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Past Interference

By

Kathryn R. Blake

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CHAPTER ONE

Eleanor Benson stared at the different swatches of color laid before her, and the small hammer pounding in her temple increased in tempo. Jerry Douglas, who had rescued Elly after her husband's abuse put her in the hospital four months ago, left explicit instructions for her to contact him if she showed any signs of a headache or stress, but Elly couldn't pull him away from work. Not for this. He would insist she sit down and tell him what was wrong, and she couldn't. Her fears might be illogical, but that didn't make them any less real.

This was the tenth migraine she'd suffered in the last two weeks. After the third one, Jerry insisted she visit Marcus Devon, Corbin's Bend's personal physician. Marcus ordered a CAT scan for her, which meant Jerry needed to drive her to Denver Memorial. In February. What was a pleasant, hour-long ride in warmer weather turned into an icy, treacherous slide in the winter that few wanted to travel. Good thing Jerry's car was four-wheel drive.

The scan showed everything was normal, as Elly suspected it would. The pain she suffered had no physical source, because it came from her over-thinking everything, not her brain. She'd experienced migraines since she was a little girl every time she stressed out. And planning a wedding was about as stressful as things got. Especially when the event being planned was your own, and you'd decided you couldn't go.

Marriage. A binding contract intended to be permanent. Eternal.

She should be joyous, happy, excited. Instead, Elly felt like throwing up.

Everyone was being so generous with their time. So supportive. How could she tell them she'd made a mistake? That she had been wrong, dishonest, to accept Jerry's proposal this past Christmas eve.

Covering her face with her hands, Elly realized how easily she'd been swept away by the Douglas's family traditions, mistletoe and romance of the holiday. Last Christmas, probably her favorite time of year, Jerry took her to meet his parents. He'd known all along what he was going to do; she, however, had no idea.

The Douglas's tradition was to place their final decorations on their tree, the unique ones that held a special meaning for the heart more than the eye, on Christmas Eve. Most of the items were simple, done by small hands with great care and love for the parents and siblings they adored.

Jerry's family was so open and loving; they embraced Elly as one of their own. During this visit, she learned Jerry was the youngest of four. A buoyant surprise, her mother called him. Sharon never even suspected she was pregnant when she and her husband booked a honeymoon trip to Paris for their twentieth anniversary. However, by the time she got on the plane, she was in her 32nd week, beginning her eighth month, and felt like a barge as she waddled down the aisle to her reserved seat.

All her previous pregnancies had been uncomplicated, but Sharon was almost forty, so her obstetrician cautioned her to take things easy in her last trimester and warned her to make sure she returned home before her 36th week, just to be safe. Sharon and Joe only planned to be gone for two weeks, so no one foresaw any problems. Dr. Stein didn't begrudge them their vacation, and even signed a letter stating Sharon's travel did not pose any health risks on the dates of her departure, or her return. Joe purchased first class tickets to surprise her, which were fortuitous if not precognitive given the extra bulk Sharon carried.

The vacation itself had been idyllic, romantic and increasingly uncomfortable for the mom-to-be. At the point Sharon's back pains intensified enough to ruin her enjoyment of the city

on the Seine, they decided to cut their time short and head home a week early. When Joe explained the reason for the change to the airline's reservation desk, they expressed some concern about Sharon's ability to travel, but Joe assured them she was fine as he pointed out their return was even earlier than Sharon's doctor approved, so the attendant reluctantly agreed to seat them on the next available flight.

Unfortunately, even as a fetus Jerry took exception to high altitudes, so Sharon went into labor thirty thousand feet over the Atlantic, giving birth with the help of two female attendants and a surgeon passenger as they flew over international waters. Such births, they learned, were still governed by maritime law, which made Jerry an anchor baby born in the state where the plane was registered — Illinois, even though neither he nor his parents ever set foot in 'The Land of Lincoln.' Sharon laughingly told Elly their surprise bundle retained an aversion to flying ever since.

Jerry grimaced at the story, having been teased about his impatience since the day he was born. "Pay them no heed," he advised, placing a kiss on Elly's head. "Here." He handed her a small glass angel ornament. The crystal wings and bell skirt were so fine and delicate she hesitated to take the figure from his fingers.

"Go on. She's a lot sturdier than she looks. Just grasp the hanging string. I want you to place her on the tree."

"Me? Why?" Elly asked, blinking up at him in wonder. These were the Douglas's traditions, and as welcoming as Jerry's family had been, she was still an outsider.

"Because I want to start a new tradition — tonight. Please?"

Elly carefully pinched the slender golden cord between her thumb and index finger and set the sparkling three-inch figurine on her palm before she glanced at Jerry in surprise. "Did you make this?"

Smiling, he shook his head while his mother, father, two brothers and single sister all took seats on the couches positioned near the tree. Elly held the last ornament to be placed.

"He did have it specially made, however," his mother announced with a grin.

"Mother..." Jerry warned.

Elly examined the fragile angel more closely. "You did?"

"Yes, I did. Look at her eyes."

They were two tiny green stones that matched the color of Elly's irises. She smiled at him, when a sudden sparkle from the angel's halo caught her eye. A garland of diamond-like crystals crowned the celestial being's long crystal locks.

"She's got a halo of shiny stars set in a silver circle," Elly said in wonder, staring at the delicate winged figure.

"The eyes are emeralds, the circle is platinum, the bar set stones are real diamonds, but you're right about the halo, because you are my very own angel." Grasping her free hand in his, Jerry dropped down to one knee. "Eleanor Ann Franklin Benson, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

The room grew snowfall silent as Elly's tear-filled eyes gazed down at the man she adored.

"You're asking me to marry you?" Her words emerged as a mere squeak of a sound.

"I told you I would do things right when I proposed. Yes, my heart, I want to spend the rest of my life with you at my side and under my wing. I want to love, hold, cherish and protect you for as long as we both shall live. Will you say yes? Please?"

Elly's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Then she gazed at his smiling

family gathered to witness their baby lay his heart out on a line. The man, whom she loved most in the world, knelt before her and his closest relatives to claim he wanted her. Her. Overcome with emotion, Elly could only nod her head.

His smile broad, Jerry rose to his feet, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her beneath the sprig of mistletoe his eldest brother held above their heads.

“Well done, sport,” Johnny murmured, clapping Jerry on the back before he retook his seat.

“You had me worried there for a second, brat,” Jerry whispered as he pulled her close for a hug. Keeping his lips hovering near her cheek, he added, “I think I might have to paddle that delectable rear end of yours later for causing me so much anxiety.”

Elly drew back to gaze at him in alarm. Was he angry with her?

Giving his head a slight shake, he detached the ring from its lofty position on the angel’s head and slipped it on her finger. A perfect fit. Elly gazed at the sparkling band in wonder as he set the ornament in its place of honor on the tree.

Then Jerry’s family converged on them with hugs, kisses and congratulations.

Later, while Elly stared at the brilliant, twinkling diamonds under the tree lights, she asked Jerry softly, “How did you know I didn’t want a solitaire?”

Holding her hand, he smiled. “I wanted to get you something different from your first engagement ring, and I liked this one’s style — a lot. Unusual, yet traditionally elegant at the same time. I hoped you would like it too, but I made sure the jeweler would let me exchange it for something more to your taste if you didn’t.

She leaned in closer to him and whispered, “I love it, but it has to be awfully expensive. Maybe we should get something smaller?”

He bent his head and kissed her. “Not your concern. Brent has a friend who’s a jeweler, so don’t worry about the cost. Do you really like it?”

Nodding, she murmured, “It’s perfect.”

And it had been a perfect proposal, made by a perfect man, on a perfect day, to a very flawed woman.

That night, after she and Jerry made slow, passionate love, Elly asked, “Are you sure?”

He idly stroked his fingers up and down her spine. “About what, sweetheart?”

“That you want to marry me?”

He drew back to gaze at her. “Yes, I’m positive. Why? Do you have doubts?”

Her shoulders rose in a casual shrug. “Only a couple thousand of them.”

“That you love me?”

She cupped his face. “No. No. No. I love you wholly, completely and entirely, but I don’t understand how you could love me. I’m damaged goods.”

Frowning, he gave her nose a tap. “We’ve discussed this, Elly. Many times. You were not at fault for your divorce or for the things your ex-husband did.”

“I know, but —”

“No, Elly. There are no buts in this. I hate what Arthur did to you. I wish I’d picked up the gun and shot him after knocking him flat, but my disgust for your husband bears no reflection on you. I love you. I have loved you since the first day I watched you playing in the dog park with your tiny ball of yipping fluff, but I never thought we could be together because you were married. The fact I suspected you were unhappy only made things worse. However, you, my fragile angel, are the closest thing to perfection I will ever know, and I intend to spend the rest of my life proving it to you.”

Elly said nothing more on the subject that night, or since, even though she continued to fret about what she'd committed herself to from that day forward. Her rational mind accepted Jerry would never become the monster Arthur changed into after they married. And yet... In six days, less than a week, on Valentine's Day, she was supposed to promise to love honor and obey another man. Yes, she obeyed Jerry now, so it shouldn't be any different. But it was. The sanctity of her wedding vows were binding. Immutable. Forever.

The room slowly closed in on her, making it difficult to breathe. Afraid she was about to slip into panic mode, Elly swept the swatches and fabric books on the floor in effort to snap herself out of the downward spiral that threatened to drag her into its spinning vortex. Muffin came running into the living room from her bed in Jerry's office and promptly went on duty by barking at whatever disturbed her mistress. Unfortunately, the little dog's yapping only exacerbated the painful pounding in Elly's head.

"No, Muffin. Settle. No one is at the door. Mommy just dropped some things. It's okay. Now go lie down."

The poodle gave a small, distressed whimper as though she didn't understand, but knew something was amiss. "Go on, sweetie. Mommy's got a bit of a headache, but she'll be fine." Though the tiny dog obeyed, she kept looking back as she made her return walk into Jerry's office, to ensure Elly understood she wasn't at all pleased about being exiled.

Once Muffin settled and the house was quiet again, Elly picked up her cell and called Charmagne Kendle, Brent Carmichael's sexy, live-in girlfriend, who still resisted walking down the aisle with the founder of Corbin's Bend.

"Hi." Char's voice held a slight laugh to it. Char and Elly had been close friends for months now, so she undoubtedly suspected Elly had been stewing and second-guessing herself for the past hour before she called. However, Char also thought Elly's fears about her upcoming wedding were groundless.

"I can't do it. This isn't going to work," Elly announced, her eyes brimming as she began to pant.

"Yes, it will." The laughter instantly vanished from Char's voice. "You're worrying yourself dizzy over nothing. What were you doing before you called me?"

Elly glanced down at the jumbled mess. "Going through color swatches."

"Elly, why? You did a beautiful job picking everything out. I love the flowers you chose. The church will shimmer like a piece of heaven all in white; and your reception in the community center is going to bloom like a flower garden in February. Your dress is breathtaking, yet practical. Everything is going to be perfect."

"How can it be when the bride's such a mess?"

"Take a deep breath, Elly." Elly sucked in a lungful of air. "Good. Now another. Okay. Are you getting another headache?" Char asked, her worry evident.

"No. I don't know. I'm fine," Elly insisted. "Just scared, I guess."

"Call Jerry now. If not caught early, those migraines can put you out of commission for days. I know you. You'll insist nothing is wrong as you continue to work yourself into a state that's so bad, Marcus will need to sedate you. Trust me, if you let it get that far, your head won't be the only thing that hurts when you get better, and you know it."

"Okay," Elly agreed on a sigh. Jerry couldn't help her with this, she needed to do it herself, but he wouldn't understand that. "I'll call or walk over there, although I think his receptionist is tired of seeing me."

"Sally? She adores you. Everyone who works with Jerry loves you, because you've made

their boss so happy. So, call him, or see him. Your choice. But if you don't do it, I'll tell Brent, and you understand what that means."

Elly immediately straightened. "Hey, you can't do that. We have a pact. You swore you wouldn't tell if I confided in you."

Char chuckled. "Okay, I won't, but if Brent drags it out of me, and you know he's awfully good at that, it won't be my fault."

"Fine. Okay. I'll go. However, I want to state for the record that I'm doing this under severe protest."

"Just as long as you do it, you can protest all you want. Call me later. 'Kay?"

"'Kay." Elly clicked off, then stared at the phone in her hand. The numbers started to blur. With a sigh over the futility of her actions, she rose and strode over to the door that led to Jerry's clinic. He was a wonderful vet, she loved him to pieces, and he was a perfect match for her, unlike Arthur. Marrying Arthur Benson had been the worst mistake of her life. She should never have wed him, but if she hadn't, then she wouldn't have met Jerry. So, even her worst mistake produced a positive result. But that did little to ease her misgivings.

The connection between their house and Jerry's clinic took her into the area near the kennels. Kelly, one of Jerry's technicians, glanced up from the pug she was bathing. Elly didn't recognize the cute little dog, but suspected the frantic tail-wagger was most likely a boarder Jerry agreed to keep while her parents went on a winter vacation.

"Hi, Elly. You here to see Jerry? He's with a client right now."

Elly stopped in her tracks. "Oh. I don't want to bother him if he's busy. Just tell him I dropped by. Okay?"

"Sure. Want me to give him a message?"

Even knowing she should tell Kelly about her migraine, Elly couldn't do it. She understood that by not admitting her problem she'd at least be facing the corner when Jerry found out and much more likely spending time over his knee for her omission. He had only a few strict rules, and delaying to report any illness or injury was breaking one of them. However, attempting to cover or hide being sick was ten times worse, which he'd demonstrated on her backside more than once. Except he couldn't help her through this. No one could. Plastering a smile on her face, she shook her head. "No. Nothing urgent. Thanks."

Elly returned to the house, shut the door, leaned against it and closed her eyes. Sleep seemed to ease the pain, but with the wedding looming like a specter before her, she doubted the sandman would visit. Pulling away with a sigh, she'd almost made it back to the sofa, when Jerry stepped through the connecting door. Elly's pulse quickened and heart fluttered, as they always did when Jerry was near.

He looked tired, and she was sure her recent headaches were to blame. The familiar telltale brush of his fingers through his golden, brown hair suggested planning their wedding had kept him from scheduling a haircut. Even so, she liked the look, and overlong bangs couldn't hide those indecently long eyelashes and the normally devilish twinkle in his hazel eyes, which seemed somewhat dimmed of late. Despite balancing a hectic schedule, he still managed to spend a few hours each week in the center's gym, which served to relieve his stress as well as keep his chest firm and waist trim. Though Elly felt the strength in Jerry's arms when he held her, he wasn't as tall or as muscular as Arthur, but then gazing at Arthur never caused desire to pool in Elly's groin the way a simple smile from Jerry could. He'd been the white knight rescuing an abused damsel when he charged into her life, and she loved him so much it hurt.

A large black lab and tiny white poodle rushed over to greet him as they did every night

when he came home. He knelt down to give them equal attention. “Yes, I’m happy to see you both, too. All right, settle down. Have they been out recently?” he asked Elly.

“About a half-hour ago.”

“Okay, guys. I’m here for only a quick visit. We’ll go for a walk later. Go back to your beds.” As though satisfied they got their message across, the two dogs returned to their downstairs cushions in Jerry’s office-slash-bedroom. The sight of their mismatched sizes always brought a smile to Elly’s lips.

“What’s wrong?” Jerry asked with a glance at the strewn books before he rose to his feet and centered his gaze directly on her.

Elly groaned. The man was far too perceptive sometimes. “Nothing. I just thought I would drop by and check how you were doing.”

“Uh huh. Care to try that again, sweetheart?”

Her shoulders dropping, Elly confessed, “I think I’m getting another migraine.”

He crossed over and placed the back of his hand against her forehead. “Take anything for it?”

“No. Not yet. It only just started.” Okay, that was a lie, which would get her in even deeper trouble if he found out. She held still beneath his hand, but knew she was flushed, so she suspected he would be escorting her into the bathroom next.

He gave a brisk nod, then grabbed her hand. “Come with me.”

“Jerry,” she protested, but cut off her words with a grimace under his angry glare. Though he didn’t make taking her temperature a punishment, exactly. He did make it an exercise in obedience.

She stood in the bathroom while he retrieved the glass tube, shook it, and then liberally coated it with lubricating jelly. “Pants and panties down, now,” he ordered without looking at her.

With an inner groan, she obeyed and positioned herself over his knees when he sat on the toilet. They’d done this often enough after she’d been released from the hospital last October, so she should be used to it by now, but she never got over the way her former husband had punished her anally. Jerry questioned her almost every time they did this, but she was afraid he would decide an anal plug or a fig of ginger was an excellent way to get his point across, and she didn’t think she could willingly accept either of those punishments again.

She grimaced at the feel of thermometer sliding into her, but remained obedient and compliant. Jerry wasn’t trying to hurt or embarrass her. Not really. He was of the opinion that rectal temperatures were more accurate, so that’s what he used, and while they waited, he stroked her back and bottom to help her relax. Despite her uneasiness, his caresses calmed and centered her until she let out a soft sigh.

“Good girl,” he praised. “You always start out so tense when we do this, and yet you know I won’t hurt you, so I suspect it’s something Arthur did. We’re getting married in less than a week, Elly. Don’t you think it’s time you trusted me enough to tell me the truth?”

“I don’t like talking about it,” she admitted. “I’m still having nightmares about some of his punishments.”

“Have you at least told Traci your bad dreams are reoccurring?”

Traci Jackson was the therapist Jerry insisted Elly visit. She’d told Traci about the source of her fears, but not how the past was bollixing up her plans for their future. “Yes, sir.”

“All right. As long as you’re talking to someone. Easy.” When the thin, glass tube was withdrawn, Elly breathed another sigh, this one of relief.

He chuckled softly at the sound. “Your temperature is a little elevated. Any other symptoms besides the headache?”

Shaking her head, she started to rise, but he placed a hand at the small of her back to hold her in position, then cleaned off her butt and the thermometer while she remained bent over his knees, reviewing everything she’d said and done.

“What’s our rule about honesty?” he asked in a tone that sounded casual and nonchalant, though Elly understood he was anything but.

“That I am not to lie to you for any reason.”

“Correct. And what did you do when I asked you what was wrong?”

“I deflected.”

He paused for a second. “Which is merely another way of saying you were trying to hide the truth, isn’t it?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so?” The question emerged with an edge of sharpness, which immediately put Elly on the defensive.

“You’re busy enough without having me run whining to you over every little thing that goes wrong.”

She should have expected the swat that fell on her unprotected hindquarters, but the smack still robbed her of breath. “Ow.”

“I thought we discussed this through a few days ago. I thought you understood that I do not regard any of your problems as whining, and that I expect you to come to me whenever something is bothering you, especially if you suspect you’re not well.”

That had been one of their longer ‘discussions,’ during which Jerry made his point painfully clear. And, yet...

His hand returned to stroking. “I’m clearly not getting through to you, sweetheart. And though you’ve earned one, I’m not convinced a spanking is the answer, either.”

“I did come to see you,” she pointed out in her defense.

“Yes, you did, and that was good. However, you should have also told Kelly what was wrong, which you didn’t, and when I asked, you attempted to cover up the problem, which is unacceptable. I instituted that restriction for a reason, Elly, and you agreed to abide by the rules we established, so you can’t just ignore one when it pleases you. At least not without earning a consequence.”

Though his words were harsh, his touch remained soothing and gentle. He was upset with her for not being truthful, but concern always trumped disappointment. “I know,” she answered. Jerry’s consequences weren’t fun, but he was always fair.

“How’s your tummy? Are you nauseated at all?”

“No, sir.”

“A good sign. All the same, I want you to go to bed and rest for a bit.”

“But —”

“Do you want a spanking after all, young lady?” he inquired, cutting her off.

Elly winced and clenched her butt cheeks together. “No, sir.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“I guess I’m going to lie down and rest for a bit.”

“Wise answer.” He helped her rise, then placed two hands at her waist and turned her to face him. “You and I will discuss this again, later tonight, after you’re better. Understand?”

A reprieve, of sorts. Her health always came first as far as Jerry was concerned. He never

punished when she felt ill, which she appreciated, though it left her dreading the moment when he decided she was well enough to answer for her errors in judgment. Even so, he was never overly harsh with her. In fact, compared to Arthur, Jerry was far more tolerant and understanding than she deserved.

When Elly gave a nod, he regarded her with a raised eyebrow and a tap against her waist. “Yes, sir,” she whispered.

Grinning, he placed a kiss on her bare belly. “Another good answer. You’re two for two this afternoon.” He helped draw up her pink sweatpants, then rose and gave her a hug. “Never worry about disturbing me, Elly. You’re what’s most important to me. You take precedence.”

And there lay the crux of her problem. She had difficulty viewing herself as a priority, and yet she couldn’t question his statement unless she wanted a lecture on her value as an individual. She knew he loved her, and his concern for her was real, but he didn’t deserve to be dragged away from his work every time she got a hangnail. Especially, when the ‘hangnail’ could only be cured by cutting her finger off.

They’d discussed long and hard whether she felt comfortable remaining in a domestic discipline relationship after what Arthur did to her. The thought of placing herself in a similar situation caused Elly many nights of anxiety, but Jerry understood. Offering her unlimited patience and consideration, he talked through Elly’s concerns with her and her mentor, Kelli Jackson.

Jerry strongly believed in the DD dynamic. So strongly, Elly suspected he would be unhappy in a non-spanking marriage, and she loved him too much to make him miserable, so they compromised. He promised her an equal say in every decision they made, and she promised to be open and honest about her feelings. He preferred to be the final arbitrator in their discussions, but if she couldn’t consent to his terms, he agreed to call in an unbiased third party. Unfortunately, that person would most likely be Brent Carmichael, who was also Jerry’s best friend. So far, they had been able to work through everything themselves, so Brent’s input hadn’t been required, though Elly secretly wondered whether Brent could be as impartial as Jerry assured her his friend and mentor would be.

After they’d talked through each rule in their current bylaws, Elly agreed to abide by them with the understanding Jerry would spank her if she broke one, and all punishment decisions needed to be his alone. Even she doubted she would always agree to a spanking when she went afoul of their rules, despite the fact Jerry never spanked Elly against her will. However, once she laid bare butt over his knees, he was the boss. Point was, even though Jerry did nothing to prompt her unease, Elly no longer thought she could marry him, not if he insisted she vow before God to obey him.

His fingers moved up to her shoulders where he massaged away her tension. “Elly... Why do I get the impression you’re still not being completely honest with me?”

Swallowing over the lump in her throat, she gazed up at him and asked, “Do we have to get married?”

CHAPTER TWO

He grew unnaturally still. “What?”

Elly swallowed as uncertainty tightened her throat. “I’m not sure I want to get married.”

His brows came together in a frown as he drew his cell phone out and pressed a button. “Sally. Something’s come up. Could you cancel the rest of my appointments for today? Oh. Right. Ask Kelly to examine Fluffypuss and see if worming medicine might help. She knows the proper dose to recommend. If it’s more serious, give me a call and I’ll come check out the cat myself. Anything else?” A pause. “Kelly can give vaccinations, too. Tell her I’m sorry, and I’ll make it up to her tomorrow. Thanks.” He returned the phone to his pocket and stared at Elly.

Guilt lay heavy on her chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pull you away from work. In fact, I was doing my best not to. I’m just being silly, and —”

“Stop it. Stop it right now. I’m going to get two of your headache tablets, and then I want you to talk this through with me. If it’s too much, we’ll continue after dinner. Now, go sit down. I’ll be right with you.”

Sighing, Elly trudged into the living room and took a seat, pulling her knees up to her chin. Jerry returned a few minutes later with two white pills and some water. She swallowed the tablets without comment, then lowering her legs; she set the empty glass on the low table before them.

He gave her a single nod, sat beside her, and swiveled his body to face her. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

Angling her body so their knees almost touched, she admitted, “I keep thinking about Arthur.”

“What about him?”

“That he didn’t really change until after we got married.” Jerry stiffened and she placed a hand on his thigh. “I realize you two are nothing alike, and my fears are ridiculous... It’s just... I was wondering why we couldn’t simply continue as we’re doing. We love each other, so it’s not essential we make our relationship legally binding, is it?”

He leaned back against the couch. “Elly, do you want children?”

“You know I do.”

“Good. So do I. You also heard about the legal difficulties my parents encountered, given how and where I was born. There was never any question as to my mother and father being legally married U.S. Citizens, but they still needed to work with the city of Chicago and its state to get my birth legitimized, because I wasn’t anywhere near Illinois when I drew my first breath. We weren’t even over land at the time.”

Elly blinked. “Your mother spoke of the experience like it was a humorous adventure for her.”

“Now, almost thirty years later, maybe she does see the humor, but at the time, neither of them thought my unexpected appearance was the least bit funny. Point is, I never want my children faced with the problem of legitimacy. Their mother will be married to me, with no doubts or stigma attached. Do you understand?”

As his words sunk in, Elly realized marriage was more than a next step for Jerry. He considered a legal union between them as essential. “I’m sorry —”

“Stop apologizing, and tell me what you need.”

His request emerged with a bit more snap than she expected. “What do you mean?”

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. “What can I do to ease your mind that I won’t

turn into the Incredible Hulk the moment you are legally mine? In fact, I suspect little will change between us.”

“But some things will change?”

“Well, yes. Your name for one. You do intend to change your last name to Douglas, don’t you?”

Though they’d never discussed it, she always assumed she would take Jerry’s name. However, the task of altering her name never made her list of concerns. “Is that all?”

“Why don’t you tell me what you’re afraid might happen, so I can take steps to assure you it won’t.”

Her heart sank. “You don’t think I’m being foolish?”

“No. I don’t find anything remotely foolish about this conversation. Did you tell Traci you were uneasy about marrying me?”

She shook her head as her worries intensified. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because... Because I was scared to. She would start asking questions, and I —”

“Part of the reason you’re meeting with her is to talk through your anxieties regarding your past as well as your present and future. If you can’t even be honest with your therapist, we have bigger problems than this. How about Kelli? Did you tell her you had fears about legally bonding with me in wedlock? That our relationship might change too much?”

Fighting back tears, Elly focused on her clenched hands. “No, sir.”

“Sweetie, I’m not angry with you. I’m... I’m trying to understand why you didn’t even hint you had some reservations before now.”

Lowering her face to her hands, Elly murmured, “I’m sorry. I thought you would tell me I was being idiotic, and my fears were ungrounded.”

“Elly, you’re not a fool or an idiot. Given your experience, I’d say you have good reason to worry you might be making a similar mistake, even though I thought I’d assured you that you weren’t, but —”

She jerked her head up to face him. “You have, Jerry. I’m not afraid of you.”

“But you weren’t afraid of Arthur before you married him, either. Were you?”

She hesitated for a moment. “No.”

“So how did the relationship change between the two of you after you wed?”

“He grew stricter with me.”

“When? Right away?”

Recalling how her idealistic, girlish dreams shattered like a broken mirror on her wedding night, she nodded and whispered, “The same night, actually.”

“Did he hurt you?”

She nodded again. “I even asked him to stop, but he told me first times were always painful, and I needed to grow accustomed to his size.”

“You were a virgin.”

He didn’t make it a question, but she answered as if he’d asked one. “Yes. He wanted to wait until we were legally bound before he lay with me.”

“Did he do anything to prepare you?”

“You mean like foreplay?” she asked, remembering how Arthur ordered her to strip and lie down while he fastidiously removed his own clothes before he mounted her.

“Yes, or kiss you. Did he try at all to arouse you before penetration?”

Meeting Jerry’s gaze, she shook her head. “No. He knew he hurt me. He wasn’t cruel

about it, just matter of fact.” And so uncaring about her emotions and feelings. “When I cried, he consoled me with a lecture on obedience and submission along with a list of his expectations.”

“Great. Just what every terrified young bride needs on her wedding night. A lesson on submissiveness. Did he ever kiss you before marriage?”

Every night he treated her to an effusive peck on the cheek, though she doubted that’s what Jerry meant. “Arthur always acted quite gentlemanly toward me, making sure I was comfortable at all times and had everything I needed. Then, at the end of our evening, he never failed to kiss me goodnight.”

“What about touching? Did he stroke your breasts or rub you between your legs?”

Elly frowned. Discussing intimate details, especially those concerning her first husband, made her vastly uncomfortable. “Not until after we were married. He considered such petting rude and said he respected me too much to take advantage of me that way.”

“Wow. He was a smooth operator. Did he discuss domestic discipline with you at all before you wed?”

“Not in those words. He did say he believed men should be head of their households and wives should defer to their husbands in all things.”

“How did you feel about that?”

Elly had developed a serious problem with submission. She didn’t like being ordered about or controlled by anyone else’s restrictions, which Jerry quickly discovered. As a result, he always got her agreement before he added a new rule. If she disagreed with his proposal, like having to give an accounting of all her expenditures, they compromised by setting a dollar amount. Both of them had to get the other’s approval before purchasing an item that cost more than one hundred dollars. He agreed Christmas and birthday presents could be an exception, but held himself to the same standards he set for her. Arthur, however, wouldn’t even discuss the notion of equality in their marriage. He was the boss, end of story.

“You know how I felt about Arthur,” she answered with a sigh. “He was handsome, commanding, intelligent and domineering. I was young, silly and in love with the thought of a man like him taking command and protecting me. I just didn’t understand what that meant until after...”

“After he deflowered you and began to assert his authority?”

Closing her eyes against the unpleasant memory, she gave a nod. “Yes. Though, he was still respectful toward me in the beginning. A little patronizing, perhaps, but he didn’t try to diminish me. He would correct me if I said or did something wrong, but he wouldn’t call me stupid or thoughtless. He liked teaching me things, but he also preferred to be the one in control.”

“That’s not unusual. Many Heads of Households prefer to set the rules. So when did he give you your first spanking?”

Elly squirmed as she recalled the embarrassing day in question. She didn’t care for the direction this conversation was taking, but understood why Jerry was asking, so she did her best to be honest. “A few days after we were settled in our new home. I burned our dinner and set off the smoke detector, bringing the fire department to our door.”

“Hmm. Let me guess. He punished you for being inattentive to the point you put yourself and your home in danger in a way that humiliated him?”

Elly gaped in surprise. “How did you know?”

“I finally figured out how your husband thinks.”

“I didn’t intend to disappoint or shame him.”

“Of course not. Do you remember why he spanked you the second time?”

“I argued with him, and he took exception to my tone.”

“What did you argue about?”

Elly glanced up to meet his gaze. “My working.” She and Jerry had a similar disagreement, but for a slightly different reason. He didn’t like the thought of her driving to Denver or Boulder during the winter. She could work out of their home, if she wished, but he preferred she didn’t commute. Elly gave in, but planned to broach the topic again in the spring.

“He wanted me to quit my job. I liked being a receptionist, but he believed all my attention should be focused on him, and my working reflected badly on his ability to provide for me. I pointed out that a lot of women worked, and their husbands didn’t seem to mind.”

“And he spanked you for saying that?”

“No, but I got a warning my tone bordered on disrespect.”

“Did it?”

“According to our established rules, yes. I deliberately challenged his authority.”

“So, what was the tipping point?”

“When I told him I thought his attitude was a relic from the dark ages, and he had the social conscience of a Neanderthal.”

Jerry choked. “Yeah. I can imagine he took exception to that.”

“He took more than exception. He took a wooden spoon to my rear end and told me I acted no better than a spoiled brat who needed to be taken in hand.”

“And you disagreed?”

Elly shrugged. “I didn’t much care for his punishment, but he had a point. I was acting like a spoiled brat, because I was mad and didn’t like him telling me what to do.” She stared at Jerry. “I should have the right to work if I want.”

“Okay, I’m going to let that pass and move on. Did the two of you ever discuss whether or not you would work before you got married?”

“Some. He said he didn’t approve and would definitely want me to quit once I got pregnant, but he didn’t say I’d need to submit my notice before then.”

“So, how long were you together before the topic came up again?”

“The argument occurred the week after we returned from our honeymoon. I had to stay late and he didn’t appreciate coming home to a dark house. So, when I got home he ordered me to turn in my two-week notice the following Monday, and I, not-so-politely, refused.”

“Did you consider his reaction harsh?”

“No. I guess not. Though his swats hurt, I could sit with a minimum of discomfort the next morning. But even if he wasn’t being overly harsh, I still thought he was unfair. It was only one time, and I was home probably fifteen minutes later than he was. I thought he overreacted.”

Jerry nodded, but didn’t comment. “So what happened once the spanking was over?”

“I said I’d resign.”

“Were you crying?”

Elly raised an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“That you were unhappy, but you agreed to do as he wanted because ultimately he was the boss. What I want to know is what he did once you capitulated to his request.”

“Nice save. He made me stand in the corner on display for ten minutes, and then ordered me to fix dinner, which he said should have been ready and waiting on the table for him.”

“Was that the end of the argument?”

“Yeah. I guess. I was still angry and called my mother the next day, but she sided with Arthur, as usual. He could do no wrong in her eyes.”

“What about after you finished eating? What did the two of you do then?”

Her jaw dropping, she stared at him for a few seconds before her temper kicked in. “He took me upstairs. Is that what you want to hear, Jerry? How my husband liked to fuck me after he punished me?”

Jerry clamped his lips together for a moment and didn’t say anything. When he spoke, his voice carried the soft reproof of a dominant male. “You’re angry. I can understand that. However, your response was both rude and crude, and I don’t think I deserve such attitude or language. Do you?”

Elly instantly responded by lowering her eyes. He was right. Her smart mouth still got her into trouble. “No, sir.”

“Then I would like an apology from you, now.”

Eyes burning and throat tight, she met his gaze. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“For?”

“For losing my temper and snapping at you so impolitely.”

“Thank you.”

Still holding her breath, Elly gave a single nod. Jerry rarely got angry, but when he adopted that tone, she knew she skated over dangerous waters and had best return to an area with more stable footing at once. After a bit, he took a deep breath, and she let out her own.

“How’s your head?”

“Better, I guess.”

“Would you like to lie down for a while?”

Elly hesitated. “Is that what you want me to do?”

“No... But your earlier tone indicates I may have overextended your limits this afternoon, and I don’t want to do that. I would like to resolve this, but not at the expense of your health. Do you understand?”

She blinked as she realized she still hadn’t reached the safety of shore. The ice wasn’t quite as brittle where she stood now, but it wasn’t solid, either. “Yes, sir.”

He gave a nod, then leaned back against the couch and crossed his arms. “So, tell me what you want to do. Lie down, or continue talking. There is no wrong answer here.”

“I said I was sorry,” she pointed out, as the coolness of his tone created an unpleasant tingle along the length of her spine.

“Yes, you did, and I accepted your apology.”

“But you’re still angry with me.”

He met her gaze. “I am disappointed with your attitude. Such language reflects a strong disrespect, and that bothers me.”

Wanting and needing his forgiveness, she whispered, “May I sit on your lap?”

He unfolded his arms and dropped his hands to the side to give her room. Moving cautiously, she shifted her position and lowered herself to his thighs. When he didn’t hug and pull her to him, her heart sank. He was more hurt than she’d realized. “I shouldn’t have said what I did, but I was getting frustrated. I’m uncomfortable talking about Arthur with you.”

He gave a nod. “I do understand that. This isn’t an easy conversation for me, either.”

“I know, but I really need a hug right now to reassure me I’m forgiven.”

Without another word, he drew her close, tucked her head beneath his chin and encased her in a protective embrace. His gentleness brought tears to her eyes and she cried against him while he rubbed her neck and shoulders to comfort her. After her crying lessened, he handed her a tissue. “Blow your nose, sweetie. Everything’s all right. You’re not in any trouble or danger.”

Nodding, she did as he asked, grateful for his understanding. Her words had hurt him, but he didn't hold a grudge. He'd asked for an apology, and once she gave it, as far as he was concerned the issue was resolved. Except, even an expression of regret didn't magically remove the sting from a barb, and she recognized his pain in the stiffness and formality he used with her. But when she told him his reaction troubled her, he immediately adjusted his behavior to make her feel better. He always did that, and she found herself seated this way almost every time after they argued. Safely protected in the security of his arms.

He idly stroked her back for a while. Not saying anything, but his slow, even breathing told her he got as much solace from holding her as she received from being held.

Finally, he said, "This is what I wanted to know, Elly. Did your husband ever offer you comfort and absolution after a lecture or punishment?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Have I ever not held and reassured you after I scolded or punished you?"

She toyed with the buttons on his lab coat, which he still wore. "No, sir."

"And therein lies the difference between us."

Considering his words, she gave a slight nod. "I know."

"Do you think I will treat you any differently once you are fully mine in name as well as heart?"

Elly closed her eyes and let out a breath. "I hope not."

"But you aren't sure?"

"I do love you."

"I realize that, but your affection isn't what's at question here, sweetheart. It's your trust. Arthur abused you and you fear I might also, once I become your husband in the eyes of the law. I'm already your guardian in many other respects. All we're doing on Saturday is making our relationship a legal marriage."

"And binding," she added.

"No more binding than it is now. I don't intend to chain you up and hold you prisoner once you say 'I do.' I won't even tie you to the bed unless you agree first."

Realizing he was teasing to lighten the mood, she chuckled wryly against his chest. Although the thought of being tied anywhere caused her stomach to knot.

"You have a lot of supporters here, Elly, who wouldn't hesitate to trounce me if I even considered mistreating you, which I would never do. No matter what. I love you with all my heart, and I don't like seeing you unhappy or uncomfortable."

Her heart understood; her mind still had doubts. "I know."

"So, do you want me to call off the wedding?"

Lifting her head, she turned to meet his gaze and confessed, "Arthur used to punish me anally."

"What?"

She spoke quickly, as though saying the words fast would make the memories less painful. "He had a huge butt plug he would force into me, then he'd cane me so it would dig deeper and cause me more pain. When I was finally sobbing and begging him to stop, he would... He'd take me that way, too. I think he liked hearing me cry and beg. Making me do things I hated made him feel stronger, more powerful. My weakness gave him pleasure, even though he claimed it didn't. I realize now that he got off on hurting me."

"He was a sadist, who enjoyed anal play. That's not unusual, but it helps explain why

you're so skittish when I take your temperature."

Shaking her head, Elly admitted, "It didn't feel like play to me." Then she asked the question that made a part of her shrink in fear. "Will you want to have sex with me that way, too?"

"If I did, I would make sure it was an entirely different experience for you."

She tried again, hoping he would give the answer she sought this time. "But once we're married, will you insist I let you do that to me?"

"Insist we have anal sex? No. Persuade and coax? Probably."

As a voice inside her head screamed in refusal, she whispered, "Except even the thought of trying scares me."

"Good to know."

Meeting his gaze, her throat grew tight with fear. "After we're wed, I will no longer have the right to refuse you."

He shook his head. "That's pure hogwash. Your ability to say no won't mysteriously disappear once we get married, Elly."

Experience had taught her otherwise. "Legally, it will though. I will have promised to obey you. I can be punished if I don't."

"Sweetie, you can be punished now if you disobey me. That won't change."

She gaped at him. Why didn't he understand? "But I haven't promised anything, yet."

"You think not?"

Marriage vows were sacred to her, and he treated them as if they held no significance. "Well, I haven't."

"The fact you're living with me now, puts you under my authority, Elly. I'm still our HoH, and as such, that makes me responsible for your actions and you answerable to me as well as my rules. You understand what they are because we discussed them, and you've agreed with each one. None of that will change after we wed."

Swallowing back her unease, she blurted, "But must I promise to obey you?"

He drew back with a frown. "Is that what this is about? Your vow of obedience?"

"In part," she whispered.

"You think removing that single word from your vows will alter something between us?"

"Maybe."

He nodded, then tapped her hip. "I think you should get up now."

"Why?"

"Because I need to get back to work."

"Jerry —"

"No, Elly. I want you to think about what you just said to me. You envision your avowal to do something you're already doing now will affect me in some way. That I will make demands of you I wouldn't even consider making now. I'd like you to give some thought as to why you suspect that might happen. Do you imagine me ordering you to your knees so you can fellate me? Or perhaps insisting you allow me access to every part of your body regardless of your wishes? If you believe your vow to obey will change me so dramatically I will no longer respect your thoughts and feelings, then I think we *should* call off the wedding, and you might want to find another place to live."

Her eyes burned at his words. "Why?"

"Because as long as you suppose I'm capable of such disregard for you, I will never be able to convince you otherwise. No matter what I say or do. Now, get up please."

His disappointment ate at her like acid. “Are you going to kick me out?”

“No. I’m going to go back to work where people have confidence in me to do what’s best for them and the animals I treat.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, Elly. You’re not. This isn’t a punishable offense, but it is a deal breaker. I can’t build a life with you if you can’t trust me enough to protect and care for you.”

Shaking her head in denial, she said, “It’s not that, I —”

“Yes, it is. It’s exactly that. The very fact you think I could and would force you to do something against your will, because I expect you to obey me, indicates you don’t trust me. You might love me, and want to believe I won’t hurt you, but a part of your mind will always wonder when and if I will turn against you the way Arthur did. We can’t live that way. I can’t live that way. Now, please get up so I can leave.”

He couldn’t walk away if she refused to move, so Elly pressed against him. “No. I won’t.”

“Fine.” Without another word, he lifted her from his lap and set her down on the couch beside him. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Go ahead and lie down. I’ll fix dinner.”

With that, he turned and strode back to his clinic.

