

Tamara L. Lewis

WHEN WEEPING ENDURES

Chapter One

The light patter of rain against the pane was enough to wake Randi from her nap. The afternoon sun was overshadowed by a multitude of clouds so that the sky was a cold steel gray. Randi was not at all disturbed by the bleakness of the day. She in fact preferred it that way. The morning had been wrought with an unusual tide of nausea. She had received an injection earlier that morning, but it had done nothing to help her stomach. The nausea alone would have been sufficient to keep her strapped to the bed. But she now sported the worst migraine of her life. She knew her recovery would be bad; she just didn't know how bad.

She ran a hand over the long braids she was usually so proud to display. Her hair had begun to itch, and she knew the braids needed to come down. She had refused assistance with her hygiene and now began to reek of a foul, stale odor. Randi didn't care, however. She thought the more foul she was, the more the nursing staff would leave her alone. The last thing she wanted was someone, anyone in her presence. She didn't want to talk, listen, think, feel, or eat. What she really wanted was to die. The pain and agony of her broken heart was all she had to remind her of her loss, and she didn't want to lose that. Randi looked toward the window that faced 15th Street. She could see small beads of rain clinging to the glass, much like she was now clinging to life—each breath a labor of love that was never to be fully known.

Randi grabbed a black hair tie from the bedside table and pulled her braids into a ponytail. She despised the hair in her face, especially when she slept. But then she hadn't slept a whole night in three days. Every night the nurse would bring Randi a sleeping pill, compliments of Dr. Coleman. Every night, Randi would slip the pill under her tongue and wait until the nurse left the room. Then she would run and spit it in the commode. For some reason, Dr. Coleman could not understand that sleep was the last thing Randi wanted.

Sleep brought thoughts of Michaela.

Randi's room was a hand's breadth from the nurses' station. She hated that she could hear the hustle and bustle of the staff throughout the day. Several times, she requested a room further down the hall, but each time her request was met with opposition. "You need to be near the nurses' station," was all they would tell her. She was beginning to feel like a prisoner except for the fact that she had no desire to leave the small private room with one window and a lounge chair.

The room was dark except for a steady stream of light that filtered in through the closed blinds. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Randi was grateful that the clouds overshadowed the sun. Her bleak surroundings were just what she needed to continue her routine of mourning. Her only objection was that it wasn't dark enough. She looked around for an extra blanket or sheet to hang over the window but found none. She started to call and request one, but realized that she had nothing heavy enough to hold it in place. After searching a little harder, Randi reached over and hit the nurse call button. A few seconds later, a muffled voice came over the intercom.

"Yes? Can I help you?" a nurse asked.

"Can I get a newspaper and some tape?" Randi asked, knowing the paper would be enough for her purpose.

"Sure!" the nurse exclaimed, somewhat excited. "We'll bring them right in." A few minutes later, a nursing assistant knocked on the door and handed Randi the items. "Would you like the light on?" she asked, her hand already on the switch.

"No, thank you." Randi replied with a cool edge to her voice. The assistant recoiled, shrugging her shoulders as she closed the door. Randi laid the paper and tape on the nightstand. She thought about calling her mother but decided against it. She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. A sharp pain suddenly shot through her lower parts and disappeared up her back. As always, it was followed by a dull cramping ache in her lower abdomen. She

looked at the small machine on her IV pole that contained her pain medicine. She had been told that she could push the button on the cord and the machine would give her an injection to relieve the pain. But Randi had never used it. It had been three days since her surgery and the pain had gotten better, not that she would have used it if it hadn't. She pulled back the pad between her legs to check for bleeding. It was slight. She turned on her left side as she had been taught to do and pulled her knees to her chest. The fetal position had proved to be the most comfortable when the waves of pain began coursing through her. It was two hours before they finally subsided.

At 5:15 p.m., the nursing assistant brought in Randi's dinner tray. She removed the lunch tray from the bedside table and replaced it with the new one. "Can I get you anything?" she asked, doubtful that things had changed. Randi shook her head no. She wanted nothing more than to be left alone. When the door finally closed, she slid out of bed, flipped on the restroom light, and began taping the largest newspaper pages to the wall, covering the large window entirely. When she was finally satisfied, she flipped the light off and crawled back into bed. From the table she could smell the lasagna and vegetable medley. Her stomach growled incessantly as the aroma teased her taste buds. Her mouth watered. And for a second, she entertained the idea of taking a small bite of the lasagna. But she thought about Michaela and decided against it. She had a greater purpose than her own physical satisfaction. She had to maintain the brief but fading connection to her precious daughter.

Randi lay back in the bed and thought about Michaela. Michaela had been the sunshine in Randi's life from the first moment she learned she was pregnant. She had done everything possible to protect the new life that grew daily within her. She took her prenatal vitamins and ate only wholesome foods. She kept her exercise safe and limited her exposure to toxic substances. She had been the perfect new mother and she was determined not to let her daughter down. Michaela would expect her mother to be there, even now.

Randi closed her eyes and began to hum her favorite lullaby. It was one her grandmother had sung to her when she was a little girl frightened by the storms. “Hush little baby girl, quiet your wild cries, Mama is right here with you, singin’ this lullaby. Don’t you fret for nothin’ girl, nothin’ can get to you, ‘cause Mama is here forever girl, faithful, lovin’ and true.”

Randi smiled to herself as she thought about the strength of her grandmother. It was a strength others had seen in Randi and had commented on. But now Randi was not sure that the same strength really existed in her. She wondered if it had not been just a façade to prevent others from seeing her true weaknesses, seeing the places where she was needy and scared and where she was utterly hopeless—a degenerate—incapable of achieving real independence; incapable of sustaining herself when others wouldn’t or couldn’t sustain her. She wondered what she would do now that she didn’t have Michaela.

Just then the phone rang. Randi didn’t budge. She was sick of the well-wishers calling her night and day to say how sorry they were about her “loss.” What did they know of the pain and agony she felt? Had their hearts been wrenched slowly from their chests? She didn’t think so. No one, not even another grieving mother, could understand her loss. This wasn’t any child. This was Michaela. She was born with big beautiful brown eyes and long, soft curly black hair. Her face was perfectly round with rose-colored cheeks. Her eyebrows already thick like Randi’s. Her fingers and toes were perfect, each with its tiny nail bed. She was Randi’s perfect angel, and no one could fully comprehend the loss, not even Randi herself.

Randi sighed as she pulled the covers over her head and sank into the confines of the hospital bed. The bed had been her friend for the past three days. She had not been outside of the room or out of the bed except to relieve her bladder in the restroom and to cover the windows with newspaper. She had not eaten since the doctor had lifted her food and fluid restriction. And every time the phone rang, Randi ignored it. The last thing she wanted was to

speak to well-wishers. She was miserable and basking in her misery was the only way she knew to deal with her “illness.”

Randi had just drifted back off to sleep when there was a loud knock on the door. She didn't answer but instead buried her head deeper into the pillow. A few seconds later, the door opened and Dr. Coleman walked in. “Randi?” she asked, hesitantly. “I'm sorry, Randi, but this will not do.” With that, Dr. Coleman flipped the overhead light on. Looking around with one quick glance, she could see the disarray of the room, including the newspaper taped over the window. “What is this?” she asked annoyed as she stormed over to the window. Without another word, she ripped the paper from the wall and then turned to her patient lying quietly beneath the covers. “Randi, we need to talk,” she said a little more compassionately. She reached down and pulled the cover from Randi's head. Randi kept her face buried in the pillow.

“I don't have anything to say.” The muffled voice responded from within the pillow.

“Well, I do.” Dr. Coleman started. “For one, you're acting like a child. You can't continue here like this. In fact, you can't continue here at all.”

Randi struggled to understand what Dr. Coleman meant, but she couldn't quite grasp it. Feeling a sense of urgency, she pulled her head from the pillow to look at Dr. Coleman. “What!?” she asked concerned.

“I'm discharging you tomorrow, Randi. There's nothing else we can do for you here. The rest is up to you.” Immediately Randi protested.

“But I'm not ready yet. How do you expect me to just go home without Michaela?”

“I honestly don't know how you're going to handle it, Randi. You might want to see someone about this. I sent Dr. Griggs over here to see you, but you refused to see him, so what do you expect me to do for you? You'll have to find a way to deal with this. She is not going home with you, ever.”

The words were enough to send Randi into a fit of tears. She was not

ready to accept that reality. As long as she was in the hospital, she didn't have to face a home without her daughter. She didn't have to look at the nursery prepared especially for Michaela, and she didn't have to deal with Darryl.

Dr. Coleman stayed a few minutes more and then left Randi with instructions to get out of the bed and walk in the hallway that evening. Randi promised she would and then pulled the covers back over her head as the stream of tears continued to flow. Her thoughts once again turned to Michaela.

She thought about Michaela's tiny fingers wrapped tightly around hers, how perfect they were. Her lips were small and straight, her tiny eyelashes long. Randi buried her head in her pillow to muffle the sobs. The throb in her head returned and felt like the pounding of an 18-wheeled truck against a steel beam. She closed her eyes and tried to forget that she was alive, that all of this was real. But she could not. The tiny face of her daughter kept flashing through her mind. Her creamy white skin was soft and satiny. Michaela had smelled like a flower garden, a perfect blend of lilacs, tulips, and petunias. And Randi could still feel the beat of her own heart through Michaela's limp body as she held her precious baby for the first and last time. She reached over to the nightstand and pulled her purse from one of the drawers. Desperately, she rummaged through her things until she found the Polaroid picture of Michaela.

The grief counselor took the picture after Randi had gone to the recovery room. Michaela had been dressed in a beautiful pink T-shirt with a white lace collar. She wore tiny pink booties and had a pink barrette gathered around a small bundle of her silky black hair. She looked like a perfect sleeping angel. Randi gently kissed the picture and then pulled herself back into a fetal position and began to rock herself to sleep. As she slowly drifted off, she wondered how life could be so unfair. God had played a horrible trick on her, and she wasn't sure if she would ever forgive Him, or anyone else for that matter.

The room was still dark except for the small amount of light that once again filtered through the blinds. The TV was off, and Randi's dinner tray was still sitting on the bedside table. A small knock on the door broke the silence and woke Randi from her nap. When the door creaked open Randi buried her head deep into her pillow.

"Ms. Payne," the nurse whispered softly. Randi didn't answer. "You have a visitor." She paused a moment, hoping there would be some sign of life from the limp body that lay beneath the covers. There was none. "Ok then," she finally insisted. "If you don't answer, you can't refuse." She opened the door a little wider and stepped aside to let the tall, good-looking man into the room. Still Randi did not budge.

"Go away," a small voice finally said from beneath the covers. The man said nothing. Immediately she recognized the scent of his Joop cologne. It was Darryl. Randi marveled at his undying devotion to her. Every day, he had come to be by her side even though she had consistently failed to acknowledge his presence.

He took off his black lambskin leather jacket and hung it in the closet. Without a word, he began to straighten up the room, first removing the dinner tray from the bedside table. He disappeared briefly into the hall, returning with a fresh pitcher of water, which he set on the table. When the room had been thoroughly cleaned, he placed a fresh bouquet of red and white roses on the nightstand. Beside the roses, he added a chocolate brown teddy bear. For three days, Darryl had come to be with Randi with a fresh bouquet of roses and a teddy bear. Each teddy bear had been a different color, adding some flavor to the dull atmosphere Randi so preferred. It wasn't so much his desire to cheer her up, as it was his need to let her know that he cared for her no matter what.

Randi couldn't help but peek through the covers and get a glance of the strong features she knew so well. He was still as handsome as ever, particularly in his black Pelle-Pelle jeans and white polo shirt. The shirt clung

to his torso exposing his well developed biceps, triceps, and pectorals. Randi could also see that he had been working on his abs. His five-foot-eleven stature was lean but very muscular. His dedication to the gym was paying off handsomely. She was grateful for his care and concern, but she knew it wouldn't make a difference. They had been through too much.

Randi watched from behind as he stood adjusting the picture on the TV, which he had just turned on. She wanted desperately to hold his hand like she had done so many times before, but still she said nothing, did nothing. The terrible throb in her head was beginning to return, and she knew it wouldn't be long before the pain once again shot through her. She thought about how cruel she had been to him and wanted to break her silence to thank him for his time and attention. But she did not. She still partially blamed him for what happened to Michaela. If he had been concerned about her, they still might have their daughter.

Darryl settled into the lounge chair next to the bed as he always did. He put his feet up in an empty wooden chair and quietly watched the news. He tried never to disturb the dark, quiet atmosphere Randi so diligently maintained, thinking it was part of her current therapy. He realized that Randi was going too far in her need to connect with the baby, but he did not think it was the appropriate time to challenge her. There would be plenty of time for that.

As the pain began again, Randi pulled once again into the fetal position. She kept her moans to a minimum not wanting Darryl to know how much she was hurting. But he knew, he always knew. He had studied her well over the past years and knew a lot of things about her. He made it his business to know the heart and secret desires of the woman he loved. How else could he have satisfied her for so long? It was not until the baby had come that the love between them seemed to die. How he wished things had been different.

At 9:30 p.m., there was another small knock at the door. Randi knew immediately that it was the nurse bringing her a sleeping pill. Again, she said

nothing. “Yes?” Darryl answered. The nurse opened the door slightly.

“I have your sleeping pill, Ms. Payne.” she said, looking toward the lump under the covers.

“I’ll take that.” Darryl stopped her. The nurse objected, explaining that it was hospital policy for her to give the medication directly to the patient. He listened attentively but still insisted. Eventually, the nurse backed down and gave him the pill. As soon as she left the room, he got up and walked into the restroom where he dropped the sleeping pill into the toilet. Randi watched the whole thing. She was surprised to find that Darryl had caught on to her game and was now an active participant. She wondered why he did it. Could he really love her that much? She realized that this was a question she would have to give a great deal more consideration to, but it would not be now or anytime soon for that matter. The only thing she had to consider now was how she was going to survive going home without Michaela. If she could survive that, then she knew she could survive anything. She turned over, clutched the picture of Michaela to her chest, and closed her eyes as the familiar flood of tears once again streamed down her golden brown face.

Chapter Two

Andrea reached home about fifteen minutes after six in the evening. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than a warm sudsy bath. As she approached the front door, she could smell the sweetness of yams from inside. “Man, she’s done it again,” she thought to herself as she opened the front door. “Hello? I’m home,” she shouted as she glanced quickly at the pile of mail that lay on the veranda.

“We’re up here,” her mother-in-law shouted back. Before Andrea could respond, five-year-old Jasmine raced down the stairs.

“Mommy, Mommy, you’re home!” she reached around and gave Andrea a big hug and kiss. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, Sweet Pea,” Andrea responded with a warm smile and kiss of her own. “What have you and Jason been up to with Grandma?”

“Nothing. Grandma is helping Jason with his stars and planets. Wanna see?”

“Ok,” Andrea said as Jasmine pulled her up the stairs to Jason’s room. There she found him in the floor with Ben’s mother, Crystal.

“Hi, Crystal. What are you two up to?” She could see they had an elaborate model of the stars and planets started. Jason was trying to glue a difficult piece of the universe onto a thin stick so the planet could rotate around the sun. His grandmother was holding the planet in place.

“Good evening, Andrea,” Crystal said without looking up. “How was your day?”

“It was fine thank you and yours?”

“Wonderful, thanks for asking.”

“Jason?” Andrea saw that he was engrossed in his work, but she wanted to at least be acknowledged.

“Yes, mom?” he answered without looking up.

“Do I at least get a hello?”

“Yea sure, as soon as I get this piece on.” Andrea nodded and then looked back at Crystal.

“Crystal, when you have time I’d like to speak to you for a minute.” Andrea carefully watched Ben’s mother. Crystal already knew what she wanted to talk about. She wasn’t particular about their little conversations, so she nodded her head and continued helping Jason. When satisfied, Andrea retired to her bedroom with Jasmine close behind.

“Mommy, can you buy me something?”

“What’s that, Jazz?”

It’s a Tickle Tina play set.”

“A what? Who is Tickle Tina?”

“She’s a new doll. You hug her and talk to her, and all she does is laugh. That’s why they call her Tickle Tina, ‘cause she laughs all the time.”

“And what’s this play set?” Andrea sat at the vanity and began taking down her hair. Jasmine came over and picked up her mother’s brush. She enjoyed brushing her mother’s hair as they talked. It was their personal time together, and she treasured it as much as Andrea did.

“Well...” she started, trying to sound grown-up, “the play set is a table with chairs so I can have tea parties. Misty already has one. She said if I get one, she’ll bake the cakes and I can make the tea. She has Tickle Tina’s bake set too. So can I have one? Please!”

“I don’t know yet, Jazz. How much does this play set cost?”

“I don’t know, but Misty said it didn’t cost a lot. She bought hers with her birthday money.”

“Oh she did, did she? I bet she had some help.”

“You can help me, Mommy. I have some birthday money.”

“Oh yea, how much do you have?” Andrea smiled to herself, knowing Jasmine’s piggy bank was nearly empty.

“I think I have like a hundred dollars.”

“Wow, that much? I guess if you have that much you can buy whatever you want.”

“If I don’t have that much can you still help me?” Jasmine tried that sweet innocent smile that always worked so well with her father. Andrea smiled to herself as she wondered when her daughter had become such a manipulator.

“We’ll have to see, Jazz, after dinner. Did you help your grandmother cook?”

“Uh huh,” she eagerly declared. “I helped Grandma clean the table, and I washed some dishes too. She even let me put the sugar on the sweet potatoes.”

“Ok,” Andrea nodded. “You go and help Grandma get the table ready. Mommy is going to take a quick bath.”

“Ok.” Jasmine obediently got up and headed back down the hallway toward Jason’s room. “Grandma!” she shouted before she got there, “Let’s get the table ready.”

Again Andrea smiled to herself. She constantly marveled at how well her children were growing up in spite of everything. She quietly thanked God for those blessings, then reached over and picked up the phone.

“Levittown Elementary. Sandy speaking,” a soft female voice answered on the third ring.

“May I speak to Ben Carter, please?” Andrea asked, slightly annoyed.

“He’s not here at the moment. Can I take a message?” the secretary knew immediately who it was.

“This is his wife. Do you know what time he gets through?”

“To be honest, Mrs. Carter, I think he left for home about an hour ago.” Sandy, the office secretary smiled to herself as she revealed that small piece of information. She was suspicious that Ben might be into something, but she didn’t know what. He was frequently on his cell phone and had

important “meetings” that no one else knew about. Yet, no other women ever called for him. She knew the news would get to Andrea, so she passed it on as innocently as she knew how.

“Mrs. Carter, did you hear me?” Sandy asked with a smirk in her voice.

“Yes, Sandy, I heard you. Well if he calls for some reason, please tell him to call home.”

“Sure, no problem.” Sandy hung up the phone, scribbled a quick message on a notepad, and headed toward Ben’s office. Just as she reached his door, he and Mr. Hanson, another teacher, came around the corner. “Oh there you are. What are you two doing back here?”

“I forgot something, why?” he asked unlocking the door while Mr. Hanson waited a few feet back.

“Your wife just called. She’s been looking for you. You better call home.”

“Uhhh, she won’t give me a moment’s peace. Did she say what she wanted?”

“Nope, just looking for you, that’s all.” Sandy watched silently as Ben pulled a small jewelry box from his desk drawer and put it in his jacket pocket. It was too big for a ring or pair of earrings, so she guessed it was either a bracelet or necklace. Ben looked up and saw her watching.

“It’s a present for my mother,” he stumbled.

“Uh huh,” she nodded with a smile. She handed Ben the small note, then turned back toward the front office.

“How much longer are you gonna be, Sandy?” Ben asked, watching the deliberate sway of her hips.

“About another ten minutes, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“No rush, I’m just asking. In fact, I’ll be on my way. Take it easy, and I’ll see you Monday.”

“Ok, Mr. Carter. Goodbye”.

“Bye, Sandy.”

Sandy watched as the two men walked out of the building. She had the distinct feeling that he wanted to do something, but she had apparently thwarted that idea. She shook her head to herself as she walked back to the office to finish typing the agenda for next week’s meeting.

Ben got in his car, waved Mr. Hanson off, and headed out without calling home. He knew Andrea would start with a hundred questions, and he wasn’t in the mood to argue. He was headed down the Bristol Pike towards 95 South when he decided to call home anyway.

“Hey,” he said when Andrea answered the phone, “did you call?”

“Where are you?” she responded, her voice raised an octave.

“I have some errands to run. Why?”

“I’ve been calling you all day. All that Sandy girl ever says is that you’re in class or out of the building.”

“Well I am a teacher. What do you expect?”

“I expect to be able to talk to my husband sometime during the day.”

“Fine...you’re talking to me now. So what do you need?”

“Your mother is here and she’s done it again!”

“Done what?”

“Cooked!”

“Oh Lord. Look Andrea we’ve been through this before. She’s only trying to help. She knows you’re busy. She just wants the kids to have a healthy meal on those days when you’re too tired to cook.”

“To her, that’s everyday. I’m going to say something to her about it.”

“No, don’t! That will just make things worse.”

“They can’t get any worse Ben. I’m tired of being made to feel inadequate in my own home. God surely knows you don’t make me feel like a woman anymore!”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Look, Andrea, leave my mother out of this. This has nothing to do with her and you know it. Besides, the last thing we need to do is piss her off when we need her to watch the kids.”

“We don’t need her, Ben. My mother would be perfectly happy watching them for us.”

“Like hell...my kids aren’t staying in that house. There are too many men over there. Sometimes I think your mother is running a brothel.”

“You know what Ben? You’re full of it.”

“Right back at cha, love.”

“F--- you!”

“Not tonight darling, I’m too tired,” Ben chuckled to himself, knowing Andrea probably had steam pouring from her nostrils. Over the past two years, he had learned to beat her at her own game. He could see he was wearing her down. “Was there anything else, love?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yes, your daughter wants a new play set.”

“She does?”

“Yes, and I’m going to get it for her.”

“With what?”

“What do you mean with what? With our money.”

“We don’t have extra funds for that right now, Andrea.”

“Why not? I’m working now.”

“But you just started that job two weeks ago. You haven’t even gotten paid yet.”

“So, I get paid next week.”

“Then buy it next week.”

“Darn, Ben, she wants it now. That little girl doesn’t ask for much. The least we can do is buy her a new play set. She hasn’t had one in two years.”

“I know, but we just don’t have the money this week.”

“Why can’t we borrow it from their college fund, and I’ll pay it back when I get paid next week.”

“No! We said we’re not touching that account for any reason, and especially not this. Jazz can just wait till next week. It won’t kill her to wait a few days.”

“Ben, you’re really becoming a bastard.”

“You know what, Andrea? I’m through with this conversation. I’ll be home in about an hour.”

“Where the hell are you going now? It’s already 7 o’clock.”

“I need to stop by the store. I’ll see you when I get home.”

“Whatever. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Ben hung up the cell. Immediately it rang. “Hello?” Ben answered with irritation.

“Hey, it’s me, not Andrea.

“Oh, hi. How’d you know?” Ben asked, softening his voice.

“Who else can get you so irritated?”

“Yea, I guess you’re right. Look, I won’t be able to come by tonight. I had something I wanted to give you, but it’ll have to wait. You’re not upset are you?”

“Of course not. I know how it is. You go home and handle your business. We’ll get together later. You still going bowling tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know right now. I’ll have to see.”

“Well if you don’t go, call me. Maybe we could get together. I have something I want to give you too.”

“Ok. I will. Again, I’m sorry about tonight.”

“Forget it. I’ll see you soon.”

“Ok. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Ben hung up the phone. He glanced over at the rectangular gray jewelry box lying in the seat next to him. It was at times like these that he really hated being married, especially to Andrea. He took the Woodhaven exit and headed back up 95 towards home.

Since shortly after Jasmine's birth, Ben had realized that his marriage to Andrea was failing. He partly blamed himself for marrying her in the first place. She had been so convincing with her "we belong together" speech. She had told him that God wanted them together and that was why she had become pregnant their first time together. Ben was skeptical, but he figured she knew what she was talking about. After all, she had been fervent in attending church and he hadn't. Things had been very confusing for him back then, and Andrea seemed to have it together. She was his anchor, and she knew better than he what God wanted. So as soon as he graduated from college, they married.

The first few years had been fairly good. Andrea stayed home and took care of Jason while Ben taught mathematics at a local junior high school. He wouldn't say they were the happiest couple in town, but they weren't miserable either. They bought their first home when Jason was about three years old. It was a single-level ranch in Burlington, New Jersey, just across the bridge from where they lived now. Ben was proud of his family and the life he was making for them. He wanted to be the man his father had always encouraged him to be. He was well aware that people thought he was a little wimpy, but Ben thought of himself as a gentle gentleman. And more than anything, he wanted to prove he was just as capable of handling responsibility as any man.

When his father died the next year, he was proud to have gotten his father's official "pat on the back" before his death. That had meant the world to Ben. At that point, he was determined to lead a good blissful life. So, he eagerly consented to having another baby when Andrea brought up the subject.

Jasmine was their pride and joy. She was a gorgeous baby with soft, dark curly hair and hazel eyes. She had inherited a strong Hispanic gene from her mother's ancestry that made her look a lot like a mixed baby. By the time she was three, it was obvious that she would command attention and become the sole recipient of her parents' devotion.

Ben could not help but smile to think about his little princess seated behind her new play set, serving tea and cookies to everyone. For a second, he regretted telling Andrea no about the play set. After all, it was for his princess. He made a mental note to tell Andrea when he got home to go and buy the play set with the grocery money and he'd find a way to replace it. But for now, he had an errand to run. He got off 95 and followed the 413 headed for the Burlington-Bristol Bridge. The evening was cold and plagued with a light shower of rain. Once across the bridge, Ben took Broad Street to High Street, made a left, and then parked the car about halfway down the block. He picked up the small gray jewelry box and carried it into "Olsen's Jewelers".

"Good Evening, Mr. Olsen," Ben greeted the older white man seated behind the large glass case.

"Hi, Ben. How are you? Enjoying this weather?"

"Not particularly." Ben placed the box on the case. "Do you think you can do a favor for me?"

"Sure." The old man got up and walked over to Ben. He opened the box Ben had placed on the counter and picked up the bracelet. It was a gold link bracelet with a small flat plate.

"Fine piece of gold," he said. "Heavy too. I used to have one just like it."

"You did?" Ben replied. "Do you think you can engrave it for me?"

"Of course. Do you need it right away?"

"No sir. I was hoping you could have it ready by Wednesday."

"Sure, no problem." Mr. Olsen turned the bracelet over several times in his hand, studying the piece. "Do you know what you want to say?"

“Yes sir. I want...”

“Write it down,” he interrupted Ben. “Otherwise I’ll forget. You now how getting old can be.” Both men chuckled, and Ben nodded in agreement as he scribbled a few letters down on a sheet of white paper. When he finished he handed the paper to Mr. Olsen.

“ ‘C.H.’ on the front. ‘With all my love. Ben’ on the back. Do you think you can get it all on there?” Ben asked hesitantly.

“I think so, especially if we use a small script.”

“Great, that sounds perfect. I’ll be back to pick it up Wednesday afternoon.”

“Ok. I’ll see ya Wednesday.”

Ben shook hands with Mr. Olsen, then jumped back into his blue 1992 Corolla and headed home.

Andrea had just hung up the phone when she noticed Crystal standing behind her.

“You and Ben need to get things together before you tear this whole family apart.”

“Ben and I are perfectly capable of handling our problems on our own.”

“That’s not how it looks from here.”

“Well I’m sorry, Crystal, but your view is not exactly all encompassing. If you ask me, you’re a little short-sighted when it comes to me and my family.”

“Not you’re family, Andrea, just you. You have an uncanny knack for making everyone around you uncomfortable.”

“That’s because people don’t want to be real. I’m real, and Ben used to admire that about me. But now he’s into that same bull everyone else is into—game-playing. Well here’s a news flash for you, Crystal. I’m not

interested in playing games with you or your son. If he wants out of this marriage, all he has to do is ask.”

“You ought to be careful what you wish for. It might just come to pass.”

“Whatever. By the way, I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t cook for me unless you okay it with me first.”

“Oh, now you have a problem with me cooking. Those kids need a good cooked meal once in awhile. Hamburger helper is fine sometimes, but they need real food too.”

“You know, Crystal, you’re a work. Thanks for keeping the kids. You can go now.”

“Where’s Ben? He isn’t home yet?”

“To be honest, I don’t know and I hardly care. Why don’t you call him and ask him yourself. Maybe he’ll tell you what’s going on in his life.”

“Maybe he will. I’ll see you later. By the way, I’m taking the kids tomorrow for the weekend. I don’t want them listening to you and Ben argue all weekend.”

“Fine. I could use the time alone. Don’t forget to lock the door on your way out.”

Andrea turned and went into the bathroom before Crystal could respond. She knelt beside the tub and turned on the water. She needed desperately to relax, especially when she knew an argument was forthcoming. She poured some of the Suave moisturizing body wash into the water and quickly slid beneath the mounting heap of bubbles. It was her first time trying the cucumber-melon with Aloe Vera and Vitamin E. The soft, soothing fragrance was just what she needed to unwind.

She thought about Ben and how he would react when he got home and saw the play set. He’d be furious, of course. But then, that never stopped her from doing things before and she saw no reason to change now. Besides, she reasoned, he should have been home to keep her from going in the first

place. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the warm massage of the bubbles against her bare skin. She thought about the passion-filled nights she and Ben used to have, when he would gently caress her until she was full of desire. She missed those times. She missed the days when he would handcuff her to the headboard and live out his fantasy for hours at a time without succumbing to his desires. At least that's how it had been when he was on his stimulation medicine. She had often wondered how he lasted so long, but then she found his prescription hidden away in the closet and she knew. She admired him for being willing to go to extremes to please her, even if he was ashamed to tell her about it. He told her it was mind over matter and that he had mastered the eternal erection. Andrea smiled to herself to think she had discovered his secret.

“Ben never could keep things from me,” she mused. “A wimp! That's all he is, a little wimp.”

She caressed herself until she felt the desire grow within her. It had been two months since she and Ben had been together as husband and wife. And the last time they had, it was a near disaster. Andrea had begged Ben for sex so much that he finally climbed on top of her, did his “business” and was done. She lay there in disbelief. She felt like a whore and vowed never to ask him for sex again. She had always been able to control Ben with her sexuality, but she felt that hold slipping quickly from her grasp. Early on in their marriage, sex had been difficult for Ben. She was certain he had been a virgin when they met, although he never admitted it. But she worked with him and felt she had a reasonably good sex life. There were some things Ben had difficulty doing, like performing orally. Andrea recalled him saying how disgusting it was to put his mouth “down there.” He said he couldn't stop thinking about the blood and odors that went along with the female reproductive system. But Andrea had managed to get Ben to do it twice a year, on her birthday and Mother's Day. During the last year, however, things had come to a complete stop. Andrea wondered briefly what had gone wrong

in her marriage. She then reached over and picked up the cell phone. She dialed Shonnee's number.

"Hey, girl, what's up?" Andrea chimed after Shonnee answered the phone.

"Nothing. How was work?"

"Pretty good. I don't know how long I'm gonna keep this job, though"

"What's wrong with it?" Shonnee was sitting on her couch polishing her toenails.

"Nothing. It's just I miss being home with the kids. Plus Crystal was over here cooking again."

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good."

"She acts like I can't take care of my own family. And Ben ain't no help. He lets her get away with it. You'd think she was his wife instead of me"

"Andrea, you know how Ben is. He's not going to say anything against his mother. Let alone stand up to her."

"You're right. He's a wimp."

"Hey, I thought that was why you married him." Andrea and Shonnee shared a warm laugh at the remark. Andrea knew it was true. One of the reasons she married Ben was because she could control him. She needed that. But lately it seemed her control was slipping.

"Yea, you're right. Ben's trying to get some balls, but I got news for him." She paused a moment, then continued. "Hey, I think Ben is having an affair." She blurted the words out as if she had to do it before she lost her courage.

"Nooo!" Shonnee's mouth was wide open. "I don't believe Ben has the guts to do something like that. It's probably just your imagination."

"I don't know. He's been acting strange lately."

"Ok," Shonnee mused, "but how's the sex?"

“What sex?” Andrea was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable at having spilled her troubles to Shonnee. She wiped a few beads of sweat from her brow then slid a little lower into the bath.

“Girl, is it that bad?”

Andrea remained quiet on the other end of the line. Shonnee took the silence to mean things were worse than that. She wanted to say something comforting, but realized that had never been one of her strong points. So she opted for a light brush-off instead.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just a phase.” Shonnee glance up and realized that it was nearly 6:45 p.m. She wanted to finish getting ready so she could make it to Darryl’s before eight o’clock. Andrea still hadn’t said anything.

“Hey, girl, you still there?”

“Yea,” Andrea said quietly. “Hey, Ben and I are supposed to go bowling tomorrow night. Do you and Darryl want to tag along? We could probably use some referees the way things have been going between us lately?”

“Sounds good to me, but let me check with Darryl.”

“Ok. How is he anyway? He hasn’t been over lately.”

“He’s good, been busy at work, getting home late almost every night. I’m going over there in a bit.”

“Got a booty call, huh?” Andrea chuckled then picked up a handful of bubbles and covered herself with them.

“You know it’s not like that between us. Darryl and I really care for one another. I think he’s my soul mate.”

Andrea rolled her eyes on the other end of the line. She hated the act Shonnee was trying to put on; that “we’re so in love” act was really just a façade. Shonnee was twenty four, and every man she had ever been with had left her.

“Well, let me know. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Andrea barely waited for Shonnee’s response before hanging up the phone.

She finished her bath and quickly dressed. She wanted to go out, buy the play set, and get back home before Ben arrived. She had gathered up the dinner dishes and sent the children out to the car when she remembered that she didn’t have the ATM card. Ben had always handled the finances in the home, so he kept most of the cards. She only had the check card with which to shop. She had already checked the balance, but found it was too low to buy Jasmine’s play set. She knew her check would be about three hundred and fifty dollars, all of which she was supposed to keep for herself. But the way Ben had been acting lately, she was never sure what he would decide.

With the kids waiting in the car, she trudged upstairs to the bedroom in search of the other ATM card. Ben kept most of the financial things in a small locked safe. Andrea had talked him into giving her the combination so she could get things in the event of an emergency. In all their years of marriage, she had never felt the need to go into the safe and see what was there. Ben had provided well for the family, and she was able to look at whatever bank statements she wanted. It had only been in the last month or so that she began to wonder if she should pay closer attention to what he was doing with their money. She wondered if he was buying things for another woman. She made a point to schedule time that weekend to go through the records in the safe. For now though, she just wanted the ATM card.

She opened the safe and found the bundled stack of cards. The bundle included their insurance cards, prescription cards, bank cards, and old credit cards. Ben liked to keep everything for a period of seven years. She rummaged through the pile and found the Fidelity Bank card. She was just about to close the safe when she saw the corner of what appeared to be a birthday card. It was lying beneath a stack of insurance forms. Andrea pulled the card out. It was a typical “emotion” card as she called them; the kind she

had always purchased for her loved ones. Andrea did not recognize the card as one of her own, so she opened it and read the short note.

“Ben. I hope you get as much pleasure out of this small gift as I got buying it for you. Love always C.”

“C,” she thought, “who could that be?” She knew it wasn’t Ben’s mother. Crystal never signed her cards that way, and Ben would never hide a card from her in the safe. She knew it must have been from the woman Ben was seeing—his lover. Hurt and angry, she slammed the safe shut and tucked the card in her purse. “That bastard is going to get everything he’s got coming and then some,” she thought. Just then, the horn blew in the car below, indicating that the children were getting tired of waiting. Andrea rushed out to the car and headed for the bank.

The five minute ride to the bank was one of deep contemplation for Andrea. Her head had begun to throb mercilessly over her right temple. Tears stained her cheeks as she tried to keep her sobs muffled from the children’s ears. She knew Ben was cheating, but seeing the card brought a sense of definitiveness to her suspicions and that hurt. Through all of their years of arguing, screaming, and fighting; through the name-calling; even through the occasional bouts of physical violence, she never thought it would come down to this. She never thought another woman would come between her and Ben. She never made provision for that. It never seemed possible with Ben. And now Andrea had to admit that she didn’t know Ben at all. As the song by Tamia echoed: “There’s a stranger in my house, took a while to figure out. You couldn’t be who you say you are, you gotta be someone else.” She brought her right hand up to her nose and tried to identify the fragrance that was embedded in her fingertips.

When Andrea arrived at the bank, she had already made up in her mind that she would clean out the savings account. She figured they had nearly six thousand dollars saved for the children’s education, and she didn’t want Ben using that money on his woman. It wasn’t her intent to spend the

money, but to open an individual account in her name and deposit the funds where Ben couldn't get to them. That way, she wouldn't be broke and totally dependent on him for money if he decided to leave. She was hoping it wouldn't come to that. But if it did, she wanted to leave him first.

She put the ATM card into the automated teller and punched in the code. She punched withdrawal and entered \$5,000.00. Immediately a message came up stating that the maximum withdrawal allowed was \$500.00. "D---," she mumbled, and then punched in \$500.00. She waited as the machine processed her transaction. Within seconds, a new message appeared. "The amount requested exceeds your available limit. Would you like to try another amount?" Andrea's mouth dropped. She read the message again, hoping she had misread it the first time. She hadn't. Immediately she punched in \$400.00. Again, the same message appeared. She tried \$200.00, but it too was denied. Finally she requested a mini-statement, hoping to find a transfer of the money to one of their other accounts. The statement revealed, however, a withdrawal in the amount of \$5,475.00 just one month before. Their current balance was \$35.00. Andrea was stunned. She tried desperately to think what Ben might have done with the money, but all she could think about was the "C" on the card. Andrea was sure that the heifer, whoever she was, had something to do with the missing money. She realized then how much of a fool she had been, but she was determined not to go down that easy. If Ben wanted to play hard ball, Andrea was ready. All she needed was a game plan; all she needed was to remember who she was and where she had come from.