You are too, man."

They smiled at each other. For the first time in years Betty didn't know what to say, couldn't crack a joke. Brad kissed her forehead then shifted so he could sit up. Betty climbed over him and went upstairs to get a light robe. When she came down, she picked Brad's ripped shirt off the floor and gave it to him. He put it on but the sides hung open. Betty handed him some safety pins she had grabbed from her home office.

"Thanks."

They settled on the couch and Betty knew Brad would say what he had come to say.

With eyes lit with love but his mouth in a firm line he said, "Your life has changed since you met me."

"It certainly has," she said with a smile. "I'm so glad you bumped into me. Twice."

Brad's lips turned up on one side of his mouth, giving him a rakish look, but his eyes turned serious. "The encounter at the restaurant today will be one of many. I need to know how you feel now, after the incident."

Betty leaned into Brad's shoulder, needing to touch him, feel their connection. His body hummed with energy. She felt his desire, his need. His concern. She softly ran her finger along his lips, wanting them to turn upward, needing to see relief in his eyes. "Angry at the woman and her friends for feeling she could barge in on Patti and me. Astonished that the restaurant patrons cheered me. A bit humiliated that I spoke out and didn't just leave the restaurant."

Brad nodded but didn't say anything at first. "I'm worried that the notoriety will become too much for you. You are such a private, introverted person." Brad waved a hand when she opened her mouth to protest. "I don't mean that you're a hermit, you deal with hundreds of people a day on your flights. But I know you treasure your time alone. There won't be much alone time if you stay with me."

Was that fear she saw on Brad's face? Fear she would leave him? Her heart trembled at the thought. Brad needed her. Something inside changed at that moment, a new resolve filled her soul, and Betty knew that the sacrifices would be worth it. "I'm staying."

"What?"

"You can't kick me out so fast." Betty smiled and touched Brad's arm. "You're stuck with me."

Brad exhaled in a whoosh and his whole body relaxed. Betty knew he hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath. She saw relief and joy relax his face and those luscious lips turned into a smile. He pulled her into his arms, careful not to hit her broken arm. "You are one remarkable woman, Betty Hammond. Thank you."

"As they say in the hair color commercial, Bradley Moore...I'm worth it."

He laughed, a deep, resonant sound that vibrated through the room. "Don't you mean I'm worth it?" he asked.

"Oh, you're worth it, my sweet. From my perspective you're worth the time, the work, and the wait. From your perspective I'm worth the time it will take for me to get used to your lifestyle, the work it'll take to get the public to accept us as a couple and the wait you'll have to suffer through until our next roll in the sack."

Brad laughed with joy and hugged Betty.

“I have an idea,” Brad said an hour later. “Let’s go out to dinner.”

“Tonight? I just ate lunch out today.”

“Let’s test the waters. It’ll be our first dinner out. We can go to a restaurant here in Orange County. See what people say or do.” Brad watched Betty closely. “What do you think?”

Betty’s eyes lit with excitement. “I like it. This time if...I should say when we’re approached by your fanatical fans, you can deal with them. We’ll call it a socioeconomic study.” Betty laughed. “Right! The study of large groups of fans and how they react to their hero dating an everyday person. I’ll write about it and get a PhD. Okay?”

Brad laughed. They went to a famous fish restaurant in Newport Beach. Betty freshened up and wore one of her new blouses with a tailored skirt and ballet flats. She didn’t want to wear heels as long as she had her arm in a cast. They stopped at Fashion Island, the wonderful outdoor mall in Newport Beach, and Brad bought a new shirt. Because of his crutches they couldn’t do a lot of walking, so they bought the shirt from a store near the parking lot.

They had their first encounter with a fan inside the store. The cashier wasn’t paying attention to Brad and Betty until Brad handed her his credit card. When she glanced at the name on the card her head snapped up, her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as she struggled to find words. The woman held the card in front of her but seemed to have forgotten how to run it through the machine. She stared at it as if it were a foreign object then her eyes flicked between the card and Brad. He leaned forward and said in a deep, rough voice, “Really, the card is good. The bank won’t decline the purchase.”

Betty laughed out loud. The woman turned crimson and jumped as if she’d been caught napping, which in essence she had been. She ran the card through and handed the receipt to Brad. Their fingers touched and the woman sighed audibly.

“Thank you,” Brad looked at the woman’s nametag, “Nancy.”

She finally found her voice and said, “You’re welcome, Mr. Moore. Oh, by the way, I love your movies.”

“Thank you,” he said again.

Nancy stared at Betty for a moment, scrunched her eyes then blurted out, “You are so lucky. You’re living every girl’s fairy tale. To meet and date a real live movie star. I hope you can make it in the harsh spotlight of Mr. Moore’s world. I saw your interview when you left the hospital in Denver and you rock!” The woman held out her fisted hand for Betty to knock knuckles together. Betty laughed with delight at the cashier and they touched their hands together.

“Would you like me to put your old shirt in a bag for you, Mr. Moore?” Nancy asked. Brad had worn the new shirt out of the dressing room.

He smiled at the woman. “You keep it. I tore off the buttons.” He knew she would tell everyone she had a Bradley Moore shirt. Then a thought struck him. “Nancy, do you have a Sharpie?”

The saleswoman reached into a drawer and pulled out a black marker. Brad wrote a short note to Nancy on the shirt and handed it to her. When she saw what he’d written, her eyes widened and her mouth trembled with happiness. “Thank you, Mr. Moore. Thank you so much.”

Brad raised his eyebrows and said, “Now tell your friends I gave you the shirt but let them figure out what happened to it.” Brad knew the minute Nancy figured out why the buttons had been torn off the shirt. Her head popped up, her face reddened and she glanced at Betty. Then a wicked smile crossed her face. As he and Betty walked away from the counter, they heard her say, “You naughty, naughty people,” and laughed.

Return

In the six months that followed Brad and Betty enjoyed many dinners in public. Most people ignored them, others smiled. A few made rude comments, but neither Brad nor Betty responded to them. Most of the comments came when they were eating in Los Angeles, near Brad's home. It seemed that the Hollywood elite stayed near Hollywood. Obviously, the movers and shakers, the famous and not so famous, all desired to be seen at only the best restaurants and clubs.

Now it was time for Betty to get back to work. Her arm and hand had healed well, allowing for some stiffness in her fingers. Betty still had physical therapy for her hand but she had been pronounced ready to report for duty by her doctor and she was looking forward to returning to work and seeing her friends.

Working in her first-class galley, Betty set up for the meal service during the boarding process. Everyone greeted her with hugs and air kisses. She felt as if she'd never been away. The flight progressed smoothly until the meal service ended. When the coach and business class flight attendants came up to eat, they didn't stay to chat and catch up. At first Betty didn't notice but soon the exodus became clear. "What's with everyone, Wendy?" Betty asked the purser.

Wendy had been reading her rag magazine and jumped. “What do you mean?”

“Why isn’t anyone staying up here to visit? I know I put on my deodorant this morning.” Betty tried to make light of the situation the only way she knew how, with humor. When Wendy didn’t answer right away Betty studied her.

The purser wouldn’t look her in the eyes for a long moment then heaved a long sigh. “I’m just guessing, Betty, but you’re famous now. Look,” she showed Betty a picture of her and Brad in the magazine she’d been reading. “I think they’re a bit uncomfortable because you’re dating a famous celebrity.”

Betty’s shoulders slumped. “I haven’t changed, Wendy. I’m still me.”

“Not to them.” Wendy put down her magazine and moved from her jumpseat near the forward entry door to the one right next to Betty. “You go out to fancy restaurants, meet friends of Brad’s at parties, see advance private screenings of movies, like Brad’s latest.”

Brad had finished the movie he’d injured himself on and the studio was rushing to get it out to the theaters, hoping to minimize the financial loss they had taken when they’d had to stop filming. He’d invited her to the screening, which had caused tingles of nerves and excitement to flutter in Betty’s stomach. He’d never asked her to a function with his peers before. Brad had bought her a new dress and she’d had the time of her life.

“Just because I went to a movie doesn’t mean I’m different,” Betty protested. “I still like to go out on a layover and have a cheap and cheerful drink with everyone. I thought these people were my friends. Now they’re treating me like a leper.”

Wendy took Betty’s hand in hers. “Give them time. They’ll come around. But keep in mind, your real friends won’t let you slip away.”

Betty thanked Wendy for her kindness. With a mumbled apology, she slipped into the bathroom. The glance in the mirror confirmed to Betty that she hadn’t changed. She still had a face others called pretty, with arched eyebrows, high cheekbones, and flawless skin. She glanced at her body, covered by the blue uniform, and knew that she could afford to lose a few pounds, but so what? That was how she’d been her whole adult life. Brad didn’t seem to mind it. Betty washed her hands and reapplied her lipstick. She squared her shoulders and went out to break the ice between her coworkers and herself.

The aft galley was crowded with flight attendants and even a couple of passengers. Everyone was laughing and talking, obviously having a good time. As soon as Betty walked around the bulkhead all conversation stopped.

“Did I grow a wart on my nose between the time I left first class and now?” Betty rubbed the offending body part then smiled at the group of people. “Be gone offending mark!”

A couple of the flight attendants chuckled, knowing Betty’s sense of humor. The nearby passengers stared at her. One lady said, “Aren’t you that stewardess who’s dating Bradley Moore?”

Betty glanced at her coworkers. They stared with interest and waited for her answer. “Yes, I am.”

The woman smiled. “You are one lucky woman,” she said with a sigh. “May I ask you a question?”

“Certainly.” Betty braced herself for a nasty comment.

“Is he really as down-to-earth as they say? I’ve never seen him give a bad interview and he is always kind to those he meets.”

Betty smiled at the woman and didn’t realize her love for Brad showed in her expression. She heard the flight attendant next to her suck in a breath. “He is. Strip away his fame and he’s the nicest, most considerate person I’ve ever met. And he’s got a great sense of humor.”

No one said a word. Two flight attendants left to check call lights but the other two remained in the galley.

A passenger rounded the bulkhead and stopped. He gave Betty a long hard stare then said, “Well if it isn’t the little tart that stole a famous movie star from his devoted fans. I wonder what he sees in you, little lady.”

Everyone gasped. The two remaining flight attendants stepped closer to Betty as if to protect her. The middle-aged female passenger who’d been so nice came over, put her arm around Betty’s shoulder and said, “What an extremely rude thing to say.”

The man glared at the passenger. “Who’re you, her mother?”

The woman stiffened. “No, I’m her publicist.”

Betty didn’t even blink at the woman’s words. She had met all kinds of people during her years as a flight attendant and wouldn’t put it past this woman to be a publicist. She gave the woman’s hand nearest hers a quick squeeze of thanks.

“Well, I recommend you tell your tart to fly away from Bradley Moore. She’s not in his league.” The man’s eyes raked up and down Betty’s body in the most insulting way. “You could do to lose some pounds, lady.”

“That’s enough,” Georgeann, one of the flight attendants said. “Go back to your seat. That’s a crew order.”

“Screw your order,” the man said. “You’re all a bunch of pansy waitresses.”

Betty had had enough. She smiled at her coworkers and the publicist and stepped up to the rude man. “Did you know that tarts are really sweet?”

A puzzled frown crossed the man’s jowly features. “What are you talking about?”

“Sweet, as compared to tart.” Betty cocked her head and smiled, disarming the man. “You lean toward the tart side of the equation. That’s a good thing. It gives you spice, flavor. I think you lost the sweet part though, and that’s very sad. That’s the part that satisfies, warms and is human.”

The man waved his hand, totally confused. “Lady, you’re a nutcase.”

“Thank you, I adore nuts.” She turned to go, then turned back on an afterthought. “I fervently hope your tartness doesn’t come back to bother you with bouts of indigestion. You know how uncomfortable and smelly that can be.”

The group in the aft galley roared. The man turned beet red. He hiked up his pants over his rounded belly, turned and retreated to his seat. Betty watched as Georgeann followed the man. In a very loud voice she said, “Sir, fasten your seatbelt and remain in your seat for the remainder of the flight. You have created an ugly disturbance in the back of the airplane and will not be allowed out of your seat without prior approval. Oh, and you’re cut off from alcohol, too.” Nearby passengers glanced up startled, then those next to him glared at him. The man sank into the seat, trying to disappear.

That was all it took for the flight attendants on that flight to feel comfortable with Betty again. But she knew she’d have to go through that each time she met someone she hadn’t seen in a while. All she had to do was think of Brad and it was worth the trouble.

The woman who said she was a publicist sent up her business card to Betty. She worked for a well-known firm in Los Angeles. Betty invited her up to visit and they talked. Velma Lewis said she'd love to represent Betty and understood when Betty thanked her and said she'd talk to Brad first.

The rest of the five-hour flight to New York went smoothly. As Betty and the crew walked off the airplane a mob of lights blinded her. Reporters shouted questions and pushed forward. Her crew circled around her for protection.

"Why'd you insult Mr. Dorfman, Ms. Hammond?" a reporter shouted above the din.

"Who?" Betty asked.

"Dorfman. The passenger on your flight today. He emailed TMZ about your comments to him on the flight."

Betty had forgotten about their onboard internet. She silently berated herself for speaking back to the passenger, no matter that she'd been insulted first. "May I ask your name, sir?"

"Alex Adams."

"Mr. Adams, how would you respond to someone who called you names, a stranger who interrupted a conversation with rudeness and scorn?"

"I wouldn't like it," the reporter said as he thrust his microphone closer to Betty. "That's not what Dorfman said happened in his email. He said he was verbally abused for no good reason."

"There is never a good reason to be rude, Mr. Adams. I—"

"I'll speak for Ms. Hammond," a female voice said above the crowd. All the reporters turned. Velma Lewis stood tall. "I witnessed the whole exchange. Mr. Dorfman was the first to toss out rude, mean volleys and called Ms. Hammond nasty names. Ms. Hammond stood up for herself, as anyone would do."

"Who are you?" a female reporter shouted.

"I am Velma Lewis, a passenger on the flight who happened to be talking to Ms. Hammond at the time of the incident."

At that point executives from Betty's airline pushed through the crowd and took her and the crew away to a private room. After two hours of investigation, Betty and the flight attendants who witnessed the exchange were released to go to their layover. They had to be rebooked on a later flight the next morning to deadhead home since the investigation had cut

their layover too short. Reserve flight attendants were called out to replace them.

The incident was played across the media within minutes. By the next morning every morning show and all the news channels were running it as their lead story. Betty's airline wasn't happy about the negative publicity and ordered her to appear with union representation on her days off.

Betty had just walked in the door later that afternoon when her phone rang.

"Betty, sweetheart, I just heard what happened. I hadn't turned on the TV this morning and have been in meetings all day," Brad said.

Hearing his voice calmed her. Betty sank onto her couch. "You're not angry that I stood up for myself to that jerk?"

"No, sweetie. I know you. You wouldn't have done it if he hadn't deserved it."

Tears of frustration slid down Betty's face. Her first trip back and her relationship with Brad had gotten her in trouble. She wondered how often this would happen. Betty told Brad what the man said and smiled when he said, "Why that son of a bitch! I would have put him in his place too. You had every right to defend yourself and I'm glad you did. I'll have Norm put out a statement right away."

"Thank you for your support, Brad, but I don't think you should. With the way the airline treated us last night, I'm wondering if they will support me in the hearing I'm having day after tomorrow. I've been told to bring union representation." Warmth and love flowed through Betty. Brad's rush to defend her meant more than she could say.

"What?" Brad shouted. "I want to be there."

Betty laughed. "I'm sure that's not allowed. Don't worry. I'm a big girl. I'll survive."

Betty heard the frustration in Brad's voice and felt his helplessness. He couldn't protect her from the nasty people confronting her. It mirrored her irritation that her own company wouldn't support her. She heard a thump over the phone. "What's going on there, Brad?"

"Nothing." There was a short silence then he said, "Well I now have a nice bruise on my hand from taking out my anger on an innocent table. I'm coming down tonight. Wear your prettiest, sheerest negligee. We'll discuss this over glasses of spiced rum and soft jazz. You in your negligee, me in my suit."

Betty laughed. That offbeat comment was just what she needed. “Really, Brad. Why do I have to wear a negligee? I’m much more comfortable in my flannel granny gown.”

The deep rumble that vibrated over the phone touched Betty and caused her pulse to speed up, her palms to sweat. Every sexual nuance that Brad made, every indication that he loved her, sent erotic pulses through her body heating her blood. She felt a tingle between her legs and couldn’t wait for him to be there. “Hurry up, the phone is starting to slip from my wet hands. I’m not sure I can hold on until you arrive, wool suit and all.”

“You will wait for me. That’s an order,” Brad said in a mock serious voice. “Make sure that the granny gown is threadbare. Then I can rip it off you without worrying that you’ll feel the need to mend and reuse it.”

Betty laughed at the picture of her in a worn, see-through granny gown. She wished she had one to wear for Brad. “See you soon,” she said with a smile on her face.

“Can’t wait, sweetheart. Bye.”

Anticipation raced through Brad the closer he got to Betty’s house. As he turned into her driveway his lights illuminated the darkness and highlighted the shrubbery around the front of her neat and tidy home. When he put the car into park, his hand slipped off the gearshift. “Get a grip, man,” he muttered to himself. Brad sat for a moment collecting his thoughts, ordering his body to settle down. Ha. That’s a laugh, he thought. Everything about Betty was attractive to him, no, not attractive, seductive. Her flowery scent, her soft, flawless skin, her silky, curly hair. He wanted to trace his finger along her perfectly arched eyebrows and see darkness and desire fill her eyes. He wanted his mouth on hers, hot and needy, sucking her flavor into his soul. Shit. Brad opened the car door with a harsh movement and slid out of the car, his erection straining the limits of his jeans. Why work himself into a sexual quivering mass when she was just on the other side of the door?

Betty must have heard him drive up because the door opened and she stood in the doorway. Brad stopped with his foot on the step to her porch and caught his breath at the vision.

He didn't know where she had found it but Betty stood in a threadbare cotton gown. She'd turned out the front porch light and was backlit from the light glowing from the living room. The thin white gown touched her mid-thigh and showed all her lush curves. He ached to feel the softness of her leg where the hem caressed her glowing skin. His fingers twitched as he remembered her inviting creaminess, fought the desperate need to take Betty on the floor of her entryway—immediately. Brad didn't know what lotion she had put on but her skin shimmered, sleek, and sultry.

Without a word he caressed her cheek, stepped into her living room, and slammed the front door with his other hand. Brad kissed her long and slow, tasting chocolate and heat, need and sex, a surefire aphrodisiac. Boiling passion raced through his veins, causing his hands to tremble and his breath to hitch, and he didn't realize they were moving until they fell onto the couch.

Perfect.

“I have you right where I want you,” he murmured, not letting up on his assault to her senses. His all-consuming need for Betty continually shocked him. Whether he was away from her for a moment or days, each time he saw her he wanted her more than the time before. Betty moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck, clutching him for dear life. Her body molded to his as she rubbed her unrestrained breasts against his chest. Even through his shirt he felt her hardened nipples, her supple breasts. He ran a hand over her breast, over the thin material of her nightgown. The slightly rough fabric helped him stimulate her nipple into a tight, hard bud and he rolled that nipple with a firm touch. Betty groaned with need, her body slackened and she clung to him. Brad pulled back and smiled at the woman he desperately loved. Her face was flushed, her pupils dilated and the look of love and lust on her face humbled him. Betty wobbled a bit and he reached out to pull her to him, but she was faster, tossing her arms around him and kissing him with a deep, hot passion.

When her back hit the soft cushions of the couch and Brad lay heavily, but he hoped not uncomfortably, on top of her, he pulled the cotton gown slowly up her legs, caressing each calf, behind her slim knees and up her trim thighs.

“Your suit?” she panted. “Where's your heavy wool suit?”

Brad trailed his fingers down her throat, then continued with long, slow, soft strokes between her breasts. He ran his tongue around the shell of her

ear. She shivered and desire flooded her face, causing a rosy glow in her cheeks. Her eyes were wide, the lids partly closed. Brad touched her nipple and Betty rose up, her mouth opens in a silent gasp of delight.

He chuckled into her ear, tasting the salty and sweet flavor of the sensitive spot behind it. “No way was I going to take the time to put on a suit. No way,” he growled and moved to ravage her lips. Betty’s firm ripe lips fitted his perfectly. He nibbled her lower lip then nipped it. Once he washed it with his tongue, he covered her mouth and plunged his tongue inside hers.

Betty’s groan of pleasure tore through Brad. His body responded with rock-hard precision, his thighs bunched, his penis hardened to painful need. Her groan forced him to pull up the hem of her nightgown. He gasped at the beauty of her naked body. No panties, no bra. The light from the living room hadn’t done her justice when he’d first seen her. Then he’d wanted to throw her to the floor. Now he couldn’t wait long enough to carry her upstairs to bed.

Brad’s head roared with desire, his body strained with need. He stared at Betty’s stunning, passion-filled emerald eyes and was lost. All desire to think fled as Brad entered her. She was tight and wet and hot. Betty moaned in ecstasy and her head rolled from side to side. Her body rose to meet his hard, fast thrusts. The slippery friction between them pushed Brad to go higher, faster, even harder. He cupped one hand around Betty’s cheek and stroked her tenderly with his thumb. Brad used his other hand to hold himself above Betty so he could see her face, bask in her desire.

Their pace quickened, their bodies became slick. Brad watched Betty through slitted eyes, heard her gasps for air, felt her tremors building.

When he neared the peak he said, “Look at me.”

Betty forced her eyes open and he grinned. This was how he loved to see her, deep in the throes of passion, gasping, her body thrusting to meet his in a frantic need for completion. He traced under an eye with his thumb, drawing light, sensitive strokes.

As desperate as he was for release, he wanted Betty’s passion to be perfect, to peak with his. He saw a tear fall down her cheek and stroked it with wonder. How could he feel such passion and tenderness at the same time?

With guttural moans that filled the house, Brad and Betty rode wave after wave of erotic sensation until he couldn’t wait another moment.

Betty's body tightened, her hips rose off the couch and her eyes fluttered closed. Her face was wet with perspiration, giving her a hot glow. Her mouth had dropped open, her lips shining with wetness. The beauty of her, her need for him, pushed him to the brink and Brad gave her two hard and fast thrusts that sent them both over the edge. He shouted his glory as pulsing release throbbed through him. Betty contracted around him, over and over again. Her fingers dug into his back then tightened on his neck, as spasms racked her body. Once their bodies calmed, Brad shifted until Betty spooned him, then held her close. They lay tired and sated.

Awed at the power of their lovemaking, knowing it was because he truly loved Betty, Brad sent up a prayer of thanks that he'd bumped into this special woman on that flight all those months ago.

He hadn't been looking for love. Instead, he'd found the love of his life.

The union meeting was held at a hotel conference room, neutral territory for both parties. Betty sat in full uniform with her union base chairperson John Nicolo, waiting for the base manager and her secretary to arrive. They were a half-hour late and Betty bristled. If she were even a minute late to sign in for her flight she'd be written up. Why then didn't the same apply to a mandatory meeting called by the company?

"Peg ought to be written up for being late," Betty said to John. Peg Ralston was the base manager.

"Don't worry. Everything will be documented, even her tardiness."

Peg waltzed into the room. She was tall, stocky and wore a false smile on her face. Her frumpy brown, loose-fitting suit blended in with her mousy short brown hair, making Peg look almost invisible in the room. Betty knew she was in real trouble the minute the woman slapped some papers on the table in front of John.

Without a glance at Betty she said, "You're fired."

"What?" Betty rose from her chair, stunned. She thought she'd be disciplined, not fired.

John placed a firm hand on Betty's shoulder with enough pressure to have her sit back in the chair. "On what charges, Peg?"

The base manager glared at John, not Betty. “She has caused untold negative publicity for this airline, the flight attendant corps and LAX base. Mr. Dorfman is suing the airline for mental duress. We cannot have a flight attendant causing disruptions and speaking to passengers in the manner Ms. Hammond did.”

Betty’s mouth opened to say something but John spoke first.

“Betty Hammond is a model employee. She has never been late for a flight, she rarely calls in sick. She has never been fined by the FAA for any infraction and is coolheaded during emergencies. Why, if it weren’t for Betty there wouldn’t be a page in the flight attendant manual stating where all the AEDs are in every terminal we fly through.”

Betty had responded to an emergency inside the terminal at JFK a couple of years ago and hadn’t known where to get the AED. When she asked the TSA employees nearby, they hadn’t known either. They hadn’t even known what an AED was. Infuriated that the employees at the airport didn’t know what kind of emergency equipment they had available or where it was stored, she’d spoken to people at headquarters and they’d agreed that a revision to the flight attendant manual should be written and inserted into their inflight manuals that showed where each AED is in every airport they flew to. Not that it would help the airport employees, but if a crewmember saw an emergency as they walked through an airport terminal one flight attendant could help the passenger while another looked up where the AED was stored. Hopefully, the next passenger wouldn’t be without help if they were having a heart attack. As it was, the man she’d responded to had been having a seizure and the AED hadn’t been needed for that emergency, thankfully.

“Yes, there is that,” Peg said showing not one ounce of compassion. “Nevertheless, Ms. Hammond is fired. She and her celebrity boyfriend are not the kind of publicity this airline wants.”

Betty shot to her feet, rage pouring through her at the injustice. “I’m sure this airline doesn’t want any more negative publicity, Peg,” she said in a low, vibrating voice. “But how is it going to look when the paparazzi get hold of the fact that you have fired me for dating Bradley Moore? That’s what this boils down to and you know it. I have no control over what Bradley Moore will say to his publicist or the press. I’m sure this airline will be thrilled with the worldwide news your firing me will cause. This is a clear case of discrimination and you can bet the media will go ballistic with

the news.” Betty gulped in a huge breath. Her hands were balled into fists of fury. Her pulse pounded in her head and she swore she saw red. “No one in this company has the right to tell me who to date. No one. How would you feel if I told you to divorce your husband?”

Peg Ralston gave Betty a withering stare. “We are not talking about me, Ms. Hammond. You have your union to back you up, they have their procedures to follow.”

John spoke with calm and controlled syllables. “We will fight this to the fullest extent possible, Peg, starting with filing a grievance. I am also informing you that I will be instructing Betty to get a lawyer. The union will work in conjunction with her lawyer. If he or she says to take this to the media, then we will.” Peg opened her mouth to say something but John put his hand up to stop her. In a very quiet voice he said, “You have fired Betty for no good reason. You know it. We will prove it. And you personally will have made this airline a laughingstock.”

Betty saw Peg flinch. She felt no sympathy for the base manager. Anger had kept her standing. Betty put her hands flat on the table and leaned toward Peg. “How will it look to the world that you didn’t follow the necessary steps before termination? Where’s my first-step notification? My day to think about the error of my ways?” Betty grabbed John’s beefy hand and squeezed it. “No wonder we have a union at this airline. You, and I mean you personally, as well as the airline, treat us like expendable pieces of luggage.” With her head high, Betty turned to leave the room.

“Ms. Hammond,” Peg Ralston said. “What now, Peg?” Betty snapped.

The base manager put out her hand. “Your ID badge, equipment keys and manual. You are no longer allowed on company property.”

Betty cringed. She’d never been treated so badly, nor humiliated so thoroughly. “The manual’s in my suitcase in the car. I’ll give it to whomever escorts me to the parking lot. She handed over the ID badge and equipment keys, then left the room without a backward glance. A supervisor walked her to her car and got the manual.

She kept the tears bottled up until she got home. As soon as she closed the door she wrapped her arms around her waist, bent over and cried painful sobs.

Fifteen years down the drain.

And all because she had fallen in love.

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Publicity

An outraged Robert Wilson, of Wilson, Roe and Booth, one of the most notable law firms in the country, sat behind his desk with his long-time friend and client Bradley Moore facing him. Next to Bradley sat Betty Hammond and her union representative John Nicolo. They had just finished telling him why Betty had been fired from Global Airlines.

“That’s blatant discrimination and they know it. I’ll fry their asses!” Wilson said as he pounded his desk with a meaty fist. Wilson shoved his chair back, stood and leaned forward, placing two hands on the large cherry desk. A muscle twitched in his jaw, shifting his slight jowls back and forth. His dark, smallish eyes raked the three people sitting across from him. “The world will see what kind of airline Global really is. To take a hero flight attendant and fire her for who she dates is absurd.”

“Mr. Wilson,” John Nicolo said. “I’ve already discussed this with our union and they too feel this should go national, even worldwide. Global has a history of taking contract negotiations directly to the public and we think this is the perfect platform to use against them by following their own cutthroat tactics. We are willing and able to do as you ask.”

“Betty,” Wilson said, giving her a long, steady stare. “Are you ready for the intense media attention you’ll be getting? As soon as we notify the press you’ll be hounded. You won’t have a spare minute to yourself.”

Betty knees quivered. Thankful she had remained sitting she said, “I’ve had a small dose of media intrusion, Mr. Wilson. In order to get my job back I’ll do what it takes. Besides, the attention will be good for my diet.”

Robert Wilson’s mouth dropped open. Brad and John chuckled.

“I don’t understand how media attention relates to your diet, Ms. Hammond,” Wilson said. He paced behind his desk and pushed his rimless glasses up his nose.

“Nervous energy, Mr. Wilson.” Betty watched the man’s face cloud as he tried to figure out her train of thought. “It’ll help me lose the few pounds I’ve been toting around.”

“Oh,” Wilson said.

Obviously, he didn’t get Betty’s sense of humor. She felt a little sorry for him and got right to the point. “I’ll deal with the attention, Mr. Wilson.”

“Good,” Wilson said. “Harriett!” he boomed. “Get me Anderson Cooper from CNN.”

The secretary stuck her head into the office. All Betty saw was the flash of a white cap of hair, sprayed into some kind of mid-century style. The woman muttered something and disappeared.

“Robert,” Brad said, “what do you recommend Betty does once the news comes out?”

“Barricade herself for a while,” Wilson laughed at his own joke. “Let the tempest turn into a fury. Then go out and charm the shit out of the press.” He turned to Betty. “I saw your interview right after the airplane crash, you were magnificent! The paparazzi already loves you, Betty. All you have to do is play the innocent wounded employee. They’ll lap it up and you’ll ride the waves of success.”

Betty nodded. She knew this would catapult her into the limelight even more than dating Brad had done. She inhaled a deep breath and stood, praying her legs would hold steady. “Well, I guess that’s it for this meeting. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.” Betty shook the man’s hand, almost wincing from his strong grip. She forced a smile and turned to Brad and John. “Guess we’d better plan our next step. Pow wow at my home?”

“We’ll have to do it by Zoom or FaceTime, Betty,” John said. “I need to get back to the union about this meeting.” He grabbed his coat from the back of the chair he’d been sitting in. “Give me a call around five this evening. And don’t worry, Wilson and the union have your back.” With a smile and a wave John left Robert Wilson’s office.

ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, AP and even Bloomberg had a feeding frenzy the next day. That night Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, and all the late-night hosts made jokes about Global Airlines. The airline had become the laughingstock of the world in less than twenty-four hours.

Betty was inundated with so many calls her voicemail box filled and stopped taking messages. With the union's approval and help from Robert Wilson she fielded what calls she could. Finally, she hired publicist Velma Lewis to deal with it.

A week of captivity went by as Betty waited for the storm to abate, but it didn't. She felt trapped in her home with news vans camped all along her street. Her neighbors hadn't minded at first, giving interviews and getting their fifteen minutes of fame. But as the week stretched into infinity, they began to complain that their quiet neighborhood was no more.

They were right, but Betty didn't know what to do about it. Finally, an idea popped into her head and she called Brad.

"Hi, sweetheart," Brad said when he answered the phone. "How's the fairest barricaded maiden in the land?"

She loved hearing his voice. The warmth that came over the line sent a delicious chill up her spine. She hoped he wouldn't mind her idea. "Oh, kind sir, this maiden needs to be rescued from the big bad wolf. He is pounding down my door," she said in a childlike voice. "If I put on my red cape, will you send someone to pick me up and take me away from it all?"

Brad laughed with delight and lowered his voice. "Only if you wear nothing under that cape, fair maiden. It's the silk one, right? The one that clings to your breasts and slides along your body, getting trapped between your legs?"

Betty's heart hammered at Brad's playful tone and sexy words. She pictured his hands clinging to and sliding along her body, molding to her breasts, touching, and teasing her nipples. She'd never talked dirty over the phone and was shocked at how turned-on she was by his words. Desire rushed through her so fast she was caught off-guard and sank to her couch.

All playfulness gone, Betty said, "God, I need you. I miss you. Can I come stay with you for a while? My neighbors are upset with all of the commotion and want their quiet neighborhood back." She decided to be bold for the first time in her life and give as good as she got. "I'm lonely,

bored and in dire need of your fingers between my legs, stroking and stimulating me. I want to wrap my hand around your penis until it's hard and throbbing. I want to make you come." She heard Brad suck in his breath. Good. She'd given as good as she got. A feeling of triumph elated Betty. Talking sexy was fun! Before he could respond she added, "Plus, I want to uproot your quiet neighborhood for a while."

A strangled chuckle escaped Brad. "I'll send the limo with a bodyguard to help you get out of your house. My neighborhood is used to periodic disruptions, what with me in their midst. I can't wait to see you. Pack for a while. A long while."

Relief fought with need and flooded Betty. She was going to stay with Brad! With a new resolve, she found strength in her legs to stand and raced up the stairs to pack. "Thank you. I can't wait to see you." She reached the top of the stairs and jogged into her bedroom.

"I think what you mean is you can't wait to jump my bones," Brad laughed.

"Really, Brad," Betty said primly as she pulled a suitcase out of the closet. "What kind of knight says his distressed maiden is going to jump his bones? You could have at least said I was going to bring you to heights of passion you've never known or...taken you on the ride of a lifetime or...popped the lid on your rod to release your elixir of love."

Brad laughed so hard Betty had to hold the phone away from her ear. "Hurry up and get here, fair maiden. I've missed you."

"I await your chariot." Betty smiled. "And I miss you too."

The week had been wonderful. Betty loved staying with Brad. He was in preproduction for a new movie and had meetings with the producer. Some of them lasted all day. When he was home, he spoiled her. At night he gave Betty his undivided attention. They cooked together, listened to music, watched TV, and even snuck out to the movies once.

The paparazzi found them after one day so now they were camped out on Brad's street. Betty had called a couple of her neighbors and they were very happy she'd left for a while. At first, she felt offended but when she analyzed the situation, she understood their feelings.

“Let’s go shopping,” Brad said one morning. They had finished breakfast and were sipping their coffees while reading the newspaper.

“You think we should? We’ll be followed and hounded.”

“Exactly!” Brad jumped up from the kitchen table and pulled Betty with him. “Go make yourself your prettiest.” He pulled her to his chest, wound his arms around her and kissed her long and hard. His drawn-out sigh of contentment told Betty how happy Brad was to have her with him.

Betty knees dissolved. When the kiss ended she said, “Now how am I supposed to get ready? My legs feel like cooked spaghetti. Go away and leave me be.” She playfully pushed him out of her way. With a smile on her face, Betty knew she’d find a way to get him back, she just didn’t know how or where...yet.

It turned out they had two hours before the press found them. The mall was crowded with shoppers that Sunday morning. Brad wore a blue baseball cap to cover his face, a blue-gray sweater, jeans, and loafers. Betty wore slimming black slacks, low heels, a lavender blouse, and silver jewelry. During that time, they went to Nordstrom, Macy’s, and a boutique shop. Betty bought a dress, two blouses and a pair of jeans. She refused to let Brad pay, wanting to be independent and self-sufficient.

Brad bought her a gift when she was in a dressing room at Nordstrom. He had it wrapped and when Betty came out of the dressing room, he waved it in her face.

“Oh! What is it?” Betty asked. The box was about a foot square and three inches high. Beautiful pink, purple and white-flowered wrapping paper covered it and white sparkly ribbon had been tied in a simple bow.

Brad grinned and stepped back. “Oh no you don’t. I won’t tell you a thing about this gift. You have to earn it.” He said it like the man in the old commercial that sold financial services years ago on television. “Lucy has promised me she won’t tell you anything and I bribed her with enough money not to tell the press.” He smiled at the young woman behind the register, who laughed with delight at Brad’s antics as she waved a twenty-dollar bill in the air.

Forcing a frown, Betty glared at the woman. But she couldn’t quite hold it, her lips quirked up at the corners. “That old saying about finding good help seems to apply right now.” She snatched the box out of Brad’s hands. He was genuinely surprised because he’d been watching the interplay between Betty and Lucy. “Hey! That’s mine.”

The box was very light. Betty wondered if it was a joke because she didn't think anything was inside. "Sorry, chum. Mine," Betty said like a three-year-old.

"Ms. Hammond," Lucy said. "I can't be bought. Er, now that I've been bought by Mr. Moore, I can't be bought again." They all laughed when Lucy held up the twenty. She gave it back to Brad and he nodded his thanks for the conspiracy.

"What's in the bag, Betty?"

They turned to see a female reporter and her cameraman standing behind them.

"A secret," Betty said quietly. The woman leaned forward, anticipation written on her face. Betty could tell that the woman thought she would scoop the other reporters about a gift Brad had bought her but Betty didn't elaborate. After a long pause the reporter sighed in defeat and said, "While I have you all to myself may I get your feelings about your being fired, Betty?"

Here we go, Betty thought. Robert Wilson and John Nicolo had told her what she could say so she said it. "My attorney and my union speak for me. Since this is an ongoing case, I can't say too much but obviously, I'm not happy about it."

The woman turned to Brad. "Mr. Moore? Ever since you started dating Betty her life has been turned upside down. Do you think that's fair?"

Betty saw Brad's brow furrow and his face showed a slight redness. He didn't like the question. She put her hand on Brad's arm to stop him from speaking when his mouth opened. "Excuse me, Miss... May we have your name?"

The woman turned to Betty exasperated that she had stopped Brad from speaking. "My name is Sonja Lee, from CBS."

"Ms. Lee," Betty said with a smile. "It's very nice to meet you." She took a breath. "I have a wonderful father who always told me that life isn't fair. He was right. I've learned that fair is a quality that's different to all people. What's not fair to you might be completely fair to me. Your use of the word in conjunction with my dating Brad is neither here nor there. Brad is a wonderful, kind, funny person. He respects me. Yes, my life has changed. Any time a woman meets a man and she begins to date, her life changes. Hopefully for the better." Betty stepped next to Brad and took his hand in hers. She knew the camera would focus on their entwined fingers.

“Never have I been happier. Brad is a gentleman and treats me like a lady. How many women wouldn’t change their lives for that?”

There was a moment of silence then Lucy clapped. “Bravo! You rock, Betty!”

The young reporter didn’t know if she had just been put down or not. She frowned at Betty. “So, you’re saying that you don’t mind the press dogging your every move?”

Betty grinned. “No, I’m not saying that. I relish my privacy, as I’m sure you do. But I know that dating Brad is not the normal relationship most people have. I accept that. I hope that you, as a member of the press, respect that I need some time alone. Right now, things are in flux from the loss of my job. Once that straightens out, I will find my new normal and be happy for all the blessings in my life.”

By then a group of reporters swarmed around Betty, Brad, and the others. They shouted questions and shoved microphones in their faces.

“Betty! Who hates you so much at your airline that you were fired?”

“Betty! Why are you holding a press conference in the women’s department of this store?”

“Betty! Are you going to sue your airline for wrongful termination?”

Betty held up her hand. There were probably twenty reporters crowding her at the moment and she’d backed into the counter behind her. Lucy stepped behind the register. “Please direct those questions to my attorney, Mr. Robert Wilson of Wilson, Roe and Booth.”

“Now, ladies and gentlemen,” Brad said with a wide smile, “we must be going. Betty and I have a date for lunch. Thank you in advance for letting us dine in privacy.”

With a wave to Lucy, Brad took Betty’s hand and pulled her through the crowd. Surprisingly, the reporters were respectful and parted to let them through. They left the mall and went to a little Italian restaurant Brad knew. Once they settled in with glasses of Chianti, they both heaved sighs of relief.

“Once again you were superb,” Brad said. “You have them eating out of your hand.”

Betty’s hand shook from delayed reaction. “Thank you.” She really didn’t like the notoriety.

Brad leaned forward and took Betty’s free hand. “It bothered you, didn’t it? You didn’t show it, but it bothered you.”

“Yes.” She sighed again and took a large sip of wine. “I’ve always been a very private person, Brad. I have a few special friends. I can count them on one hand. They mean the world to me. But I’m not accustomed to socializing in large crowds. Plus, I know the paparazzi can be totally disrespectful to a celebrity, which I guess I now am. I’ve read horror stories about stars being run off the road, followed, stalked and even having their homes broken into.” She didn’t say the rest. The part where she didn’t want that kind of recognition. She had it now and had to deal with it knowing it wasn’t going away.

He gave her a sympathetic glance then took her hand in his. Stroking the soft skin between her thumb and forefinger, Brad sipped his Chianti before he spoke. “Do you regret meeting me?”

“No!” Betty put her glass on the table a bit too hard and the liquid sloshed over the side. “Never, Brad. I love you. I wouldn’t have found this kind of love if you hadn’t blundered into me on the airplane. I thank God every day that we met.”

Betty knew her words startled Brad. He looked humbled, as if he didn’t know what to say. After a long pause he gave her a small, crooked smile then pushed his chair back. Without looking around to see if anyone was watching, he leaned over the table and kissed her.

Brad kissed her hard and firm, his tongue tasting hers. Betty moaned out loud. She couldn’t think, lost complete awareness of her surroundings. The kiss was short but powerful. His lips tasted like wine with a hint of sweetness. One hand cupped her chin in a delicate, soft caress. The caress didn’t last long, but left lasting heat rushing through her. How could she regret meeting this man?

When Brad sat back onto his chair and took a pull of his wine, she gulped a few breaths to calm her racing pulse. No man had ever moved the earth beneath her and Brad seemed to do it on a regular, if unexpected, basis.

They finished their pastas and hurried home. Brad wanted Betty to open her gift. She unwrapped the beautiful box to find matching shimmery pink silk underpants and a demi-bra with lace on top of the cups. The intimate wear was stunning. It must have cost Brad a fortune. Betty had never owned anything so beautiful. “Thank you, Brad.” She fingered the material and watched it shimmer through her fingers. “These are lovely.”

Betty saw the wary amusement on Brad's face as her fingers kept touching the soft, slippery material. He didn't think she liked it and his next words proved it.

"You don't like it?"

She knew he would take it back if she didn't. "I love it. I'm...I'm just not sure how to react. I've never had anything so, so...sexy before." Her voice fell to a whisper. Betty had always thought of herself as average, pretty but average. Touching the garments made her feel sensuous, naughty. She hadn't felt so feminine in years. The gift meant that Brad saw her as a beautiful, sexy woman, and Betty couldn't remember when—or if—any man had ever made her feel that way.

"I sense a hesitation on your part. What bothers you about the garments, Betty?"

She gave him a self-deprecating grin and heaved a long sigh. "I've never thought of myself as sexy and these slinky pieces are the epitome of raw, hard sex."

Brad moaned. Without a word he picked up the panties and bra, grabbed Betty's hand and dragged her into his bedroom. "Undress," he ordered.

Betty laughed a bit nervously. "What?"

Brad didn't seem to hear the hesitation in Betty's voice. He was too busy stripping off his jeans and sweater. "Now, Betty. I can't wait another second."

The urgency in his voice had her reaching for the buttons on her blouse. Brad stood up with a deep groan, naked and fully aroused. His hard and pulsing erection pointed straight at her, as if daring her to join him. Betty sucked in a breath at the beauty and power of him. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons and clasps she had to undo as she undressed. He walked awkwardly toward her and moved her hands away from her clothes. With impatient fingers Brad shed her clothes until she stood before him in her underwear. He kissed her as he unsnapped the front closure on her bra and slipped her panties down her slender legs.

Brad touched and kissed and slowly stroked every square inch of her. With light fingers he tantalized the insides of her legs, drawing his fingers down to her ankles, slowly, then back up again. Betty quivered as he reached behind and grabbed the silk panties from the bed. He lifted one of her legs and pulled the panties up over her ankle.

He kissed the delicate bone that tempted him, then repositioned her foot and lifted the other so he could pull the shimmery silk up her legs.

Betty almost fell to her knees. Her legs wobbled, so weak they wouldn't hold her up much longer. Brad's hands and mouth drove her crazy. Her every fantasy was coming true. She was wild with need. Her breath caught in her throat, helpless cries came from her mouth and desperate desire drove her to unbearable passion. Once Brad pulled the panties over her hips, he lowered her to the bed and stroked her clitoris through the silk, rubbing, sending her higher and higher. Then he knelt next to her and sucked the tight nub into his mouth, wetting the thin material. Betty gasped and moaned, crazed with burning desire.

Never in her life had she thought she'd be so turned on by someone putting clothes on her. She wriggled and twisted, beyond desperate, nearing orgasm. She prayed the panties would come off soon.

But Brad wouldn't stop his relentless assault.

He moved up her body, his hands stroking her tiny waist and the sensitive indentation where her bellybutton was. He slowly moved toward her breasts. She didn't know when he grabbed the bra but with strong hands, he slipped the bra on her and latched the front clasp. Her breasts came together, showing cleavage and voluptuous mounds. Brad stroked his finger down the valley between her breasts then lightly touched a nipple. The sensation was so light, almost as if he hadn't touched her, but feeling burned through her body and her back arched off the bed. Her hips moved up and down and Betty rubbed Brad's penis between her legs. His erection teased and stroked her slit, hard and ready to enter her. Using the same movements, he had used with the panties, Brad sucked one nipple through the thin material, wetting the silk and causing a friction that Betty had never felt before. Brad suckled her nipple and blew on the material, the cold air tightening the bud. She moaned, twisting on the bed, her legs hanging over the sides.

Betty pulled Brad to her and fumbled for his erection. She needed release. Desperately. Right now. One of Brad's hands hastily pushed down the bra and cupped her breast. His mouth sucked the other nipple through the silk. She thrashed and moaned as she guided Brad inside her. He never let go of her nipple, never took his mouth away from the wet, torturous silk. Betty set a frantic pace, craving the release that only Brad could give her.

“You feel so good. So hot,” Brad murmured in a rough voice. He met her thrust for thrust then finally let go of her nipple and threw his head back in a male roar. Betty strained toward the edge, nearly at the peak, desperate for release. Her ragged breaths matched his, her slick skin slid against his wet, slippery body. The scent of love filled the room.

Brad bent down and nipped her nipple, silk bra and all, and Betty’s body reacted like lightning had touched her. She reared up, her eyes widened, then narrowed to passion-filled slits. She wrapped her arms around Brad’s neck, clinging to the one man who had ever made her feel beautiful, cherished.

Betty reached the summit when Brad kissed her. His tongue found hers and sucked it. The pulling sensation reached every part of her body and Betty flew over the top, riding wave after wave of powerful contractions. The guttural groan of relief that slipped out didn’t even sound like her.

Even through her release Betty felt Brad’s powerful orgasm. His muscles tightened to rigidity for a long moment then he spilled into her and her world dimmed to black for a brief moment. He growled his pleasure as Betty contracted around him over and over again.

Once the spasms quieted Brad held her close then kissed her tenderly on her forehead.

Every celebrity magazine ran pictures of Brad and Betty. They were photographed at movie premieres, quiet dinners with friends and even once through the picture window in Brad’s house. They felt lucky if they made a trip to the supermarket without being followed.

Betty’s first hearing was set for the next day. She’d been out of work for two months. She had no pay coming in and had applied for unemployment. She barely had enough to make her mortgage payments and paying for COBRA healthcare almost put her into bankruptcy. Betty felt lucky she had no credit card debt or car payments to worry about. Brad paid for food most of the time. Betty told him she’d pay him back. He brushed it off but Betty wouldn’t feel right if she didn’t repay his kindness.

She wore a new navy suit to the hearing. She looked professional, like a flight attendant, even down to the matching shoes and purse. The hotel near

the airport was mobbed with reporters. Betty walked through the crowd with her head high, surrounded by her attorney, Robert Wilson, and a couple of bodyguards Brad had hired for the day. With reporters shouting questions and her attorney muttering in her ear not to answer them, Betty smiled and nodded to the press. When she reached the room where the members of the airline, her union and Robert Wilson would be holding the meeting, she turned to the press.

“Betty, what are you doing?” Wilson muttered into her ear. “Keep going inside.”

Betty put her hand on Robert’s arm and said, “No, Robert, these people have a right to ask their questions. I’m going to give them a short statement.”

“Wait until after the hearing.”

“I’ll speak then too.” Betty held up her hand and waited for the group to quiet down. It didn’t take long. The more she dealt with the press the more they realized that she wouldn’t speak until everyone had quieted. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here to support me.” Betty knew they were only there for the sensationalism. They couldn’t have cared less if she won or lost. She figured they probably wanted her to lose so they could sell more papers, more space on TV, radio and on the internet. “I know you’re all concerned for my career, as I am.” She heard a few chuckles near her. “My fifteen-year career will show my commitment to this airline. Let’s hope that Global Airlines will be fair and honest with me today.”

She turned, opened the door, and escaped inside without answering any questions.

Five people sat at a table facing the room. The company’s lawyer sat next to another man, probably an executive. Two union representatives, one from headquarters and the local base chairperson, John Nicolo, glared at the executives. A neutral arbitrator rounded out the group. Each had a stack of papers in front of them. Betty and Robert Wilson took seats.

Betty’s hands shook and were sweaty. She had never been through anything like this before. Betty’s whole life had consisted of following the rules, playing it safe and not getting into trouble. This scene was completely out of character for her and she felt her breath back up in her throat with fear.

She hadn’t realized how much she wanted to keep her job. There were days when she grumbled that she might retire, but being a flight attendant

had been the only job she'd ever wanted. To have it ripped away for no good reason was something she'd never considered. Betty had always pictured the grand retirement party filled with a room full of balloons and friends.

"This hearing will determine whether flight attendant Betty Hammond has done irreparable harm to Global Airlines in the form of negative publicity resulting from a passenger encounter with Mr. Charles Dorfman," the Global Airlines lawyer read in a bored voice from the papers in front of him. "After reviewing the documents here, do you have anything to say about your behavior, Ms. Hammond?"

Betty had been prepped for this hearing. "Mr. Dorfman insulted me by calling me a tart and telling me I should lose a few pounds. I responded with sweetness and never once insulted him. There were witnesses to the exchange who I know you have interviewed. I have never abused sick time, I am prompt and have only missed one trip in my fifteen years of flying. I'm responsible, deal with emergencies with quick, decisive action and help little old ladies get their wheelchairs." Betty took a quick breath. "In conclusion, I am a very good flight attendant for Global Airlines."

The men at the table glanced at their notes. The shuffling of papers sounded loud in the quiet room. Betty heard the heat cycle on in the hotel conference room and clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

"Why were you in the aft galley, Ms. Hammond?" the arbitrator asked.

"I'd gone back to visit my friends. I hadn't seen them in a while and I wanted to catch up on their lives."

"Weren't you needed in first class?"

"No. The lunch service was over and I had about two hours until I needed to serve cookies before landing."

Her union representative from headquarters didn't say anything. Betty didn't really know why he was there, except to witness the hearing.

In quiet undertones the men at the table discussed their notes. The union representative from headquarters and John Nicolo argued with the men, shaking their heads, and pointing to the papers in front of them. Finally, the lawyer for Global Airlines stood up. "The ruling stands. Ms. Hammond is fired."

Betty gasped. They had been in the room all of ten minutes. She pushed her chair back from the table and stood. "That's it? No more questions? Please tell me how you consider this a fair hearing."

“Betty,” Robert Wilson said. “Don’t say another word.”

John Nicolo took her arm gently. “Betty, the company always turns down a first- level hearing. I told you that. It’s their way of showing how much power they have. It also forces the union to spend more money. Let’s go. This was the expected outcome.”

Betty knew the expected outcome. She hadn’t realized how much she’d been hoping that her case would be the exception. She couldn’t leave without one last word.

“Gentlemen.” She gave each man at the table a blinding smile and her full attention for a long moment. “I wish to thank you for your kind, impartial and fair hearing today. It proves to me that this company does truly have a heart and cares about its employees. I wish you the best in your endeavors and hope to meet some other fair and impartial judges just like you at my next hearing. Good day.”

The media went wild. Global Airlines’ reputation was ripped to shreds. Betty became the nationwide symbol for the underdog and people all around the world sent emails to support her. Global Airlines had an immediate and alarming drop in passenger traffic. Those that did fly on the airline publicly ripped it to shreds, saying what bullies they were and stated that they only flew on the airline because their tickets had already been purchased and were nonrefundable.

After two days Global Airlines came out with a statement that said Betty had been reinstated with full back pay. What they didn’t say was she’d been put on an indefinite leave of absence pending another hearing.

That mollified some. Still, the blog world went crazy in support of Betty Hammond.

Reputation

Jolie Kensington wasn't happy. The World War II movie she'd done with Brad, *Between Heaven and Hell*, had flopped. Actually, it was a critical flop but did well at the box office. It seemed that anything Bradley Moore touched turned to box office gold. She hadn't heard from him since the premiere, when he'd brought that little slut stewardess with him. Jolie cringed when she remembered the way the press fawned over Betty Hammond. She didn't realize she'd snarled at that thought until she heard the growl come out of her throat.

Jolie paced the living room of her expensive condo and wondered how she'd be able to afford living here. She only had enough money for three months' rent.

She had a gambling problem.

She hid it well. But she gambled online late at night and into the early morning hours. She went to Las Vegas when she could and stayed the weekend in luxury, thanks to the complimentary rooms she earned with casino points.

But she'd gotten in deep and needed someone to bail her out before the loan sharks came after her. Someone rich. Someone handsome. Someone very generous.

Someone like Bradley Moore.

Jolie creamed her face and scrutinized it. Not a wrinkle anywhere. Thank you, Botox. Young enough to not need plastic surgery, not like that old sky hag Bradley dated. In her saner moments Jolie knew Betty wasn't old but she was older than her and that's what counted. She shuddered every time she saw Betty's wrinkled face. Who didn't use Botox nowadays? Thinking of beautiful faces, she smiled at her reflection in the brightly lit mirror and decided she was due for a teeth whitening. Her perfectly straight teeth were one of her top priorities. After finishing her nightly ritual, she pushed away from the makeup mirror. She needed to get Bradley Moore into her life. But how?

As soon as she felt the frown on her forehead Jolie released her concern and smoothed away the wrinkles with her fingers. She jumped up from the stool in a nervous burst of energy and paced her three-thousand-square-foot condo. She didn't see the stunning Pacific Ocean sparkling like diamonds outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, or the beige and sea foam professionally decorated interior. She saw absolute destruction of her life, dire financial consequences, a total ruination of her acting career and the very real possibility of a rearranged face.

She couldn't tolerate the thought of a face change. She had to do something.

Pouring a glass of Riesling, she pondered her problem. Then it hit her like a wave pounding the sand. Jolie drained her wine and laughed out loud.

She had the perfect plan.

As Brad tied the knot in his tie for the meeting, he wondered why Jolie had called it. They were done with the film and he was done with her. He was glad to have put *Between Heaven and Hell* behind him, he never would work with her again. She was spoiled, whiny and abrasive. Call times didn't apply to Jolie. She kept everyone waiting until she was good and ready to come to the set. He grimaced and patted the Windsor knot. Perfect. He wouldn't have dressed so formally in a black tux, white shirt with French cuffs and black wingtips polished to perfection, but he was taking Betty to a premiere after the three o'clock meeting with Jolie.

He couldn't wait to be with Betty. She grounded him, made him feel normal. He laughed with her and loved her. So much it hurt. Brad had never fallen this hard for a woman before, especially one not in the entertainment industry.

He almost didn't go to the meeting. He hadn't seen much of Betty between her trying to get her job back and his meetings. He thanked God she was living with him now, at least they could see each other in the evenings. And what evenings they'd had. Even the quiet ones at home were fantastic. He could lounge around in sweats, watch movies, and eat popcorn with her and not worry that he had to show her a fancy time out. He almost felt as if Betty had been living with him for years. With any other woman that would have scared him to death, but with Betty he felt warm and safe, comfortable.

Brad dragged his thoughts away from Betty and focused on the meeting with Jolie. He'd chosen a very public place to meet her due to Jolie's tendency to make a scene. He hoped the hottest restaurant in Beverly Hills, famous for thick steaks, sweet lobster with drawn butter and crab cakes—would keep her from acting up. The bar inside the restaurant was the “in” place to be seen.

Something in Jolie's voice had touched Brad. She'd sounded a bit desperate, almost scared. He didn't know what that was about, but figured he'd give her ten minutes to explain then be on his way.

The restaurant was packed when he arrived. Brad parked with the valet and walked into the bar. Many A-list actors sat at tables holding power lunches with their agents, producers, or other actor friends. He saw Brad Pitt, George Clooney, and Julia Roberts at different tables. He nodded and said hello on his way to the bar. Jolie sat on a high stool, making sure her long, slim legs were displayed to perfection. He pulled up the stool next to her and ordered a glass of red wine.

“What's up, Jolie?”

She placed her hand on his arm. He wanted to pull it away, but wouldn't be that rude. Her blood-red nails looked like claws, and he hoped she wouldn't dig into him.

“Thank you for coming, Brad. I hope I'm not interrupting something.” Jolie sipped her mojito and placed it on the cocktail napkin on the counter.

“Betty and I are going to a premiere tonight. I only have a few minutes.” Jolie's hand tightened on Brad's arm. This time he did pull away,

but he covered it by taking a sip of his wine. He hid a smile when he saw Jolie grit her teeth. She placed one hand on her forehead, her fingers absently rubbing away a headache. Consummate acting, Brad thought. Why hadn't she acted that well on set?

"I wonder if you'd do me a really big favor, Brad." She leaned closer, glanced around the bar to make sure nobody paid them any attention, which to Brad meant she wanted every eye in the room on her, then touched the side of his face. "It needs to be kept very quiet."

Brad sat back, putting distance between them. He knew she'd touched him to make it look as if they were a couple. "What's so hush-hush?" How quiet could she keep it if she talked to him at the hottest restaurant in town?

Jolie giggled, trying to sound lighthearted, but it grated on Brad's nerves. He glanced at his watch. The ten minutes were up. With his patience running out, he raised one eyebrow and waited for her to say what was on her mind.

"This may seem silly, but would you escort me to a function next Saturday night? I really need a strong man to be there with me."

Brad cursed inwardly. He knew that refusing her would cause a fit. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm sorry, Jolie. I'm dating Betty and don't want the paparazzi to get the wrong idea. Isn't there anyone else who can help you?" He glanced at someone who'd entered the bar and smiled. The producer of his next movie had just arrived with his latest young starlet. Now he had an excuse to leave. The man walked over to them and introduced his friend.

"Hello, Brad, I'd like to introduce you to Sasha McFadden. Sasha, Bradley Moore."

The young woman almost swooned. "Oh! Mr. Moore. I'm sooo glad to meet you. Why, you're a legend." She let out a high-pitched giggle and turned to her date. "Oh, Tommy, thank you. I never thought I'd meet someone so famous."

Brad hoped his cringe didn't show. Thomas Brennan was the biggest producer in the business right now, and famous for his young starlets. Most never saw the inside of a movie studio, but he promised them the moon and they fell into his bed, hoping to be the next world-renowned actress.

While Brad talked to Thomas, he didn't notice Jolie pour a powder into his wine.

Brad finished talking to his producer and stood up, turning to Jolie. "I'm sorry I can't help you, Jolie. I've really got to run. Have a nice evening." He glanced at the wine but figured there'd be more of that at the premiere afterparty and left it on the counter. "Tom, I'll see you later in the week at the next preproduction meeting." With a nod to the small group standing there, he left the bar.

Brad waited for his car, relieved to be away from Jolie and excited to see Betty. The bartender raced up to him, panting slightly from the exertion.

"Mr. Moore?"

Brad turned. "Yes, Joe. What can I do for you?"

Joe glanced around to make sure no one was within hearing distance. "I wanted you to know that it was a good thing you didn't touch your wine. Ms. Kensington slipped something into it when you weren't looking."

"What?"

"I took the liberty of pouring the wine into a small, sealable container. You might want to have it analyzed somewhere." Joe handed him a plastic container.

Fury roiled through Brad. His whole body tensed. The hand not holding the drugged wine balled into a fist.

The scheming little bitch.

He thanked Joe. "I owe you for this."

"I saw her do it, and if you'd reached for the glass I would have spoken up. As it was, since you didn't, I wanted you to know what happened. If you ever press charges and need me to be a witness, count me in."

"Thanks, Joe. You're a lifesaver. If there's anything you need, let me know." Brad gave the bartender his card and patted him on his shoulder. His car arrived and he climbed in. As he drove to pick up Betty, he wondered what he'd do about Jolie's scheming little trick.

By the time he got home Brad had reached a full boil. He entered the living room and grabbed for the closest phone. After dialing a friend of his father's and speaking to him for a short while, he slammed down the phone.

Betty came into the living room, having just finished getting dressed, and asked, "Is everything all right?"

Brad turned and his anger fled in the face of her beauty. He drank in the long, slimming red dress, matching strappy red sandals and tasteful, sparkling silver jewelry. Betty looked stunning. He got up from the couch and pulled her into an embrace. She was exactly what he needed after the

meeting with Jolie. Betty's honesty, goodness and kindness washed away the film of anger that had been with him on his drive home. After kissing her lightly on her lips—not enough to mess up her lipstick, but enough to soak in her taste and scent—he stroked her chin. The velvety softness of her skin called to him and his body tightened in anticipation. He hardened and strained the tux pants, shifting his legs wider to accommodate his swollen penis. Amazed that even though they were living together, he needed her so desperately, he left his hand next to her chin, needing the extra moment to be thankful he'd found her. With a mental shove he pushed his desire for her away and prayed his erection would subside by the time they left the house. “You are gorgeous. That dress is perfect. I'm so glad I met you.”

Betty smiled. Her fingers played with the lapels of Brad's tux. “You are the most handsome man on earth. I couldn't be happier that you found me. I know something is wrong though. Want to tell me about it?”

Brad did. Betty was furious on his behalf. “She tried to drug you?”

Hearing those words out loud were enough to douse the flame raging through his body. Anger replaced lust and Brad needed a minute to tamp down his feelings. “Yes. I called a friend of my dad's who still has connections at a police lab. He's coming over to get the container of liquid and take it to be analyzed. He's going to do it under his name. I'm sure Joe is right, but I want the name of the drug she used so I can confront her about it when the time is right.”

“My God, Brad. Why would she do something like that? That's the action of a desperate woman. And why you?”

“I can only guess she wanted to get me in a compromising situation. She hates that I don't fawn over her like the other male actors she works with.”

Betty watched Brad pace the living room. “If you don't want to go to the premiere I understand.”

Brad's head snapped up. “Oh, we're going, sweetheart. We are going to make the biggest splash, have every photographer take our picture, and show Jolie Kensington she can't compromise me. She will see our picture in every rag magazine and I will be kissing you, touching you and desperately wanting to ravish you.” Amazed that his feelings were so swiftly changing, first anger then desire then anger again and now hot lust, Brad pulled Betty against him and rolled a nipple between his fingers. She moaned, the nipple stiffened and she reached down to cup his penis. He

couldn't take another moment before taking her to bed. Brad stepped away and said, "I want you right now. Desperately." His words were said between gasps. "But if I make love to you, we won't make the premiere and I want to show Jolie how much I love and admire you. I want to show you off and piss her off."

Betty laughed. "I'm thrilled to see your humor and determination restored for the time being." She straightened her bodice and smoothed her skirt before slipping her arm through the crook of his. "Now, kind sir, take me to the premiere. I'm ready to be displayed for nefarious purposes as long as you buy me cheap and cheerful drinks. Did I tell you I was a cheap date?"

Brad snorted with laughter. "Cheap and cheerful. You'd think we were going to a pizza parlor that served beer and wine."

"I'm happy to go wherever you go. Pizza parlor or premiere. I don't need fancy drinks. I just need you," Betty said in a moment of seriousness.

Once again, she'd humbled him. Every time she did that was unexpected and tender. A lump formed in his throat. Because he couldn't speak for a moment Brad pulled her close for a tight hug. With a quick kiss to her beautiful forehead Brad led Betty out of the house and into the waiting limo.

The paparazzi went crazy when they arrived at the premiere. Flashes blinded them, questions were shouted. Brad steered Betty to a reporter he had a great rapport with. David Menning was a fair reporter, always making sure he had the facts before putting a story out to the public.

"Bradley Moore and his lovely Betty Hammond," Menning said into his microphone. The cameraman moved away to get full-length shots of Brad's and Betty's outfits for his viewers. "What are you working on right now, Brad?"

Brad smiled for the cameras and pulled Betty closer to his side. "I'm in preproduction for a new thriller with producers Bentley Cummings and Thomas Brennan."

"And what are you doing now, Betty?" The microphone swung from Brad to Betty.

She smiled at David. "Not much," she laughed. "I'm sorting through my options. In the meantime, I'm taking a much-needed leave of absence from flying."

"Didn't you get your job back with Global Airlines?" Menning asked.

“Oh yes. But I’m still dealing with some residual effects from being thrown out of an airplane,” Betty rolled her right shoulder, “and I’m reevaluating priorities regarding Global right now.”

Menning jumped on that statement. “Does that mean you are going to sue Global for being fired?”

Betty laughed and smiled at the reporter. “Oh, I already did that. I can’t say more at this time but as soon as I make up my mind, I’ll let you know.”

“Will that be an exclusive, Betty?” Menning asked.

Betty glanced at Brad, who gave her a small nod. “It is. I promise.”

“Great to see you again, Brad. You and Betty have a wonderful time at the premiere. Oh, Betty, who are you wearing today?”

Betty did her version of a runway model and turned. It wasn’t very graceful but she didn’t trip. Brad knew she’d been practicing that move for a week and was supremely grateful for her sake she hadn’t fallen flat on her face. “Oscar de la Renta. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

During the past month Betty had been offered custom-designed dresses from the biggest designers. Brad loved the dress she’d chosen, her first of many to come. He smiled as he thought of how many times she’d commented that she couldn’t believe she wore a famous designer’s dress and it was free. What dream world was she living in right now?

His world. He was so happy she lived in his world.

“You look marvelous, Betty.” Menning glanced over her shoulder. His eyes lit up and he bounced on his feet. “Oh, Brad Pitt is right behind you. Gotta go.”

The reporter stepped away and waylaid the celebrity. Brad laughed and pulled Betty close so she could hear what he was saying. “You were great. We’ll finish this red carpet and take our seats.” They walked up the red carpet a few more steps then were surrounded by a crowd of people trying to move toward the entrance to the movie theater. “Now it’s time to put our plan into effect. Don’t be nervous, sweetheart,” he murmured in her ear. He’d placed his hand on her stomach and felt it jump. “Here we go.” He stared at her with love, popped a long, deep kiss and lightly ran a finger down her cheek. Strobe lights flashed. Brad’s public lovemaking caused a furor and he knew Betty was a bit embarrassed. He also knew she understood the stakes were high. He had to get Jolie off his back, needed to expose her for the vicious woman she was.

Brad steadied Betty after their kiss and protected her as she glanced at the many high-powered people walking the red carpet. This was the biggest red carpet yet for her. A-list celebrities, producers and directors walked before and behind them. The most famous reporters talked to a constant stream of actors. Designers commented on the beautiful dresses that women wore. Under normal circumstances, Brad thought, Betty might feel out of place, but tonight there were other concerns at stake. Brad kept a constant touch at the small of her back so she'd know he was right there with her. He wanted her to focus on him and not her surroundings.

As they mingled with Brad's friends Betty wondered if she'd ever truly feel comfortable with these people. Most of the celebrities were polite to her but Betty knew they thought of her as Brad's latest fling. Vegas oddsmakers were having a field day, but they'd already outlasted most of the bets on how long their relationship would last. She squashed the insecurities that nearly flooded her and put on a game face. Telling herself to enjoy the moment and not think about Jolie Kensington, Betty smiled and chatted with celebrities she'd never in her wildest dreams thought she would meet.

They were near the end of the red carpet when a female voice interrupted their conversation with an ABC reporter.

"Well, if it isn't Bradley Moore and his latest fling," Jolie sneered.

Had anyone else heard the snide way she'd said it? Betty wondered. The noise level was so loud she wasn't even sure the reporter had heard the comment.

"Jolie Kensington," the reporter said into her microphone. "You look lovely tonight. And who's your date?"

Brad moved Betty to the side so Jolie could talk, but the reporter stopped him. "Stay, Brad. You and Jolie lit up the magazines while you were making *Between Heaven and Hell*. Are you friends after your breakup?"

Brad opened his mouth but Jolie spoke first. "Oh, we just had an on-set romance. Nothing serious," Jolie laughed with a wave of her French-manicured hand. "Brad has his little stewardess now and I have my man." Betty watched as Jolie patted her date's arm. The man was classically

handsome and grinned from ear to ear. He didn't seem bothered that Jolie hadn't introduced him to the world. He moved closer to Jolie and put his arm across her bare shoulders. A few frown lines marred Jolie's forehead for a fleeting second. She turned to her date and kissed him on the cheek. At the same time, she gracefully slid from under his arm.

Betty noticed Brad's thin lips and knew he'd seen Jolie's rudeness. He smiled at Betty and pulled her close to his side. She couldn't wait to hear what Brad would say to counteract Jolie's claim. "I want to correct Jolie by stating we never had an on-set romance. The magazines made it up."

The reporter pounced. "You're contradicting Jolie Kensington right here at the premiere?"

"Yes. I want the story straight. I have never had any kind of relationship with Jolie outside of a professional working relationship."

From Betty's short time in the limelight, she knew this would hit the media like a comet hitting Earth. She also knew Brad didn't care. Jolie wasn't going to get away with outright lies. Betty knew the news would be big for a week then die down. It'd happened to her after the airplane crash. There'd be another story to distract the public a short time later.

"She's asked for it," Brad murmured into Betty's ear. "I don't care if it makes her look bad." Betty narrowed her eyes at the tone of Brad's voice. His anger that Jolie tried to drug him still simmered and seemed to be reaching the boiling point again. Well, Betty thought, the woman deserved what would come to her. She'd put the wheels in motion—Brad was more than happy to drive the car.

The reporter cornered Jolie, allowing Brad and Betty to move away. With so many celebrities to interview, they wouldn't be missed.

Brad ushered Betty to their seats inside the Dolby Theater. They sat in the center section about four rows from the front. The movie was fantastic. When they exited the theater to go to the afterparties Brad and Betty were assaulted by the paparazzi.

"Brad! Are you saying that Jolie Kensington is a liar?" one reporter shouted.

"Brad! What are you hiding? Were you dating someone while filming *Between*

Heaven and Hell?" another screamed.

"Betty! How do you feel about being in the middle of a celebrity triangle?"

Betty started when she heard that question. She knew she wasn't in the middle but the public wouldn't know that. She had been dating Brad when he went to Germany to film *Between Heaven and Hell* but no one had known about it at the time. She wondered if she should say anything or let Brad deal with it.

Brad answered that question when he said, "I am not saying that Jolie is a liar. I'm saying that the magazines made an error." She was a liar but Betty knew Brad wouldn't say that outright. That's one of the many reasons why she loved him so much. "We weren't and never have dated. As to the question about whether I was dating anyone during filming, the answer is yes."

The crowd gathered outside the Dolby Theater gasped. To Betty it seemed as if they collectively leaned forward to hear the rest of the answer.

"I was dating Betty. I hadn't told anyone because it was still new." Brad smiled softly at Betty and kissed her on the lips. Flashbulbs lit the night, blinding her. With a gentle stroke along her collarbone he said, "As you know, we met on a flight some months ago and I haven't seen anyone else since then."

The reporters went crazy. Questions were shouted from all around. Brad raised his hand for quiet and waited a few minutes, following Betty's lead with the press by waiting until they calmed down. When the crowd hushed, he said, "I'm going to let Betty answer the question about being in a celebrity triangle, then we're going to a party."

As one, the crowd of reporters held their microphones toward Betty. Butterflies flew into her stomach. What a mess. What a life she now led. Who could have predicted six months ago that bookworm-Betty-the-anonymous-flight-attendant would be standing in front of a rabid crowd of reporters explaining her life to a world that only wanted to skewer her and other people they didn't know.

She took a long, slow, deep breath. "I don't know what it's like to be in a triangle of any kind, let alone a celebrity triangle. From my early math classes I learned that a triangle has three sides. Therefore, I'm not in a triangle since there are only two sides to my relationship with Brad. Mine and his." She smiled with relief when no one tossed out a rude question. The paparazzi seemed to be breathless, waiting for more. "I can tell you that triangles have points. So, I think I'll point out that poor Jolie Kensington is a bit mistaken when she says that she and Brad had a romance. I don't

blame her for taking the stories to heart though. Who wouldn't want to have an affair with Brad?" She chuckled and turned toward him. Doing her best Vanna White imitation, Betty waved her hands at Brad, starting from his head and floating down to his feet. "Just look at what a fine specimen he is!" Everyone burst out laughing. "Please leave Jolie alone. She'll find her handsome hunk, someone who understands her perfectly. I have no doubt about it. Now thank you for your time. You are all wonderful, generous, and accurate reporters. I know that what I'll read tomorrow will be the absolute truth."

Betty was thrilled when Brad laughed at the startled faces before him. No one had ever said the paparazzi told the truth. She'd thrown down a gantlet and it would be highly entertaining to read what tomorrow's newspapers said and hear what the talk shows spoke about. She also couldn't wait to read tomorrow's updates to all the websites, blogs, Twitter and Instagram accounts, too. He hoped Jolie Kensington would be skewered for her comments about a "celebrity triangle."

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Lesson

Brad seethed when he got the information. A date rape drug. Rohypnol. The lab report said that although the amount was very small, he could have been easily controlled and it may have caused him to black out.

He paced Bentley Cummings' office while the producer had a sidebar with his secretary. Brad wasn't one to sit back and see what would happen. Jolie deserved to be taught a lesson. But what kind of lesson, how would he do it and would he end up looking like an idiot?

He could take the evidence to the police and charge her with attempted rape or assault. No. He could plant an item in a rag magazine and see how it affected her reputation. No. Brad smacked his hand against his forehead. Think! It had to be something cunning, brash. Something like Jolie. Yet it had to teach without serious harm. Brad wasn't too concerned about Jolie's reputation. She continued to ruin that all by herself. He plopped onto the couch in Bentley's office and stared at the black-and-white photo on the wall across from him. Brad didn't see the 1930s street scene of Los Angeles. He didn't see the old cars parked on either side of a wide-open Sunset Boulevard. He pictured the startled look of chagrin that Jolie would wear on her face when she realized her dirty little stunt had been found out.

Plotting Jolie's comeuppance gave him no feeling of satisfaction. Instead, it made him feel low, dirty, and unworthy. Brad jumped up from the

couch. What was taking Cummings so long? He paced the large outer office. Should he not do anything? No.

Then it came to him. He would let Jolie know he knew she'd tried to drug him. Then he'd let her suffer. Would he do anything with the knowledge? No. Yes. He'd hold it over her head, knowing that the heavy burden would weigh on her. He could see her wicked mind swirling with thoughts. Would he take it to the media? How could she get out of it and turn the situation around to make Brad the bad guy? Brad knew Jolie would plan her defense once she knew he'd caught on to what she'd done.

That's it! Brad snapped his fingers as a smile of relief split his face. I'm going to tell her I know what she was going to do to me. Brad reached for the phone on Cummings' secretary's desk and dialed Jolie.

She answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jolie, this is Bradley Moore." He heard her suck in a sharp breath. She couldn't know that he knew about the drug. The bartender Joe was very discreet. "I'd like to invite you to dinner tomorrow night. Are you available?"

"Dinner?"

Jolie sounded flustered, flattered.

"Yes, dinner. There's something I want to discuss with you. How about eight o'clock at Dolce's on Melrose Avenue?"

"Sure, Brad. I'd love it. I'll wear something pretty, just for you," she said in a low, sexy voice.

"Great, Jolie. I'll see you there." Brad hung up the phone with a snort. "I'll just bet you'll wear something pretty for me," he muttered.

Brad entered Catch LA the next night and found Jolie perched on a stool at the bar. "Hello. Our table is ready, if you don't mind." Brad grabbed her drink and carried it to the table.

Jolie stopped short when she saw Betty and Joe sitting at the table. The maître'd had given him the prized center table in the restaurant's dining room. She gave them a wobbly smile and folded herself into the chair Brad held out for her. "This is a surprise. I thought we were having a meeting of some sort, Brad."

"We are, Jolie." Brad gave her the menu. "Go ahead and look over the choices." After a few minutes they decided. "I think I'll have the grilled jumbo shrimp, Brad said. The sautéed wild-caught snapper sounds great, too. "Betty? Joe?"

Betty ordered the snapper and Joe ordered a filet mignon.

“Jolie?”

She glanced up nervously from the menu. All three pairs of eyes were on her. “The seared Scottish salmon looks lovely.”

The waiter took their orders and left.

“What about wine?” Jolie asked.

“I’ve taken the liberty of ordering in advance for all of us. Do you mind?”

“No.” Jolie frowned but didn’t say anything until the waiter reappeared with a bottle of wine and had poured a sip for Brad to taste. At his nod of acceptance, the waiter filled everyone else’s glasses.

Brad held his glass high in a toast. “To great wine.”

Everyone murmured their agreement, clinked glasses, and took a sip.

“This is very good, Brad. What did you order?” Jolie asked, taking another sip.

“Nothing expensive. Just a basic red wine with a dash of Rohypnol to add some excitement.”

Jolie sputtered and wine dribbled out of her mouth. She held her glass to her lips, hoping that no one had seen her spit the mouthful back into the glass. Treating it like a viper, she carefully put the stemmed glass on the table and pushed it away from her.

“W-what?”

Everyone at the table continued to sip their wine except Jolie. Joe had one eyebrow raised as he waited for her answer.

Betty smiled at Jolie but the smile didn’t reach her cold eyes.

“Oh, you know, Jolie. The date rape drug,” Brad said.

“Why would I know about a date rape drug?”

The waiter arrived with their dinners. Everything at the restaurant was a la carte and no one had ordered an appetizer, salad, or soup.

Brad dug into his shrimp. “This is delicious! How are your entrees, Betty, Joe?”

They murmured their agreement and continued to eat. Jolie sat with her hands folded in her lap, too afraid to touch her food or wine. “What’s going on here, Brad?”

He ignored her question. “Something wrong with your food? You haven’t even touched it.”

“Maybe,” Betty said after swallowing a mouthful of snapper and sipping her wine, “she’s concerned that someone put some of that date rape drug in her wine or food.”

Joe chuckled. “Is that your way of making friends, Jolie? Using a date rape drug?”

Brad noticed her trembling lip. For some reason it made him stare at her flaring nostrils. Her chest rose and fell with short, fast breaths. Nerves. She needed to suffer a bit longer.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She reached for her glass of water, lifted it to her lips then stopped. Brad nearly choked on a swallow of wine. Jolie’s look was priceless as she wondered if there was something in the water.

“This shrimp is fantastic! Want a bite?” Brad offered his fork to Betty.

“Sure.” She took the fork and slowly drew the shrimp off the tines, her eyes never leaving Brad’s face. “Delicious.”

“Brad,” Joe said as he emptied the bottle of red wine. “Want me to order another?”

Brad glanced at Jolie. A thin film of sweat lined her upper lip. He reached over and moved Jolie’s glass back toward her. “Why aren’t you drinking, Jolie? The wine is delicious.” As if to prove his statement, Brad drank the rest of his glass in one gulp. Then he picked up her glass and held it to her lips.

“No!” She jumped up from the table, causing her chair to hit the diner behind her. The woman turned around and snapped at Jolie for her clumsiness.

“Won’t drink the wine?” Brad asked. “Why? Something wrong with it?”

“How do I know you didn’t put a date rape drug in it?” Jolie sat back down. Her hands twisted together. Her outburst had caused other diners to glance at their table. A few muttered between themselves and Brad knew he’d been recognized.

“Why would I do that? I don’t even know where to get one. Do you?” Jolie clamped her lips together, forming a straight line. Brad had had enough. He leaned forward. “When we met last week, you put Rohypnol in my wine. I didn’t drink it, but Joe saw you do it. Before I left, he gave me the wine and I had it tested at a police lab.”

Jolie gasped. One shaking hand flew to cover her mouth.

“You tried to drug me. I don’t know why and I don’t care. I will never work with you again. You will never plant false rumors in the rag magazines about me, Betty, or Joe. If you do, I will go to the police. Keep in mind, to me there is no statute of limitations. For the rest of my life, you will not cross my loved ones, family, friends, or me. Do you hear me?” Brad’s deep and intense voice was pitched low so no one at the surrounding tables could hear him.

Tears pooled in Jolie’s eyes. Her mouth trembled but she didn’t speak. Only the tiniest nod indicated her acknowledgement of Brad’s words.

“Now for you this dinner is over. Have a nice life.”

The world wondered what had upset Jolie Kensington so much. Pictures showed her standing with a shocked look on her face as Brad, Betty and Joe stared at her. Other pictures showed Brad with narrowed eyes, Betty’s mouth turned down and Joe’s eyebrows raised.

The photos were cover shots on every celebrity magazine worldwide. Speculation ran rampant. If Jolie had an affair with Brad, as everyone suspected, why was Betty sitting at the table? Had Brad been unfaithful to her while they were dating? Was he trying to make it up to Betty by apologizing with Jolie at the table? Pictures taken after Jolie left showed Brad holding Betty’s hand with a loving look on his face as they spoke quietly and laughed. Others showed the three diners having a serious conversation.

Brad’s publicist worked overtime to quell the tide, but everyone wanted answers. A week later Brad decided to give a version of the truth to the world. A press conference was set for ten the next morning. When Brad arrived, the excited crowd surged forward to hear above the noise.

“Thank you all for coming,” Brad said. “I’ve read the speculation and rumors about my dinner the other night and want to say how impressed I am with the ideas you’ve come up with.” Laughter filled the crowd as he shook his head ruefully. “I can honestly say how happy I was to hear that Jolie Kensington had called me to tell me she wanted to have my baby.” More laughter. “I am sorry to say she didn’t discuss that with me.” Good-natured groans filled the audience.

“Would you have done it if she had?” a reporter shouted. “They would have been beautiful children.”

Brad grinned. “Thank you, but no. I might have taken a few seconds to think about it, however.” Brad shook his head in a deprecating manner. “You’ll be the first to know when I want to start a family. Count on it.”

“What about a family with Betty?” another reporter yelled and the crowd cheered.

“She’ll be the second to know if I want a family, right after I tell you,” Brad joked. The crowd roared. Brad held up his hand to quiet them. “I’m here to answer your questions about the recent pictures in the celebrity magazines.” The crowd hushed and thrust their microphones closer to the podium. “Jolie was upset when I told her we would not be doing any more movies together.”

The paparazzi went wild, peppering Brad with questions.

“Why not? Did she say or do something to upset you?”

“Are you saying Jolie Kensington isn’t a good enough actor?”

“I heard she’s caused trouble on many sets before,” one female reporter said. “Is that why you won’t work with her again?”

“The truth is we just don’t gel together. I’m not going to say anything else now. Jolie is a good actor and will go on to make many more movies without me. Thank you for your time.”

Brad left the podium with hundreds of questions left unanswered. He knew his statement could be the end of Jolie’s career. He wouldn’t tell the world about her trying to drug him, but he wouldn’t let her tell outright lies either. Some of the magazines had reported that he’d gotten Jolie pregnant and she’d had an abortion, angering Brad. Others claimed Jolie wanted to marry Brad for his money. None of it was true. He knew he left the press with more questions than answers and that was too bad. The story would run its course and Brad would be off the hook at some point.

The scumbag, Jolie thought viciously. Who does he think he is? Bradley Moore had just ruined her career. Now how would she ever repay her gambling debts? Jolie had been drinking straight vodka since the press conference and two hours later she stumbled into her bathroom to throw up.

Nerves. She'd been given a week to repay her three hundred grand. With this news the vultures would be circling in an hour. After emptying her stomach Jolie glanced in the mirror. What a mess. Her hair was smashed to her cheeks and pushed up in the back, her flawless skin gleamed the unattractive color of paste and her line-free forehead was damp and taut, courtesy of the previous day's Botox treatment. With shaking hands, she rinsed her face with cold water. Then she patted the towel to her face to dry it. No use stretching her skin too much.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror and narrowed her eyes. Both Bradley Moore and his bitch girlfriend would regret this. No one throws Jolie Kensington to the sharks.

A month passed. Betty needed to decide if she would go back to flying. Her life had changed so much. The meek bookworm who dressed in a sensible blue uniform had disappeared, replaced by a more confident, even sexy woman. Living with Brad under a worldwide microscope had forced her out of her shell. She found she could enjoy a press conference now and again. Parties and premieres were getting better, although she still felt out of place more often than not. Betty loved to dress up but stiletto heels killed her feet.

She and Brad stayed home quite a bit, offsetting the hectic lifestyle he had. His new film, *Top Secret*, started filming in a few weeks and Brad would be off to different countries in Europe for four months, then Australia for two months. Betty needed something to do while he was gone and flying would fill that need.

She didn't have to fly a full schedule. She could work two or three transcontinental flights a month, and find a project to do when at home. As she straightened the kitchen after breakfast, Betty thought about what she'd like to do. She could write a book about her fifteen years of flying. That didn't thrill her. Who would read it? She could volunteer. For what? After loading up and starting the dishwasher Betty grabbed a pad and a pencil to write down her options.

She loved to read. Literacy. That's it! Betty decided to join a group that taught illiterate adults to read. She jumped up and ran to the computer to search for a nearby group.

After filling out the initial forms to sign up online she called Global Airlines and told them she was coming back to work. They didn't make it easy. She had to get cleared to fly, which meant Betty needed a doctor's note saying she was healthy enough to push two-hundred-pound carts and open heavy doors and window exits in an emergency. Even though she'd already passed a physical when she'd gone back to work after the airplane accident, they were making her take another one. Sheer harassment, but Betty would do it anyway. In the meantime, she downloaded the forms to start the process to be able to teach adults to read.

A month later Betty received clearance to go back to work. She timed it so she could bid for her next month's schedule and work the first trip of the month. No sitting around on reserve for her. She'd put in her time years ago, and due to her seniority, reaped the benefit of holding monthly schedules all the time.

"You really want to go back to flying?" Brad asked her the night before her first trip back.

"I do. I'm going to drop three trips each month so I'll only be working two days a week." She turned to look at him. "Does it bother you that I'm going back to work?"

Brad pulled her close. They'd been sitting on the couch watching TV. After kissing her hairline and tucking a strand of her hair behind her ears he said in a low voice, "I'm going to miss touching you, holding you."

Betty's heart stumbled. Brad's soft words and gentle touch caused her knees to tremble and she was glad she was sitting down. Her chest heaved as warmth flooded her body. "You're leaving for Europe in a few days, honey. I need something to do with my time."

Brad sighed and tightened his arms around her. Her face rested on his chest, his head on top of hers. "I know. I just want you to be safe. I still see you being tossed out of that airplane." Brad shuddered and kissed the top of her head. Betty glanced up and smiled, but her smile was immediately trapped between Brad's hungry lips. She kissed him back with hot passion. She pushed her tongue inside Brad's mouth and tangled with his. She thrust and parried and just when she thought he was winning the duel she sucked his tongue into her mouth. Brad's groan of surrender shot pulsing desire straight to Betty's womb. She stroked his strong face, his cheeks, his chin. She shifted around and sat on his lap facing him. With tender strokes she moved her hands down his chest, opening the buttons on his shirt as she did

so. When the shirt was free, Betty ran her hands over his nipples, touched them, rolled them and pulled one into her mouth to lave and lick.

“The more I have you with me the more I want you here, right by my side. You’re a drug, Betty Hammond, and I’m addicted,” Brad said in a husky voice. His hands traveled her body, starting at her narrow waist, up her slender sides under her blouse to her breasts, where he reached inside her bra, lingering only a moment to tap the tip of her nipple then moved back down her sides to unzip her jeans and shove them down to her ankles. Betty rose and shifted across Brad’s lap so he could slide them off, and somehow his hands touched every erotic part of her body, leaving a trail of blazing need in their wake. Betty sucked in a breath as Brad touched her clitoris and stroked it. Already ready and hot for release, Betty was wet and desperate.

“Now, Brad. Right now.”

He stroked her faster. Her body tightened, her breath caught and before she could exhale explosive contractions broke through her. The release drained through her and Betty sagged against Brad. “Wow.”

“Wow yourself,” he said. “You’ve become quite the sensual woman. Who knew the prim flight attendant I ran into was really such a hot temptress.” His hands still touched, tempted.

“It’s all the romance novels I read. They taught me everything I know,” Betty said smugly.

Brad chuckled and kissed her. “My turn, sweetheart.”

Betty obliged by shifting over Brad, shoving his pants down his legs, and taking his balls in her hand. She fondled and squeezed and stroked. Brad sucked in a sharp breath, his body stiffened and his penis, already hard, rose higher. She wrapped her other hand around his erection and stroked slowly up and down, teased along the slit at the top then bent down and took him into her mouth. With one hand still fondling his balls she sucked and ran her tongue around the tip. Then, ever so slowly, she lowered her mouth over him until she could go no farther and sucked harder. Brad gasped as she moved up and down, his hips rising and falling as he frantically sought release. Just when she thought he was going to come she slipped her mouth off him, only for a moment. He groaned his frustration and reached for her head to pull it back to his penis but Betty was already licking the sensitive underside near his balls. She didn’t give him a minute to breathe, to even catch his breath. Betty licked up his penis and in a quick

move took him completely into her mouth. While bobbing her head up and down she sucked him until his hips rose off the couch and he came in an intense release, his sperm rushing into her mouth. Betty continued to suck him until he lay back, sated, his breathing harsh in the quiet room.

“Oh God, that was magnificent,” Brad said. He smiled at her with warmth and love, desire still in his eyes. They stayed where they were, he with his pants around his ankles, she naked from the waist down. Brad had wrapped his arms around her body and he held her, protected her.

After a few minutes Brad kicked his pants off, pulled a blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped it around them. They snuggled together until they fell asleep, safe, and secure in each other’s arms.

When she woke Betty thought about Brad’s comment about the airplane incident. She lay between him and the back of the couch, Brad on his side, one of his arms across her stomach. She was touched by Brad’s fear, his need. But she wanted him to move forward, put it behind him. She knew he’d awakened because he lightly ran his fingers over her, causing goose bumps to rise along her arms. Without turning her head, she said, “You know there are no guarantees in life. The accident happened and now you’re having post-traumatic stress disorder from having watched it over and over again on TV. I should be the one with PTSD, yet I’ve slept like a baby for months now.” Counseling had helped. Humor was the antidote for Betty.

Laying a hand on his chest and stroking the light hairs that covered it, Betty continued, “I’ve recently become aware of the hazards of airplane emergency slides and have a written guarantee from the manufacturer that they will post placards along the sides of the slide that will be easy to read as the passenger is sliding to the bottom. Three signs will be posted on each side that say, ‘using this slide can cause injury during an emergency evacuation. There is a one in a gazillion chance that the slidee will be tossed over the side and completely miss the fast lane provided down the middle’.”

Brad laughed, obviously feeling a little better. “If you’re okay with it, then so am I. Just remember to step out of the doorway if anyone bigger than you acts as if they’re going to toss you out of their way.”

“You bet. I learned my lesson. Adapt, adapt, adapt. Assess the situation, and if a frightened man looks like he may take things into his own hands, I’ll be sure to give him all the room he needs.” Betty kissed Brad. She loved the feel of his firm lips against hers. Wanting more, she swept her tongue

along the crease and forced him to open his mouth. He loved her. It amazed and honored her that Bradley Moore, the man, not the celebrity, loved her. Her body melted at the touch of his tongue, her nipples puckered.

Rivers of desire flowed through her veins, quickly warming her again. Betty lost all track of time. In Brad's arms the world stopped and only the two of them existed.

Brad groaned. "So sweet. Velvet and sweet," he said after tasting her tongue.

"So tight. Hard and tight," Betty said when she felt his thighs tighten in response to her touch. Adrenaline rushed through her. Brad shifted and lay on the couch, pulling her on top of him. With a light touch, he unbuttoned her blouse and found her hard, desperate nipple. He rolled it between his fingers and Betty moaned as the bud tightened even more. "Oh God," Betty whispered. "I'll never get enough of this."

Without replying, Brad sat up and scooped Betty into his arms. He carried her down the hall to their bedroom and laid her on the bed. She didn't move a muscle, knowing he wanted to look at her.

"You are lovely, Betty Hammond."

Betty had never been called lovely before and she blushed. She always thought her body was a bit too curvy, her thighs too thick. Brad made her feel beautiful even when she felt her most vulnerable, like now, as she lay naked on his bed. Betty reached up to pull Brad to her. He stood with proud male magnificence as he leaned over her. "Come here." A sexy leer crossed his face and his blue eyes glittered. "I see a little of the dominatrix in you fighting to come out. Care to elaborate?"

Her blush turned crimson. "Brad!" Shocked that he thought she could be dominating, shocked that deep inside she knew he was right, Betty pulled him on top of her and ran her hands through his hair. That led to a long, tender touch down his neck, along his wide shoulders and down his sides to his hips. They never lost eye contact and Betty watched Brad's pupils dilate. His mouth opened as his breath came faster and for a brief moment he groaned and closed his eyes.

"I'm so hard I hurt, sweetheart. Each time I touch you I want more. No. I need more." He trailed his finger down her waist. With unerring accuracy, he found her center, rubbed lightly then pushed his finger inside. Betty's body lifted off the bed as she let out a tortured moan.

“Oh God.” Each time Brad touched her she soared. This was what flying on cloud nine must be like, Betty thought. His fingers were magic. Slick from her wetness, he pushed inside her then pulled slowly out. Each time he pulled out he stroked her clit then delved back inside her straining, tense body. “Now. Enter me now,” she ground out on a groan.

Brad did so without complaint. And when he filled her, she felt complete. Whole. Loved.

How she loved him.

The faster they moved together the more intensely unbearable the friction became. Ripe, sensual musk filled the air. Breaths hitched; heat rose off their bodies like steam from a shower. Betty moaned and met him thrust for thrust. Brad grunted and couldn't keep his hands from touching her everywhere. When they neared the peak Brad pulled Betty to his chest. “Look at me,” he growled.

Betty forced her eyes open and stared into Brad's half-shuttered eyes. Her own were so weighted down with desire she almost couldn't keep them open. As he pushed them over the peak into an exquisite orgasm he groaned, “I love you.”

The erotic waves crested amid shouts and groans with Betty clinging to Brad. Wave after wave of heart-pounding contractions rolled through her body. Betty had never climaxed like that before. She reached the highest highs and barreled over the cliff so hard her stomach muscles contracted from the release. The contractions slowly subsided yet neither spoke, both too overcome with emotion. After a long silence Brad sighed.

Betty stroked his strong face, across his forehead, down his cheek, along his lips. “I love you too. Very much.”

Brad's face cleared and Betty knew he'd wondered if she would say the words back to him. They'd said it many times to each other, but for some reason this time seemed different. They'd crossed an invisible barrier and had entered a new phase of their relationship. Betty didn't know what it meant, but for now she let happiness and contentment fill her. For now, she was in Brad's arms and that was all that mattered.

Brad grabbed a towel from the bathroom and cleaned up a bit. When he was done, he handed it to Betty and sat next to her on the bed. “Will you come visit me on set?” His eyes were wide and an excited smile lit his face.

Betty stopped and glanced up. Excitement flooded her system, causing her heart to race. “In Europe or Australia?”

“Either. Both. It’s going to be a very long six months without you.”

“I’d love to. Can I come visit you more than once?”

The grin that widened Brad’s face made him look boyish. “You’d better,” he murmured. “You’re like oxygen to me. I can’t live without you.”

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Schedules

Betty had a great first trip back to work. The crew treated her as if nothing had changed, like she'd been on vacation for a month or so. These were her best friends at the airline and no matter what happened they championed her. When she'd first met Brad, they'd cheered her on. At the beginning some had even teased her and asked if she knew what to do on a date. They knew Betty hadn't dated in years, that she had chosen to be alone. A few flight attendants had tried to set her up over the years but they hadn't pushed too hard.

Things had certainly changed since she met Brad.

Now flying home from JFK to LAX, Betty sat in the first-class galley on her jumpseat reading a spy novel. The flight attendants had finished the meal service an hour ago and all that was left to do was check the passengers' comfort then bake chocolate chip and oatmeal raisin cookies before landing. Lost in the story, she jumped when a woman marched into the galley.

"I've been watching you and wondered if you were that stewardess who is dating Bradley Moore."

Surprised that no one had said anything on the flight out to New York yesterday, Betty wasn't concerned with the woman's question. She'd noticed the woman glancing at her from her business-class seat. The few

times she'd walked down the aisle to the back of the airplane the woman had been on the internet but Betty hadn't been able to tell what website she read. Papers had been strewn on her tray table and Betty noticed an article about a famous singer who had recently beaten up his girlfriend. She wondered if the woman worked for some celebrity magazine.

"Yes, I am. May I help you?" Kill the woman with kindness, Betty thought, as she put her book aside and stood up to be on the same level as the woman. There was no need to get into another tiff with a passenger about Brad and bring more "bad publicity" to Global Airlines.

"Why are you back to flying? Weren't you fired?"

Betty bristled at the woman's attitude. Her comment was abrupt and nosy and she'd leaned forward to invade Betty's personal space. "Since you've asked who I am, may I ask who you are and where you work?" She made sure her voice was soft, not threatening, when she asked the question.

"I'm Ginny Ralston, reporter for Wow! magazine."

Wow! was a rag magazine with a reputation for cutting and pasting photos together and making up stories when they didn't exist. Betty knew she had to disarm the woman before the reporter stuck her claws into her. Betty wished Kathy, the purser, hadn't gone to the back of the airplane and left her alone in the first-class galley. If anything happened there wouldn't be a witness to corroborate her story.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Ralston?" Betty asked with a smile.

Ralston's eyes narrowed to a crafty look. "Tell me what really happened at the Catch LA restaurant between Bradley Moore and Jolie Kensington."

"It's exactly what Brad said to the media, Ms. Ralston."

"Come on...Betty." The reporter stared at Betty's name tag. Her condescending tone grated. "There's more to the story than what's being said."

"Well, if you really want the truth..."

Ginny Ralston pulled out a pen and a small spiral pad, flipped over the cover and waited for Betty to give her the dirt. Her mouth gaped open and she licked her lips in anticipation of a juicy morsel she could plant online before the flight landed.

Betty almost laughed out loud. The very pretty brunette with long slim legs looked like she was about to steal the goose's golden egg. Betty glanced around then leaned forward and whispered, "Brad became upset when Jolie told him she liked blue M&M's over brown ones."

“What?”

This time Betty did laugh. “Really, Ms. Ralston, it was a small tiff over a matter of preference. I prefer the red M&Ms, they seem to have more flavor even though the color rubs off faster than the others. But some people won’t allow others to have their own opinion.” Betty shrugged and raised an eyebrow, as if she couldn’t understand why everyone wasn’t allowed to have his or her own opinion. “If you ask me, I’d take a Snickers bar over M&Ms anytime. As they say in the commercials, they’re much more satisfying.”

The reporter’s face mottled as she tried to hold in her temper. Her mouth gaped for a long moment then she snapped it shut so hard Betty heard her teeth click together. Obviously, the woman had no sense of humor, Betty thought.

“So, you’re not going to elaborate on what happened?”

“I’d love to, really!” Betty gushed. “But I swore an oath to the man upstairs not to give away state secrets. Talking about M&Ms could ruin my relationship with Him,” Betty pointed up, “and I don’t want Him to stop hearing my prayers. After all, I pray for world peace, that Jennifer Aniston finds true love, and that people, especially children, get a decent meal now and again. Oh, I also pray for the economy to rebound overnight.”

Ginny Ralston flipped the spiral notebook cover closed with a snap and jammed the pen inside the wire spirals along the top of the pad. She gave Betty a long perusal, starting at her face then slowly lowering her eyes until they landed on her sensible navy-colored shoes, then pointed a scarlet-tipped finger in her chest. “You will regret what you said to me, Ms. Hammond. I’ll make you look like a fool when I print my exclusive interview about you. It will be all over the internet by the time we land.”

“Oh, do me a favor then, will you?” Betty smiled and stepped closer to the reporter.

“What?” Wariness and uncertainty were clear in her voice. Ginny Ralston actually took a step away from Betty.

“Please spell my name right. I know you’re a meticulous reporter and wouldn’t dream of printing any false statements. And please quote me correctly by making sure that I said how much I love M&Ms even though I think Snickers are a more satisfying meal. I wouldn’t want the makers of M&Ms to think I don’t like their candies, as I do, very much.”

“Are you getting to the point soon?” Ralston asked, frustration clear on her face.

Betty’s smile never left her face, but she let ice freeze her eyes when she narrowed them. “I am.” She glanced at her watch then cocked her head as if confused about something. “We still have two hours until landing, are you in a rush? I wouldn’t want you to mess up the article.”

Ralston gritted her teeth and ground out, “No rush.”

“Oh good!” Betty gushed. “Well then. Please make sure your readers know you were prying.” Her light tone never changed and it amused Betty to see how long it took Ginny Ralston to realize what Betty had just said.

“What?”

Ginny Ralston’s job was to pry into celebrities’ lives. Just like the paparazzi. Betty’s job was to feint and deflect any attacks on her personal reputation. “Bradley Moore gave his statement. Are you saying he wasn’t telling the truth? What could you possibly gain by calling him a liar?” Betty watched the wall come up in front of Ginny. Her face froze into a stony expression and she straightened her shoulders. The interview had just ended and Betty was glad.

“We have nothing more to discuss, Ms. Hammond.” Ralston turned to go back to her seat then swiveled back to Betty. “You won’t come out looking very good after I send this article.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll be just fine. I have Brad, the support of my friends, a clear conscience and I take my vitamins every day. You should try them, vitamins, I mean. They really help pep up a lagging constitution. I’ll sleep like a baby tonight. Will you?”

Ginny Ralston’s face flushed. So sharp was her abrupt retreat she did a military turn and marched back to her business-class aisle seat.

Betty let out a huge sigh then jumped when Kathy came around the corner. “Oh! You scared me.”

“I’ve been here the whole time, Betty. I stayed by the wall, hidden behind the curtain. I heard everything and will back you up no matter what happens. I just want you to know you were brilliant. M&Ms versus Snickers.” Kathy laughed with delight. “Vitamins for a lagging constitution. You are priceless and I’m so glad we’re friends.”

“Thank you, Kath. I thought it would be my word against hers and I can’t afford to have another altercation with the company.”

Kathy poured herself a Diet Coke and sat on the jumpseat in the galley. “If my guess is right, Ginny Ralston will write an article, but I don’t think it’ll be as bad as you think.”

Kathy had been right. Ralston’s article didn’t say anything negative about Betty. Instead, she wrote about how quick Betty was with a witty reply and how obvious it was that she loved Bradley Moore. She did wonder why Betty went back to flying and made sure to hint that there might be trouble in paradise. The article also mentioned her love for Snickers over M&Ms but assured Mars, Incorporated, that Betty loved their candies.

By the time she got home that afternoon Brad had ordered Chinese food and set out two iced bottles of Tsingtao beer. It was their last night together before he left for Europe. Neither one spoke about it but they used every opportunity to touch and stroke each other between bites of fried tofu, shrimp in lobster sauce, fried rice, and hot and sour soup. Once the dinner dishes were cleared, they went to the family room to watch TV.

The evening rushed by with Betty in Brad’s arms all night long, and before they knew it morning brought Brad’s limo to take him to the airport. As they stood on the curb, he gave her a long drawn-out kiss. “I miss you already.”

“I miss you too.”

“I’ll call, text and email.”

“So will I.”

There wasn’t anything more to say so Brad stepped into the limo.

“Wait.” Betty rushed up to the window to give him another kiss, this one long and soft and tender. He smelled clean, of some kind of citrusy aftershave, his cheeks were smooth and his hair, now mussed from her hands, stood endearingly up at the cowlick. Brad never looked more handsome to Betty. She sighed, pulled away from Brad’s intoxicating kiss and glanced at the driver who waited, patiently facing forward to give them their last minute of privacy. “One more thing,” she said and pulled a Ziplock bag of cereal out from behind her. “You almost forgot your Ewell Grubbins pellets. I don’t want you to get mean and cranky without them and I know that Europe doesn’t carry this particular brand.”

Brad grinned. “You are the most thoughtful health-food nut,” he coughed as he held the nutlike pellets in his hand, “that I know. Each time I eat a pellet I’ll think of you.”

His words were light but his eyes somber. Six months apart was a long time and anything could happen to change their relationship. Betty sucked in a deep, bracing breath and sent up a quick prayer that their relationship would be fine, even stronger, when he came home.

“You do that,” Betty said with a smile. “And when you kiss your costar, think of what these pellets will do for your digestion. That ought to give you something to moan about.”

Brad roared. “Fly safe, sweetheart.”

“You too.” Betty stepped back onto the sidewalk and watched the limo pull away from the curb. She remembered the time he’d filled a limo with roses and champagne and wished she’d thought to do that this time. With a heavy heart and a bright smile, Betty waved until the car turned the corner then dropped her arm. She reached for her stomach and wished the knot inside would go away. Before Betty met Brad, she hadn’t been lonely, but now, for the first time in her life, she thought she might be. With a shake of her head, she gave herself a pep talk and went back into the house.

It was time to begin her new life. A life that included reduced flying and increased teaching. A life she controlled, not one that controlled her.

Betty hadn’t followed through on the application process to the literary association at first, what with her flying schedule and the time she spent with Brad. But now, a few months later, everything was complete. She went to her first meeting with the literary association that evening. They explained how their organization worked and what they expected of her. She had to take one orientation session and all of their online tutor training classes in order to be certified. After that she could start individual lessons.

She kept herself busy and by the time six weeks had passed she knew she loved tutoring. She had a knack for helping adults learn to read and felt a strong sense of satisfaction each time a student grinned with joy when they realized they’d read a word or sentence.

Each day brought her new joys. She had flown only two trips in those six weeks and felt like she was on vacation. Betty spoke to Brad every day by email, they video chatted two or three times a week and they spoke on the phone when he had time in his schedule for breaks. She missed him. But Betty had been alone for so long before she dated Brad, she felt comfortable filling her time with worthwhile accomplishments and her friends.

Her last student for the day had just left and Betty was cleaning up her table when a man burst into the room. She and Miles, her boss, turned in surprise at the intrusion.

“Give me all your cash,” the man demanded as he waved a gun at them.

“We don’t have any cash,” Miles said. “We teach reading here.”

“Empty your pockets.”

Betty didn’t have pockets in her dress. She’d worn an above the knee light blue sleeveless linen dress with a wide dark blue belt and a matching light blue sweater.

She’d put her purse in a cupboard when she’d arrived some hours ago and hadn’t used it since.

“There’s no cash here,” Miles said again.

Without a second’s thought the intruder shot Miles in the arm. Miles fell to the floor with a groan, using his hand to cover his wound. Betty ducked under the table. She glanced at Miles and saw he was grimacing in pain but he seemed to be okay otherwise. The intruder stomped around the room overturning tables and chairs, tossing papers on the floor, and rummaging through the desk.

Betty’s cell phone sat on a nearby table. She wondered if she could reach it. She watched the intruder, making sure she got a very good look at his face, memorizing his height, approximate weight, and the unusual scar on his left cheek. The man’s curly brown hair was long and unkempt and his blue eyes seemed void of any kind of life. Betty wondered what the man was on, but had very little knowledge of drugs. When he turned his back to Betty she slipped out from under the table and reached up for her phone. After fumbling around for a few long moments, Betty grabbed the phone and ducked back under the table, where she dialed 9-1-1.

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?” the operator asked.

Betty winced. She’d accidentally hit the speaker button and the operator’s voice was too loud. She prayed the intruder was focused on the robbery and didn’t hear it. With a quick glance over the table she

whispered, "I'm at 1505 West Main Street where a man who is trying to rob us has just shot the manager."

"Is the intruder still there?" the 9-1-1 operator asked.

"Yes."

"An ambulance and the police are on their way. Keep the phone on if you can."

"I will," Betty whispered.

"What a bunch of idiots!" the man roared. "I need money and I need it now." He walked over to Betty and yanked her up from under the table. She left the phone on the floor, hoping he hadn't noticed it and the operator wouldn't say anything to cause him to turn it off.

"Let's go." The twentyish-something, Caucasian man, stuck the gun in Betty's back and pushed her out the door just as three black-and-white police cars and an ambulance pulled up.

With nothing more than her wits to work with Betty said, "Watch out for the bicycle!"

The robber jumped to the side. Betty dropped to the ground like a stone and crawled away from the man as fast as she could. She didn't look to see what the intruder was doing and prayed he wouldn't shoot her in the back.

Left standing alone with six officers pointing guns at him, the man bolted. He ran up the street with four of the officers racing behind him.

"Freeze! Police!"

When Betty heard the police command, she realized the intruder was running away from her. She turned to see what was happening and watched the man run toward a street corner, knocking into a middle-aged man whose elderly mother held onto his arm.

"Hey!" the man shouted at the fleeing intruder. He wobbled and swayed forward but stayed on his feet as he fought to keep his mother from falling to the ground.

Betty didn't see what happened after that as the man turned the corner. The two remaining police officers and the paramedics came over to her to see if she was okay. "Are you all right, Miss?"

"I'm fine, thank you. But my manager, Miles, was shot and is inside the building."

The paramedics grabbed their equipment and hurried into the education center. Betty followed. They found Miles leaning against a wall of cabinets with his eyes closed. His chest rose and fell rapidly and he held a bloody

wad of tissues to his wound. The paramedics slapped an oxygen mask over Miles' face and tended to his wound. "He's going to need surgery, Miss. We'll be taking him to Cedar's Sinai." They put Miles on a gurney and wheeled him out.

By now the residents of the other stores on the street were gathered outside to see what had happened. It was the busiest time of day due to the afternoon rush hour.

"Go home, folks," one of the police officers said. "There's nothing to see here." He struggled to move the crowd back a few inches then gave up when they refused to budge.

Inside the store Betty sat on a chair and shook from the aftermath of the attempted robbery. She gave a detailed description of the intruder to the police officer who asked her questions, as well as a complete recollection of what had happened.

"You okay, Miss Hammond?" the officer asked. "You weren't injured, were you?"

Betty's hands shook. "N-no. I'm...fine. Just a bit shaken up."

"From the description you gave us, we'll catch the perp and put him away. Don't you worry your pretty little head about it."

Betty didn't like being talked to as if she were "the little lady." Before she could stop herself, she said in a falsely high-pitched voice, "Oh, Officer, thank you for taking such good care of me. Why, I wouldn't know what to do if you hadn't arrived so quickly to save little ol' me."

The man had been writing something in his notepad. When he heard the comment, his head snapped up and his eyebrows lowered. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Not any more than you are belittling me," Betty said in her normal voice as she watched the muscle in his cheek twitch. She knew the man was holding back what he really wanted to say. "Give me some credit for finding a way to call 9-1-1."

They stared at each other for a long, tense moment. Betty saw the stiffness in his shoulders loosen and he closed his notebook. "Sorry if I came off a bit gruff. This guy has knocked over two gas stations, a restaurant and now your learning center. This is the first time he's shot anyone and I want to stop him from shooting anyone else."

"Thank you for the apology. I hope my description will help you find the young man."

“It will. Thanks for your statement, Miss Hammond.” The minute he said her last name his face tilted up as if he’d just realized something. “Are you the stewardess dating that actor Bradley Moore?”

Betty sighed. Now it would be in all the newspapers and online. “Yes I am. What’s that got to do with this robbery?”

“Can I get his autograph sometime? My wife’s a real fan of his.”

“Mr. Moore is out of the country for some months, but I’ll be sure to ask him when we speak next.”

The officer nodded. “Thanks. You can just leave it at the station.”

Betty gritted her teeth. The man assumed that Brad would give him the autograph, no questions asked. He probably would too. “I surely will,” Betty said with a coy Southern accent.

The man’s head jerked, once again he was startled by her response. He gave her a puzzled glance then laughed. “Say, you’re funny. I can see what Moore sees in you.” With a salute and a wink, the officer left the education center.

With Miles on his way to the hospital, Betty heaved a sigh and straightened the room for the next day’s students. She grabbed her purse out of the closet, locked the front door, and went home.

A hot, bubbly, lavender-scented bath relaxed her and Betty soaked for half an hour. Chilled white wine settled her nerves along with soothing jazz music. The intrusion replayed over and over in her mind and she knew she’d been very lucky not to have been shot during her hasty escape.

As the adrenaline flowing through her veins calmed Betty thought about Brad and what he’d say when he heard about this development. She decided to call him right away and explain the incident.

After quickly drying off, she grabbed a robe and the cordless phone. Three rings later Brad answered.

“Hello, sweetheart. How are you?”

His deep voice filled her soul and tears finally flowed down Betty’s face. Hiccuping as she got control of her emotions, Betty couldn’t speak for long moments.

“Betty?” Brad said with concern. “Are you all right?”

Betty gulped in a few breaths and nodded. She immediately realized Brad couldn’t see her. “I...fine,” was all she managed to croak out as she sank into the nearest chair.

“No, you’re not. Tell me what happened.” Brad’s demand was low and harsh, but Betty knew it was his concern for her that caused the tension to come across the miles.

“A man broke into the education center with a gun and shot Miles, the manager. He demanded money.” Betty couldn’t stop the flow of tears and shuffled off to the nearest bathroom to grab some tissues.

“What? Are you hurt? God, why am I thousands of miles away?”

“N-no. Just shaken up.”

“Video chat. Right now.”

Betty smiled. Brad had hung up the phone so fast she hadn’t been able to answer him. She went into the den and opened the laptop. After signing on she found Brad waiting for her. When the picture came on it was remarkably clear. Brad studied Betty for a long moment. She watched the fear in his face clear and felt her limbs weaken at his crooked, sexy smile.

“You’re pale.”

Betty’s hands flopped in the air, indicating a lack of concern for her looks, then flew to her cheeks. With a devilish tilt to her head she said, “Oh! Just a minute. I’ll go put some blush on.”

Brad burst out laughing. “Darling woman, you are precious. Forget the blush. You’re beautiful with or without makeup. Now. Tell me what happened.” Brad leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head.

When Betty finished her story Brad leaned forward and sighed. “I wish I was there to hold you and comfort you. Thank goodness you’re a quick thinker.”

Betty smiled. “It’s my flight attendant training. I’m prepared for any emergency. You know, like a Boy Scout.” Betty leaned closer to the camera on the computer. “I’m pretty glad I’ve had that training, Brad. It sure came in handy today.”

Brad sighed. “So am I, sweetheart.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Are you really okay?”

Betty felt a new resolve firming inside her. “I am. Knowing you care helps tremendously.”

Brad pushed the chair back and stood up. Betty could only see his waist. “I don’t care about you, Betty Hammond. I love you!”

Warmth flooded her, weakening her legs. She felt them tremble and marveled that a few shouted words across thousands of miles could make

her so soft and gooey inside. “I love you too.”

Betty saw a light brighten the room behind Brad and heard someone say, “You’re on set in ten minutes, Mr. Moore.”

Brad sat down and raked his hand through his hair. “I’ve gotta go, sweetheart. I don’t want you there alone. When can you get here?”

Betty thought about her students and knew she couldn’t leave them without finding another tutor to carry on their studies. “Give me a few days. I need to change my flying schedule around and find someone to fill in for me at the education center.”

“Well hurry up, for God’s sake. I’ll email you my updated schedule and we’ll meet in Paris at the end of the week.”

Betty had never been to Paris. “I can’t wait to see you, Brad. It’s already been too long.”

“I feel the same. But I have to say I’m learning that I can’t leave you alone for long. Trouble seems to find you when I’m not nearby and my ancient caveman seems to be rearing his demanding head.”

Betty didn’t want to sign off. “Caveman, huh? Be prepared for your cavewoman to melt the fur right off your back when I see you in Paris.”

Brad held his hands to his heart. “It’s a date, sweetheart. Make it here fast.”

Paris

The Hotel de Crillon was one of the oldest luxury hotels in Paris. As Betty walked through the lobby with the bellhop trailing behind, she glanced at the opulent honey-colored marble, crystal chandeliers, seventeenth-and eighteenth-century tapestries, gilt and brocade furniture, sculptures and Louis XVI chests and chairs. The decor emitted history, wealth, and power. A bit awed by the surroundings, Betty wished she had changed into a fresh dress on the airplane.

The bellhop showed her to Brad's one-bedroom suite. When she entered, she gasped at the lovely arrangement of fruit on a silver platter. Oranges, dark grapes, kiwis, and apples gleamed as if they were set for display and not to be eaten. A gorgeous flower arrangement graced an eighteenth-century table.

After the bellhop placed Betty's luggage in the bedroom and left, she released the breath she'd been holding. My goodness, she didn't want to touch anything, fearing she'd damage it. Priceless furniture, expensive silver and stunning crystal surrounded her. With a shake of her head, Betty reminded herself she was here at Brad's request. She belonged in this suite. She had every right to sit on the furniture or drink the champagne that was so beautifully displayed on a table next to a window overlooking Paris.

Betty smoothed the bedspread with reverent hands, amazed that she was in Paris, the city of love.

In all her years as a flight attendant Betty had never flown to Europe. She'd wanted to, but when she'd tried to hold the international flights as a six-year flight attendant, she'd been too junior. Now that she had a bit more seniority, she could hold the flights but she didn't want to work all-nighters and fourteen-or sixteen-hour legs.

A feeling of happiness flooded her. She was in Paris! Betty danced to another window and stared at the stunning view outside. Located at the north end of the Place de la Concorde, she watched people stroll the Champs-Élysées under a beautiful morning sun. She glanced at the table and saw a note leaning against the bottle of champagne that stood between two stemmed glasses on a round silver tray.

"Wait for me, sweetheart. We'll toast your first trip abroad when I get back to the hotel. Can't wait to see you. I ache for you. Love, Brad." Under his scribbled name he'd left the time he should finish shooting. Betty glanced at her watch. Brad wouldn't be back for three hours. She had time to take a nap and freshen up.

She unpacked her suitcase with a grin on her face. Usually, she left most of her items in the suitcase, knowing she'd be leaving in the morning. This time she was here for a full week, maybe longer, so she hung up her clothes and put a few essentials in the drawers. By the time she'd unpacked the all-night flight had caught up with her so Betty lay down for a short nap.

A knock on the door woke her an hour and a half later. For a minute Betty didn't know where she was. When the knock came again, she remembered she was in Paris and jumped up with joy and excitement. When Betty opened the door a pretty young woman stood there frowning.

"May I help you?" Betty asked.

The woman glanced behind Betty. "I thought this was Bradley Moore's suite."

"It is. He's not here right now." The woman continued to frown. "May I take a message for him?"

"Who are you?"

The rudeness of the question took Betty aback. "I'm Betty Hammond. And you are?" Betty stood in the doorway, disheveled and not quite awake. The twenty-something woman shifted back and forth. She must have

something to do with the film because the hotel wouldn't just give out Brad's room number.

"I'm Brad's production assistant. I thought he'd be back by now. Filming ended over half an hour ago."

The omission of the assistant's name wasn't lost on Betty. The woman was bright, beautiful, and blonde. But she wasn't friendly and Betty wondered if this assistant had designs on Brad. "I'll be happy to tell him you stopped by when he gets here. I'm sure he had some errands to do before he came home."

"I'll wait."

The woman moved to step into the room but Betty blocked her. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name." She didn't say it in a friendly tone of voice.

"Lacy Herald."

For a minute Betty wasn't sure she'd heard right. She snapped her mouth shut, knowing it'd dropped open. Maybe the woman had made it up. When Betty glanced at her eyes, she saw the woman was serious and waiting for the expected comment.

"I'll be sure to tell Brad you stopped by, Ms. Herald." Betty stood firmly fixed in the doorway, blocking any entrance by the assistant.

For a few tense moments the two women stared at each other, then Lacy heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Tell him to call me as soon as he gets back."

Betty plastered a smile on her face. She didn't like this woman. This fortune hunter. "Certainly." She stepped back to close the door.

"Ms. Hammond?"

Betty reluctantly opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

The woman glanced up and down the hallway to see if anybody was approaching. "You are too old and stuffy for him. I'm more his type."

Without giving Betty a chance to comment, Lacy Herald turned and sashayed down the hallway, making sure she swung her hips in time to music only she could hear.

Rattled from the encounter with the production assistant, Betty leaned against the closed door. This was the second woman who didn't like her because she dated Brad. First Jolie Kensington, and now Lacy Herald. Both women thought they were Brad's type. Both said she was too old, even though she was only thirty-five. Both women were young, beautiful, calculating, and ambitious. Both women would do anything to get Brad.

What a world Brad lived in. Now Betty was part of that world. With a heavy sigh she went to shower and freshen up, hoping Brad would come home soon.

Betty now had two sworn enemies. What was she supposed to do about them? Anything? Nothing? She'd never been in this position before and worried that these women would somehow ruin her relationship with Brad.

The water sluiced down her neck and shoulders, erasing her tiredness and tension. Deep in thought, Betty jumped when the shower curtain opened. Brad stood naked and aroused with a huge grin on his face.

"Glad I found you here. I was worried about your cleanliness." He laughed as he stepped into the shower and pulled Betty into a tight embrace. Warm soap and water slicked their bodies and Betty groaned with delight when Brad kissed her. The kiss melted her bones and she nearly slid to the floor of the tub. Brad's hands found her nipples, erect and desperate, ready to be touched, and fondled them. He rolled them between his fingers with a light, firm touch. Heady desire and hot need raced through Betty with the speed of a wildfire. She felt feverish and boneless, desperate, and hungry. It'd been too long since he'd touched her.

She needed Brad. Right now.

They made passionate love in the shower until neither one could stand. His hands touched and stroked her between her legs, sliding over her clitoris and deep into her core. He kissed her all over her face, her forehead, down her cheeks, on the tip of her nose and then covered her mouth with his. His tongue plunged inside at the same rate his finger plunged into her. Betty's legs trembled and she slid to the shower floor, warm water pouring down her body, mixing with body heat and passion and need. "Now, Brad."

"Not here. In bed." He kissed her lightly on the lips, stroked her wet hair and stood, helping her to her feet. They stepped out of the shower and Brad pulled two large bath towels off the rack and wrapped one around her and the other around him. He quickly dried her, making sure to keep her arousal blazing by touching her nipples with the towel then rubbing it between her legs. The friction drove her crazy.

On wobbly legs they exited the bathroom and continued their reunion in bed.

"God, I've missed you," Brad groaned as he stroked the soft inside of Betty's leg. He kissed her lightly on the lips, then opened her mouth with his tongue, plundering her with a clawing need.

Betty moaned. Brad swept her away on a tidal wave of hot desire. With no more foreplay she wrapped her legs around Brad's waist and guided him inside her. He filled her to perfection. His hard, strong thrusts touched her deeply, setting her body on fire. Her hands clenched against Brad's strong back as she clung to his nearness.

Their orgasms came with blistering contractions sooner than they'd expected. Gasping for air and clinging to each other, Betty and Brad rode the pulsing waves until they subsided. As their breathing slowed Brad pulled Betty into his arms and stroked her damp hair off her face.

"Welcome to Paris, sweetheart."

She turned toward Brad with a soft smile. She knew her face was flushed with sated desire. "If I'd known my first visit to Paris would start out like this, I'd have broken the sound barrier to get here sooner."

Brad grinned, his even white teeth not quite hiding the smugness in his eyes. "We're pretty well-matched in the sex department, aren't we?"

Betty blew out a huff and sat up. "Sex? That all this was to you?"

With a gleam in his eyes he said, "Yes. This was only the greatest sex of my life with the woman I love. Nothing more than that." He pretended indifference and patted her on the thigh. "Now you must know that you are to keep all drooling sex maniacs away from you. And as you can see there is a line of sex maniacs waiting right outside this door. There is, however, one sex maniac you need to learn about. He is demanding and needs very special care. He might even be a bit obsessed with you. I suggest you read the manual that describes this fellow very carefully. It'll take you a lifetime to get through it."

The minute Brad finished joking he abruptly stopped talking and Betty wondered if he wanted a lifetime with her. She couldn't imagine what her life would be like without him now. Something twisted inside her, her heart pounded and her head felt light.

After years of being single, Betty had finally found the man of her dreams.

A lifetime. It'd taken Brad a lifetime to find a woman like Betty. Kind, funny, loyal. A woman who was successful, not conceited, yet sure of

herself. If he hadn't bumped into her on the airplane, he'd never have known who she was.

But he knew now. And he knew he wanted a lifetime with her.

Brad was famous, handsome, and wealthy. Could she really fit into his world? Betty sighed and snuggled in his arms. He felt right. She was comfortable with him. He never made her feel left out when they were out on the town, at a party or a premiere. He showed her off with pride.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Betty turned to face him. She drew her finger around the light hair on his chest, noticing the way Brad's eyes darkened with desire. Deciding to be honest, she said, "I was wondering how I fit into your life. We come from two very different worlds."

Brad stopped her wandering finger by pulling her up with him as he lay back against the headboard. "We've been dating for months, Betty. You already fit into my life."

"I'm not the glamorous type, Brad." At his raised eyebrow she rushed on, "Oh, I've loved dressing up and going to functions with you. It's fascinating. But I feel like an imposter pretending to be someone I'm not."

"What are you saying, Betty?"

"You have a worldwide fan base. How will they react to my being a fixture in your life?"

"I don't care. They are my fans, yes. But they aren't my day-to-day life. You are."

Warmth spread through Betty. She knew Brad treasured her. She felt cherished, something she'd never felt before, but only dreamed of. "How serious are you about us?"

"Very serious. I love you."

"I love you too." Betty kissed Brad on the lips.

Not wanting to delve too deeply into their feelings, Betty changed the subject. "I know a way you can prove your love to me." She saw his eyebrows lower and touched the twin lines above either side of his nose. "We'll get back to this discussion soon, I promise."

Serious blue eyes studied her for a long, unnerving moment. Then Brad sighed, sat up straight and said, “Your wish is my command, madam.”

With a light laugh Betty jumped up from the bed and curtsied. “Oh, my knight in shining armor, will you take me someplace sparkly and tall?”

Brad’s wide grin showed his appreciation for her nakedness. Or was it for her playfulness? “I will, milady, but there is one promise I request of you.”

“Anything, sir.” Betty sank to her knees next to the bed. She clasped her hands together as if she was praying. “Name your demand, sir.”

Brad paused for theatrical effect. “I forbid you to go out in public dressed as you are. You will put on proper garments to be viewed by your adoring servants.”

Betty glanced down at her nakedness in feigned shock. “But what’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Nothing,” Brad said in a serious, choked voice. “Nothing at all.”

Betty laughed. “Exactly. I’m wearing nothing.” She twirled gracefully. “But for you, I’ll cover up.”

“You do that.” Brad leered, again caught in the playful moment. “Come on. The Eiffel Tower awaits.”

They kissed at the base of the Eiffel Tower and waited in line for the elevator. As they neared the door a woman said, “Aren’t you Bradley Moore?” She was American, obviously on vacation with her family. She stood with her two high school-aged children and her husband, who seemed embarrassed that his wife had spoken to them.

“Yes I am.” Brad grinned and moved into the elevator car with the other tourists.

“Oh! See, I told you, Timothy,” she said to her husband. The woman scrambled through her large bag and pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper. “Can I have your autograph?”

Brad took the paper and pen from the woman. “May I ask your name?” With the pen poised over the paper, he waited.

“Why? Oh! I’m sorry. I’m so flustered. I never thought I’d be standing next to the world’s biggest movie star. It’s...it’s...”

Her daughter rolled her eyes. “Jeez, Mom.” She turned to Brad and said, “Eleanor. My mom’s name is Eleanor.”

Brad scratched a quick note to Eleanor, signed it and gave the autographed paper and the pen back to her. He took her shaking hand in his and held it for a long moment, marveling that he still had that effect on women. “Here you go, Eleanor. I hope you enjoy your stay in Paris.”

“Oh uh...” Eleanor’s face had purpled. She stared at their clasped hands.

“Mom...” the daughter said in a long-suffering tone.

With a sharp shake of her head Eleanor came back to the real world. “What a kind, gracious man you are, Bradley Moore. I will treasure this autograph for the rest of my life.”

The elevator doors closed and no one spoke. Everyone in the elevator had been touched by the scene they’d just witnessed.

Brad found Betty’s hand and twined his fingers with hers. She squeezed lightly. “I’m proud of how you treated Eleanor,” she whispered. When they reached the upper observation platform Betty gasped. The view of the Seine was gorgeous. The late afternoon sunshine sparkled on the river and nearby music floated up to them.

“This is one of the most magical moments of my life,” Betty said. “I can’t believe I’m in Paris, in the arms of the man I love and sharing the view from the Eiffel Tower. It’s something I never dreamed I’d see,” she whispered. “It’s more beautiful than I could have imagined.” Brad’s body stiffened suddenly and Betty turned toward him. He wore a stunned, amazed look on his face, his eyes were wide and his mouth open. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve never been so touched by anyone’s words in my life, Betty.” Brad turned her toward him. With a tender touch to her cheek, he bent down on one knee, took her left hand in his right one and glanced up at her. “Betty Hammond, love of my life, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Before Betty could answer a press of people crowded around them. Flashes blinded her. Men and women clapped and murmured and sighs were heard from the women. Tourists and citizens of Paris all surged to be closer to hear the answer.

“My God, we’re going to be trampled.” Brad stood up and moved to protect Betty by putting his body in front of hers. His face had changed to granite and Betty saw a muscle tick in his jaw, knew he’d clenched his

teeth. "I should have paid more attention to our surroundings," he muttered. "I'm sorry, Betty. The news is probably all over the internet by now. Our perfect moment is forever gone."

Questions were shouted. "Brad, when are you and Betty gonna get married?"

"Brad, have you set the date?"

"Betty, did you accept?"

Many of the women who witnessed the proposal stood with smiles on their faces. Others held a hand over their hearts or mouths.

Brad wrapped his arm around Betty and pulled her closer for protection. He held up his other hand to quiet the crowd. When a hush fell over the observation platform, he said, "Please let Betty and me have a moment of privacy. We'll answer your questions after that."

Grumbles were heard throughout the crowd but a few people stepped back to give them a bit of open space.

Turning to Betty, Brad whispered, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have proposed."

Betty's heart shattered. She knew Brad didn't see her pained expression because he was staring at the Seine. She knew he couldn't understand her utter joy when he'd proposed, and her crushing despair when he'd taken it back.

Able to handle most any situation, when it came to matters of the heart Betty was suddenly at a loss. She thought she'd worked through her insecurities when it came to relationships, but Brad's few words tore away the tough exterior she displayed to the world and left her trembling inside. There must be a reason he'd rescinded his proposal but at the moment, with the crowd of people surrounding them, she couldn't think what it might be. At the moment she couldn't think at all.

Betty withdrew into her old safe and secure shell and buried her emotions tightly inside, ordering herself not to cry in public. Not to cry in front of Brad.

Oblivious to her feelings, Brad pushed the knife further into Betty's chest by saying, "We have to leave, right now."

Somehow, they made it down to the ground, where Brad hailed a taxi to take them to their hotel. The paparazzi raced to the base of the Eiffel Tower shouting questions and demanding answers. Thank you, internet. One guy even complained, "Hey! You told us you'd answer our questions."

“Now’s not a good time after all,” Brad said as he helped Betty into a cab. “I’m sorry to disappoint you.” The cab sped away from the Eiffel Tower amid angry shouts and slurs from the frustrated reporters.

Betty couldn’t breathe, she was so hurt and humiliated by Brad’s actions. She wouldn’t admit her feeling of embarrassment to him, that would be like salting a wound. She had been swept away by Brad’s romantic proposal. It had come to her as a complete surprise. She knew he loved her ,but didn’t really expect him to want to marry her. After all, they’d lived in totally different worlds until they’d met. Her heart had soared with love and happiness and she’d been on the verge of accepting his proposal.

It amazed her how fast her old feelings of insecurity came back. She’d thought she’d become more confident. She knew she’d grown as a woman, sexually at least. But it seemed that a few hastily spoken words could send her right back to square one emotionally. It seemed she hadn’t really internalized her newfound confidence.

Betty realized that the situation on the observation deck had quickly deteriorated. She knew that Brad had been trying to protect her. So why was she so hurt? Why couldn’t she explain her feelings to Brad, even to herself? If she loved him so much, and she did, if she believed he loved her just as much, and she had, until the doubts flowed back, then why couldn’t she explain her feelings to Brad?

Time. Betty needed time to sort through her emotions. Time out of the spotlight of Brad’s fame. Time to reconnect with herself and learn what she really wanted in life.

Betty needed to search her soul and find the answers to her future.

Neither one spoke on the cab ride back to the hotel, which was for the best. Betty didn’t know what she’d say to Brad. She didn’t want to cry or yell and decided that silence was the best bet.

They had just closed the door to their suite when there was a loud knock. Brad yanked the door open with a “What do you want?”

Lacy Herald stood there with her arm raised. “Why didn’t you call me?”
“What?”

Lacy's eyes narrowed and she glared at Betty. "You didn't tell him." The statement spoke volumes of loathing.

Betty, still shell-shocked from the proposal, didn't react. She felt numb. Words weren't processing properly.

"I came by this morning to speak to you and this woman was here." Lacy pointed a scarlet-tipped fingernail at Betty. "She told me she'd tell you to call me. Obviously, she didn't," Lacy said.

Brad raked his hand through his hair. "Look, Lacy, can you give me a few minutes? I need to speak to Betty."

"Brad, the producer is changing the script. You need to see it and stop him. He's going to ruin the movie." Lacy glared at Betty. "Maybe you ought to send your little plaything home. She seems to be distracting you."

"You've just crossed a line, Lacy," Brad said with steel in his voice. "You're fired."

Brad turned away from his former assistant to talk to Betty.

"What? For speaking my mind about your frumpy girlfriend? If you feel that way, fine. I don't need this job, Brad. I don't need you." Lacy turned to leave the suite.

"Just one moment, Lacy," Brad said in an angry voice. He waited until she turned back to him. "Never speak about Betty like that again." Lacy's mouth formed a straight line. "Do you hear me? You'll only make yourself look small and petty and stupid. And for the record, I've never been interested in you and you know it. I love Betty."

"She'll never live up to your expectations, Brad. She's not in the business and time will show she won't like living in your legendary shadow. So be it. You've made your bed." With that Lacy Herald stormed out of the suite and slammed the door.

Betty sank onto the sofa in the living room. Never had she expected her dream trip to Paris to begin and end in one day. She tried to keep her limbs from shaking and clamped her mouth together to keep her teeth from chattering. Tears formed but she refused to let them slide down her cheeks.

Brad came over and sat next to her. He took her hands in his but Betty pulled them back and clasped them together. "Betty, look at me."

She didn't want him to see her tears and shook her head no. She would have spoken but feared she'd bite her tongue from her chattering teeth.

"I know today got out of hand and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have proposed. It was stupid of me and I'm sorry." Keep stabbing her in the heart, she

thought. “Look, I got caught up in your enjoyment of the Eiffel Tower and forgot about the crowd. For a short time, I forgot my fishbowl life and lived only in the moment. Your moment.”

Betty turned her back to Brad and wiped the tears she couldn't keep falling from her face.

“How can I make it up to you?”

Hauling in a huge breath, Betty finally found her voice. “I don't know.” She didn't look at him, couldn't. She could barely catch her breath, let alone speak.

“Betty, please. Say something.” She couldn't. His next words were, “Don't leave me.”

Betty sucked in a huge breath and said, “I've now been vilified by two awful women in your industry. Both had designs on you, wanted you for your fame and fortune. I want to make sure that you know I never wanted you for either of those things.”

“I know that, sweetheart. That's why I love you. You love me for who I am.”

Betty caught the sob before it could come out and embarrass her. “Yet to your friends and coworkers, and to the world, I'm the frumpy stewardess you're dating. They can't understand it and have probably taken bets on when it will end.”

Frustration sounded in Brad's voice as he rose from the couch. “So? Who cares?”

Betty finally turned to Brad. With tracks of tears marking her face she said in the saddest voice, “I care.” Before Brad could say anything, she went into the bedroom and closed the door. Grabbing her suitcase out of the closet, she pulled her clothes off the hangers and out of the drawers and tossed them into the bag. With a sharp zip she grabbed the suitcase and walked into the living room.

Brad turned from the window to see Betty walking to the door and said again, “Betty, don't leave. Let's talk about this.”

She stopped at the door. “I need to think. You proposed and then told me it was a mistake and you were sorry, before I could even answer you. Then I was humiliated by your production assistant. I came from a quiet life where no one made fun of me, embarrassed me or ridiculed me. I lead a private life. One I cherish. I guess the odds were in the favor of those that thought we wouldn't last. At least someone is happy tonight.”

Without a backward glance, Betty left the suite.

Stunned, Brad didn't move. How had it gone so wrong? He loved Betty. He needed her. A surge of adrenaline rushed through him. Betty couldn't leave him! He raced out of the suite and down the hall where he saw the doors to the elevator closing. "Betty, wait!" Brad shouted. He tried to stop the doors but couldn't hold them back.

As they cut off his view of Betty, he wondered if he'd ever see her again. Wondered how he'd ever live without her.

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Solvang, CA

Four months passed by in a blur. Betty had never been so lonely or miserable in her life. Every rag magazine called her, camped out on her front lawn, and followed her wherever she went. She couldn't go to the supermarket, dry cleaners, or movies without someone jumping out from behind a bush or tree to snap her picture.

The photographers must have sap in their veins the way they blended into the scenery so well. Sap reminded her of sticky syrup. She was a sap for letting Brad's public life get to her and he was the syrup glued to her heart. It figured Betty would think of sweets at a time like this.

She blamed it on all the bakeries that surrounded her.

Solvang, the small Dutch city in the Santa Ynez Valley, was noted for its famous *éclairs* and *kranskage*, or almond cakes, as well as their almond custard *kringle*. She hadn't indulged her sorrow in any of it though. She had no appetite. Which in itself said a lot about how she felt about Brad. Normally, Betty would drown her sorrows in sweets, but for the first time in her life she'd fallen head over heels in love with someone and had no idea what to do about it.

Hence the lack of appetite.

After all, it wasn't as if he were a normal man. Well, he was normal in all the bodily ways, very normal. Betty sighed out loud thinking about his

bodily ways. As a matter of fact, he was magnificent. No, his lifestyle wasn't normal. But whose life was normal? Hers wasn't. She had buried herself in books, ignored the outside world, except for work, and refused to watch TV or movies for most of her adult life. That certainly wasn't normal.

So, whose fault was it that she and Brad weren't together?

Hers.

The thought startled her so much she had clear visions of cupcakes dancing in her head. Food again. A strong temptation to eat all of Solvang's pastries caused Betty's fingers to twitch. Now that was a normal reaction for her, she thought. Go right to the sugar. Any and all sugar.

Betty had left town to get away and search her soul. She'd learned she'd been a fool. Love wasn't easy. In order for it to last it needed to be carefully cultivated, cherished. It was work. Betty knew she hadn't worked hard enough to accept Brad's lifestyle, hadn't really accepted the changes it would create in her life. She also knew he needed someone who would accept the interruptions, violations of privacy.

She knew that to love him was to love all of him.

She didn't know where to go from here. Would Brad accept an apology? Would an apology be enough?

Enough wallowing. She'd made her bed. Time to lie in it. Which brought her to the bed she was lying in right now. She glanced at the cottage she'd rented for a month. As she stared at the walls, her book lay turned over on the bed next to her, forgotten. Betty didn't see the pretty country pictures that were hung to brighten the room. A bird twittered outside the window, making beautiful music, but Betty didn't hear it. Her comfortable old robe hung open, showing her favorite well-worn pajamas underneath. With a long sigh Betty picked up her spy thriller, now having sworn off romance novels for the rest of her life.

The book didn't hold her attention and Betty fell asleep. She dreamed of Brad walking down the aisle with Jolie Kensington, who smiled with righteous glee that she had won the prize. With a start Betty jerked awake. Sweat lined her brow and her heart pounded. She glanced at the clock and saw it was four in the afternoon.

Determined to put the dream behind her, she showered, put on new makeup and a light dress for the warm afternoon. Low-heeled Kate Spade sandals finished her outfit. My how she'd changed. Her life before Bradley

Moore had consisted of DSW and Macy's shoes, Target clothes and drugstore makeup. Her life after Bradley Moore consisted of designer shoes, expensive makeup, and wallowing.

Time for a stroll down Solvang's main thoroughfare, Mission Drive. The distraction of the quaint shops cleared her head that beautiful afternoon. She walked along the sidewalk, charmed by the windmills, bicycles and even a few horse-drawn trolleys showing tourists around the town. A few shop owners wore authentic Danish costumes that added to the feeling of being in Denmark. The warm afternoon sun shone brightly and even though Betty looked like a million she felt like a dollar.

She shopped in some antique stores and a Christmas store and perused shops that displayed artwork from local artists. Betty found the Hans Christian Andersen Museum quite interesting. After hearing her stomach rumble, she decided to get something for dinner and chose the Solvang Restaurant to grab a bite to eat.

Home to Arne's famous aebleskiver, a Danish pancake, the Solvang Restaurant served traditional Danish as well as American cuisine. She ordered Danish-style meatballs and red cabbage. When the plate arrived, Betty groaned at the amount of food on it. She ate what she could then asked the server to pack the rest up to take back to the cottage.

Not sure what she'd do next, Betty lingered over a cup of coffee. She watched happy couples stroll up the street hand in hand. Children raced past with smiles of joy on their faces.

Buck up, Betty! Other women have loved and lost. Consider this a warning. Never date a celebrity unless he isn't well-known. She laughed at herself. If the celebrity wasn't well-known, he wouldn't be a celebrity. Having cheered herself up a bit, she paid her bill and left the restaurant.

A woman walking toward her smiled. Betty figured her to be about her age. As they passed each other on the street the woman stopped. "Are you Betty Hammond?"

"Yes, may I help you?" The woman seemed nice enough but Betty had dealt with reporters who charmed first then struck like a viper later. Wary but pleasant, she waited for the woman's comment.

The woman looked Betty up and down for a long moment. "You look fabulous! Have you lost weight?"

When Betty had first come back from Paris, she'd been hounded by TMZ. For a short, intense time she'd considered getting plastic surgery to

change her appearance. Now that had been a thought! She'd decided she'd come back as someone else, someone who would take the word frumpy out of the dictionary. Since then, Betty had lost fifteen pounds from the stress and looked fabulous. All her life people told her she had a pretty face. Now with her size-six body she looked gorgeous. When her clothes began to hang on her she bought stylish new slacks, skirts, dresses, and blouses. Betty even splurged on an expensive pair of Kate Spade sandals that elongated her legs and made her feel sexy. The same shoes she wore right now.

Pleased by the compliment, Betty said, "Yes I have. Thank you."

"What diet are you on? I want to look like you."

"I'm on the leave-your-boyfriend diet. I find it works well for reducing food cravings."

The woman laughed. "Betty, you are wonderful. I love your sense of humor. That man of yours has lost his marbles to let you get away. I'm rooting for you and hope Mr. Bradley Moore comes to his senses."

Redness crept up Betty's face. "Thank you. I appreciate the support." She paused, unsure if she should say it, but her need to confess overwhelmed her. "I'm the one who left him."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Now why would you leave a hunk like Bradley Moore?"

The conversation was so friendly that Betty couldn't help but pour out her story. She summed it up with, "And I couldn't deal with the public pressure anymore."

"My dear, take love when you can. No relationship is perfect. Suck it up!" The sternness of the remark was tempered with kindness. "From everything I've read he's a good man. There aren't many of those out there." The woman winked and laughed.

Betty smiled. "I know that. He is a very good man." She heaved in a breath. "Would you like to have coffee with me? We can go to Olsen's Bakery across the street."

"I would love to but I can't. I'm meeting my daughter and husband in a few minutes." The woman patted Betty on her shoulder. "Rethink your decision, Betty. Grab happiness. Life is short."

A sob nearly escaped Betty. This stranger had touched a nerve. "Thank you for your kindness and for taking the time to stop and talk. May I have your name?"

“Rachael Grand.”

Betty pulled out a small spiral notebook and wrote her phone number on a slip of paper. “Please call me if you’re ever in the Los Angeles area. I would love to have lunch or dinner with you.”

Rachael beamed. “I’d like that. Now you run off and find your man. Put everything else out of your mind. That’s my advice for happiness.”

Betty hugged Rachael and watched as she walked briskly up the street to find her daughter and husband. “Now that’s an amazing woman,” she muttered.

With no place to be, Betty decided to get another cup of coffee and a dessert. Perked up by Rachael’s kindness, hope flowing through her once again, she knew she was on the road to recovery when she wanted to eat sweets again. She grabbed a Los Angeles Times from the newsstand and took it into Olsen’s Bakery. Choosing a small, round table by the window, Betty ordered and opened the newspaper to the Calendar section. Before she could glance at the front page the coffee arrived. Taking a grateful sip of the hot brew, Betty opened the paper and gasped, nearly spitting out the mouthful of liquid.

On a half page ad in bold black letters were the words, “I’m Looking for Betty Hammond,” by Bradley Moore. Underneath the title was a picture of her and Brad attending a movie premiere. She glanced outside the window to see if anyone was peering in at her. After all, millions of people read the Los Angeles Times. She turned her back to the window and bent forward to read the article.

Bradley Moore is looking for Betty Hammond. According to TMZ they had a misunderstanding while in Paris some months ago. While standing on the observation platform of the Eiffel Tower, Moore proposed to Hammond. Before she could answer him, he told her he’d made a mistake and took back the proposal. Joan Blue, an Iowa tourist who’d been on the observation deck at the time said it had been a very romantic proposal. “But the crowd pushed forward, trapping Betty and Brad,” Blue said. “The paparazzi were everywhere, shouting questions and demanding answers. Bradley Moore stood up and moved closer to Betty, I think to protect her from the crowd. She looked kind of stunned, he looked angry. After saying to the crowd, he’d made a mistake, he ushered Betty down to the street. The look on her face is something I’ll never forget. First, she seemed really, really happy, then badly hurt.” Moore says he took back the proposal

because he'd wanted it to be private. He never meant to hurt Betty and has tried to call her to explain, but she hasn't returned his calls. If anyone has seen Betty Hammond, the flight attendant hero from flight 738, please call this number at the newspaper. We'll forward it to Mr. Moore, who we hope will find his true love. You go, Bradley!

Tears ran down Betty's cheeks. He'd wanted the proposal to be private. Yet it had been the most romantic moment of her life. She stared out the window and saw a blur of images passing through her mind. Images from when she'd first met Brad onboard her flight. Their first date, first time out in public. Nights at home together getting to know each other, hot, desperate sex.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

With painful clarity, Betty realized she'd made a mistake leaving Brad. She paid for the coffee, grabbed the newspaper, and went back to the cottage to cry her eyes out.

Packed and ready to go home the next morning, Betty decided to eat breakfast at Olsen's Bakery before she left. After she'd fortified herself with sugar and caffeine, she drummed up the nerve to call Brad. She stepped out of the bakery to make her phone call but couldn't find her phone. Frustrated, she glanced up at the crystal-blue sky. Flying in a series of precise maneuvers were small airplanes sky typing a message. Not overly interested, focused on retrieving her cell phone, Betty stepped into the street to go back to her cottage. A horn honked and a man yelled, "Watch where you're going!" In a fit of anger, he flipped her off. Betty shrugged, apologized, and moved back onto the sidewalk.

Breathing in a long, calming sigh, she glanced up again. But the air she'd sucked in flew out of her mouth in a gasp. There in large letters were the words, Betty Hammond Will You Marry Me?

She didn't know how he'd found her. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know where he was. People on the street were pointing at the sky then back to her. Across the street a woman grinned and held up her cell phone and yesterday's Los Angeles Times Calendar section. Rachael Grand. She gave Betty a happy wave then pointed behind her.

Betty whirled around and found Brad bent down on one knee with his arms stretched out in welcome and a tremulous smile on his face. "Well?"

Tears flowed down her cheeks. Betty licked her lips, tasting salt. Her throat had closed up at the sight of Brad kneeling behind her.

“I thought you wanted the proposal to be private.” She felt the silly grin on her face and never wanted it to go away.

“I figured this would catch your attention. I know what a hermit you can be.” Brad shifted the other knee to the ground and raised the first one with a small groan. “Answer me, Betty, and put me out of my misery. My knees can’t take this much longer.”

Betty bent down to Brad and kneeled in front of him. With a tender reach she cupped his face in her hands and stared at the man she loved. “Yes.”

“Oh, thank God!” Brad groaned as he lumbered to a standing position. “I’m getting too old for kneeling.” He pulled Betty with him, twirled her around and shouted to the gathering crowd, “She said yes!”

The crowd roared their approval and clapped. Flashes blinded them. TMZ had found them once again.

But this time Betty didn’t care and ignored them. She focused on the knowledge that Brad’s strong arms held her again after so many months of emptiness. She sucked in his masculine scent, reveled in the feeling of love that radiated from him.

His kiss seared her soul and weakened her legs. Forgetting the world around them, Betty wrapped her arms around Brad’s broad shoulders and molded her body to his.

He pulled away from her after he thoroughly swept his tongue through her mouth. His crooked grin melted her bones and Betty laid her head on his shoulder as he hugged her tightly against him.

“I’m sorry, Brad. I was an idiot,” Betty said.

“No, sweetheart, I was. I should have realized how hurtful it was to take back the proposal. I’d been so caught up in your delight at seeing Paris that the proposal popped out before I could think.” Betty pulled back a bit to study Brad’s face. “I had every intention of explaining my change of mind when we got back to the hotel but you ran out on me.”

Idiot, idiot, idiot.

Betty mentally kicked herself for not giving Brad the chance to apologize. “From now on I promise I won’t run away.”

Brad pulled her close and whispered in her ear, “You won’t, my love, that’s for sure. I’m keeping you close by my side. There will be no chance for you to run again. Besides, who else will serve me my favorite vegetarian meal?”

“Oh, Brad,” Betty said. “Ewell Grubbins pellets! I’ll stock up as soon as we get married.” She laughed with joy. “By the way, when will that be?”

“Immediately,” Brad said with a twinkle in his eye. “I need you. I can’t go another day eating carrot sticks, mushy beans or protein powder without you.”

“Immediately it is.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing as Emily Sinclair, Barbara Goodwin is a multi-published author. Her former day job as a flight attendant for a worldwide airline gave her unbelievable stories to use in her novels. Unbelievable because most of the time she couldn't dream up the things that happened on her flights. Barbara loves to write sexy adventure stories that involve romantic suspense, time travel, comedy, and mystery. She also loves to read, write, and spend time with her family.



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