



*Lost That
Lovin'
Feeling*

A SHORT PREQUEL

BETTYE GRIFFIN

LOST THAT LOVIN' FEELING: A SHORT PREQUEL

by Bettye Griffin

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Lost That Lovin' Feeling

In this prequel to the upcoming novel **Love Will Follow**, author Bettye Griffin introduces readers to Tierney Simmons, a young wife and mother from Waukegan, Illinois, who has worked hard to support her husband, Steven, and their young daughter, Sienna, after Steven's layoff. After years indulging his passion to write, Steven has hit the big time, selling a series he created to a cable network. But the stress of the long period of financial struggle has taken a toll on their relationship, and as they uncertainly stand on the threshold of a new life in California, Tierney and Steven take Sienna for a weekend with friends in an attempt to rediscover each other before it's too late...

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Table of Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A Note From The Author](#)

[Lost That Lovin' Feeling: A Short Prequel](#)

[A Note to the Reader](#)

[Excerpt, Love Will Follow by Bettye Griffin](#)

Acknowledgments

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The Almighty, from whom all blessings flow.

A Note From the Author

Lost That Lovin' Feeling is a short (approximately 25 pages) prequel to the upcoming novel **Love Will Follow**. It technically isn't a short story, because rather than being a complete story with a defined ending, it provides background information and hints at trouble to come that will be addressed in my upcoming novel...in other words, to get readers to want to know what happens next!

I hope you will tell your friends about this prequel. Please note that it can be downloaded for free at Bunderful Books-dot-com-slash-freebies. The online retailers require a minimum purchase price of 99 cents, and they do not allow any mention of it being available for free, so if you paid 99 cents don't get mad...get informed! Become a part of my network by "liking" [my Bunderful Books Facebook page](#) or joining my mailing list at www.bettyegriffin.com to be made aware of future freebies (and there will be more freebies!). The additional 20 or so pages represent a preview of the first two chapters of **Love Will Follow**. Please be sure to check it out!

B.

Lost That Lovin' Feeling

A Short Prequel (to **Love Will Follow**)

Tierney removed the round, John Lennon-inspired shades she'd picked up at the dollar

store from her purse and handed them to her four-year-old daughter, Sienna, who sat in the back seat. "Here you go, Punkin."

The child promptly put them on. The youth-sized sunglasses fit her small face perfectly. Tierney remembered playing in the snow and sunshine as a child, then going inside, where it took about an hour before her vision darkened enough to see clearly. They'd had a recent snowfall, and the bright February sun reflected off the white snow. Tierney felt certain that glare couldn't be good for Sienna's eyes. Funny how people today were more concerned about this type of thing than they were back in the day. Not only had no one thought much of snow blindness, but nor was anyone particularly concerned about potato salad sitting for hours on a picnic table, or about protecting one's knees and elbows with pads while skateboarding.

"Look at me, Daddy!" Sienna leaned forward eagerly in her booster seat.

Tierney found herself holding her breath. She told herself to relax, that the tension that reigned over their family was now a thing of the past. But while Steven was working feverishly on his script, his mood seemingly growing more desperate by the day, a simple query from Sienna could spark a brusque or absent-sounding response from him. Things had been a lot better now that he'd sold his script, but the fact that Tierney's senses went on alert when Sienna piped up was a testament to just how strained relations in their household had become.

Steven, backing the car out of its parking space, looked over his right shoulder at his daughter wearing her new sunglasses. "Hey, look at you! Very cool."

"Thank you," she replied in a preening manner, obviously happy to have his approval.

"Now remember, Sienna, those sunglasses aren't a toy. I want you to either wear them or not wear them, but don't be taking them off and putting them back on, okay?" Steven spoke in a gentle tone that sounded more like coaxing than a warning.

"I'm gonna keep them on."

"That's a good girl." Steven resumed backing out. He traded an amused glance with Tierney. "If she starts taking them off and putting them on, the arms will probably break off before we get to Cook County."

The two of them laughed, and Tierney felt herself relaxing. Things hadn't been too good in the Simmons household for quite a long time. Happy family times like this could only be good for Sienna, who probably had no memories of the tranquility that existed during the first two years of her life. It was true that they'd suffered a financial setback when the Chrysler plant across the Wisconsin border, where Steven worked as a machinist, began laying off people as they prepared to close permanently, but then he got a job as a production scheduler for an engineering firm. Tierney's work history was more stable; she had worked for the largest employer in Lake County ever since she got her Associate

degree, beginning as a low-level clerk and working her way up to administrative assistant to a vice president. They lived simply but comfortably in a two-bedroom-plus-den apartment in a modern complex in Waukegan, Illinois, and had actually started house hunting when the bottom fell out. The company Steven worked for went out of business, resulting in the loss of his job.

He then announced that instead of looking for another job, he wanted to concentrate on building a career as a writer. Tierney had been astounded. On one hand, she'd always known that Steven had an interest in writing...he spent most of his spare time either in front of the computer in the den—which he'd insisted their apartment include so he could have an office to work in—or poring over written notes. He'd actually sold a few stories to a mystery magazine. Still, Tierney knew that a few hundred dollars here and there would hardly take the place of his regular salary.

When she pointed that out to him, he asked her to believe in him, said he had an idea he was developing for a dramatic series that would be worth big money to a forward-thinking producer. That seemed like a huge long shot to Tierney, and when she suggested he get another job and continue to work on his project in his spare time, he told her he'd already made up his mind. She then suggested he look for something part-time, which he rejected as well. His unwillingness to compromise had set the stage for a resentment for which even the six-figure check he received had failed to compensate.

It only took a few minutes to reach the highway from their apartment. "And we're off," Steven said, his voice ringing with enthusiasm as he guided the car down the entrance ramp.

"Will we be there soon, Daddy?" Sienna asked.

Tierney chuckled. It was a little too soon for Sienna to be asking the inevitable question of are-we-there-yet. It would take about four-and-a-half hours to get to Springfield.

"No, baby girl, it's gonna be a long drive," Steven answered. "Why don't you take a nap? I'm going to drive for an hour or two, and then we'll stop and have a nice, big breakfast. How's that sound?"

"I'm not hungry now. I had a banana."

"That's why we're going to drive for awhile. By the time we stop, we'll all be good and hungry. That makes sense, doesn't it?"

Sienna thought for a moment, then said, "Yes."

"Okay. You just close your eyes and take a nap, and we'll wake you up when it's time to eat breakfast, okay?"

Tierney leaned into the space between the driver and passenger seats. "You can cover yourself with the blanket, Sienna." She smiled in satisfaction. Steven had been so casual

about stopping for breakfast, and Sienna probably thought he meant McDonald's. That was about the only place they ate at these days. But Steven probably had someplace like Perkins or Bob Evans in mind...now that they could afford it.

To his credit, he had worked diligently from his first day of unemployment, settling in his home office right after his morning run and spending most of his day developing his idea and a smaller portion working on short stories he could sell for a more immediate income. He made about half a dozen attempts to sell to a women's magazine that published a short mystery story every week at the high rate of about a dollar a word. Finally, they bought a story from him...and then another...and then another. The checks he received periodically did help out—and he always turned them over to her, asking her to reserve just fifty dollars pocket money for him—but they were sporadic.

Steven's first love, though, had always been movies. He'd always said he wished he had followed through on his interest in filmmaking as a young man, as Spike Lee had done. He'd been discouraged by his parents, who felt the odds of making it were against him, but he learned enough on his own to be able to point out things to her like how certain special effects were accomplished, or how shots changed and principals were replaced with stunt people in long shots, then back to the principals again.

He worked hard, but in the end the responsibility of providing for them fell on Tierney's shoulders. It had been a struggle to get the rent and utilities paid every month—their rent was high because of the features it had, a washer and dryer, fireplace, and of course Steven's office—plus keeping them fed and clothed. What was worse, Steven insisted she keep Sienna enrolled in daycare, just as she had been when they were both working. He said it was impossible to keep her entertained and write at the same time. He didn't budge from his position when she pointed out how much of her net pay daycare took, and when she suggested that they take a smaller apartment without a den to compensate, with him working at the kitchen table, he balked. Their relationship deteriorated from there. Steven felt Tierney wasn't being supportive, while Tierney felt annoyed at his unwillingness to do anything to help. They'd continued in that vein for two long years...

Sienna covered herself with the blanket. "Will I be able to play with baby Kylie when we get there?"

"I don't see why not," Tierney replied. "Of course, you're a few years older than she is, but I think she's big enough to do a few things with you." The daughter of her friend and former co-worker was a toddler rather than a preschooler like Sienna. "It's important that you realize, though, that she can't talk yet."

"That's okay. Mika can't talk, either." Sienna hugged her doll to her chest, then laid her head back against the seat. Tierney couldn't see her eyes through the dark lenses of the sunglasses, but she presumed her eyes were closed.

She reached out and lowered the volume of the radio, silently indicating to Steven that

Sienna was going to sleep.

"Why don't you catch a nap yourself?" he suggested softly. "You were up so late last night, packing for all of us. I had a good night's sleep, so I'm fine to drive all the way there. Besides, I know that you and Tracy are going to want to gab and cackle when we get there."

Tierney nodded. She'd missed her dear friend Tracy Norwood since she'd moved to the state capital, Springfield, after her husband, Keith, was elected governor. Tierney had confided much of her frustration of those early months of Steven's unemployment to her friend on an almost daily basis. It was rough not having a close friend live locally. Her best friend since childhood, Nylah Taylor, still lived in Northwest Indiana. Nylah had been with her the night eight years ago when they went to a concert in Chicago, at which Tierney met a handsome man named Steven Simmons...

She gazed out the window, not really seeing the scenery of the North Chicago suburbs as they sped by. She thought about how Sienna looked so forward to playing with Kylie Norwood. Tierney had never planned for Sienna being an only child. She felt guilty, because she knew sometimes her daughter was lonely. If everything had gone the way she hoped, she would've had another baby at around the same time Tracy had little Kylie...but Steven's layoff had changed everything. Another pregnancy would've been disastrous. In an almost desperate attempt to save a few dollars she'd gone off birth control pills in favor of a more economical diaphragm. Although inconvenient, she figured it was better for her health as well. As the tension between her and Steven increased, the frequency of their sex life decreased, and Tierney didn't see much point in ingesting a pill every day when she and Steven had sex maybe eight days out of thirty...

Economics no longer ruled her life. Not only had Steven sold his concept and script for a six-figure sum, but there was potential to make much more, writing scripts for the series the cable network planned to produce. Truly big things could come from this for Steven, and consequently for her as well. Tierney couldn't deny feeling relieved that the financial pressure was off, but whenever she tried to get excited about what the future held, she couldn't do it. It was time to admit the cold, hard truth...that after two long years of struggle and resentment, her feelings for her husband weren't anywhere near as strong as they'd been previously.

"You okay, Tierney?"

His voice brought her back to the present, and she turned at him. "Oh, yes, fine." In spite of the hard times of the last two years, there was no denying that Steven knew her better than anyone, with the possible exception of her mother. He could always tell when she had something on her mind.

Who knew? Maybe this little weekend getaway was just what she and Steven needed to recapture what they'd lost...

Tierney had seen pictures of the Governor's Mansion before, but nothing prepared her for the site of the sprawling redbrick structure that dated back to the mid-Nineteenth Century.

"Wow," Tierney breathed. "I know they call it the Governor's Mansion, but...it didn't look quite so big in Tracy's pictures."

"It is pretty impressive, at that," Steven replied. "It's quite an honor to be able to sleep here. That was real nice of Tracy and Keith to invite us to celebrate our good fortune."

Tierney had pulled out her camera and was busy taking pictures of the mansion. "Look at that house, Sienna. Isn't it pretty?" It surprised her that her daughter, who'd been awake since they stopped for breakfast in Joliet, didn't seem impressed. But the child's next words told her why.

"Does Miss Tracy live upstairs or downstairs?"

Tierney and Steven's gazes met, and they both laughed.

"I guess to someone her age this does look like just another apartment building," Steven remarked.

Tierney nodded agreement, then said, "No, Sienna. This isn't an apartment building. It's one very large house. Any house this large is called a mansion." Sure, Sienna had just turned four, but Tierney figured it was never too early for her to develop a good vocabulary. "You see, Miss Tracy's husband, Mr. Keith, is the governor of the whole state."

"That means he's in charge of everything that happens in the whole state of Illinois," Steven added. When Sienna looked confused, he clarified, "In other words, he's the boss."

"But since you asked, Sienna, Miss Tracy and her family live upstairs. This is a very important building, and it's very old. People come to see it, like a museum." Tierney knew Sienna understood what a museum was; she'd taken her to the Children's Museum in Kenosha, just across the Wisconsin border. "But the people who visit only get to see the first floor, so Ms. Tracy and her family can have privacy. The furniture on the first floor is the same as it was way back when Abraham Lincoln lived here."

"Ah, Tierney. Abraham Lincoln never lived here."

She looked at Steven quizzically. "Was it not built when he was governor? It has to be a hundred-and-fifty years old, even though it's obviously been refurbished."

"No, I don't think that's it. But Lincoln was never governor. He served in Congress for one term, then went back to practicing law but was active in politics before he became

president. You can't go from being a lawyer to the White House nowadays, but things were different back then."

"Oh! I didn't know. It's just that he was so closely linked to Springfield."

"Well, he did live here for about fifteen years before he left for Washington." Steven gave her shoulder a reassuring pat. "Come on, let's go inside."

Tracy had lunch all ready for them when they arrived. She'd made two dishes. Both the chicken chili and the creamy New England clam chowder were perfect for a February day with temperatures hovering around eighteen degrees. They ate at the informal dining nook of the spacious second-floor private living area, joined only by eighteen-month-old Kylie, Tracy's daughter. Kylie had been born six months after Tracy's husband, Keith Norwood, was inaugurated as governor.

Keith was at his office at the State Capitol, while Tracy's eleven-year-old son from her first marriage, Gabe Pegram, was at school. There were two other children in the blended Pegram/Norwood family. Tracy's daughter, Amber Pegram, as well as Keith's son, Josh Norwood, both attended a private high school up in Lake County and boarded there.

Josh, along with his father and grandfather, had witnessed the car crash that killed his mother and grandmother. The taxi in which the women were riding collided with a gas truck as they drove to the airport for the flight home after a vacation. Keith, Josh, and Keith's father-in-law rode in a second taxi behind them. The emotional problems stemming from the trauma of seeing the fiery crash led to Josh acting out. One day he'd taken his grandfather's car without permission—he only had a learner's permit at the time—and, was rushing to get home before he was discovered, and ran over little Gabe Pegram in the parking lot of the library, breaking his leg.

Tierney knew about the hit-and-run, but she hadn't known the identity of the driver. As far as she knew at the time, the police hadn't found the person who ran over Gabe. She also knew that Tracy started seeing someone after Gabe's leg healed, for Tracy had confided that her ex-husband, Clint, didn't like her dating and was giving her a hard time. But Tracy only identified the man as the widowed father of one of Amber's friends.

Tierney had been floored several months later when Tracy told her she was getting married and asked her to be matron of honor. With a secrecy Tierney found both uncharacteristic and puzzling, Tracy refused to reveal the name of the groom, citing a need to avoid media leaks. That told Tierney that her friend was marrying someone well known, but not until she and Steven arrived at an impressively large suburban home in Gurnee did Tracy inform them that she was marrying Keith Norwood, the gubernatorial candidate. She apologetically explained that they tried to keep their romance quiet because of the publicity it would receive.

Tierney believed Tracy's story, but just days after the ceremony, a scandalous story broke that it was all a sham, simply to cover up a private settlement Keith made to Tracy after Josh ran Gabe down. His opponent immediately jumped on it, and it became a hot topic, with people at the office divided...some saying it was a business arrangement to buy Tracy's silence, others saying how romantic it was that two people who'd met under such hostile circumstances had managed to fall in love. With some brilliant PR on the part of Keith's staff, Tracy was shown to the public and made a brief statement, declined to answer any questions, and retreated to the background, seen just enough to satisfy the public's curiosity, but not enough to smack of exploitation.

At the office Tierney had spoken out in her friend's defense, but she really didn't know what to think. She desperately wanted to believe that Tracy and Keith had fallen in love, but she wasn't sure. Keith Norwood was rich, and Tracy was a divorced mother struggling to keep the bills paid. She'd had it even worse than Tierney, for not only did her ex-husband rarely contribute due to an irregular income, but Tracy had a lower-paying job than Tierney and therefore less funds with which to support her family. Shortly after the accident Tracy and her children had moved into a rented house, with Tracy saying the owners had been frantic for a tenant and agreed to the lower rent she offered. Tierney didn't find out until after the accusations of a deal were made public that the house was owned by Keith Norwood, whose personal fortune was in real estate. Tierney felt hurt that her friend had lied to her, not only about the driver of the car that ran Gabe down and about the circumstances under which she'd moved, but also regarding the details about the house rental, as well as the identity of the man she was dating. When she asked Tracy about it, Tracy repeated that she and Keith chose to keep the details of their courtship private. Tierney, wanting to preserve their friendship, wisely didn't press the issue.

The scandal, although damaging, had not been enough to defeat Keith, whose concern for the less fortunate residents of the state had made him popular with voters. The Norwoods, who appeared publicly for the first time at a candidate debate, made an attractive, appealing couple who had genuine chemistry; and their children, also present, were obviously fond of each other. The entire blended family appeared so natural and relaxed that it was difficult to believe the marriage was anything but the real thing. Widely published, candid photos of Tracy and Keith being affectionate over dinner at a rooftop Chicago restaurant, taken by a reporter equipped with a long-distance lens who wanted to capture their interaction without their awareness, also helped their cause. Regardless, the validity of the Norwood marriage continued to be debated in the court of public opinion, finally fading the following spring, when Tracy announced her pregnancy.

Whatever the true circumstances behind the marriage, Tracy certainly looked happy as she spoon-fed her daughter. Tierney found herself feeling a little envious of her friend.

"Keith was sorry he couldn't take today off," Tracy said apologetically. "He had some important meetings scheduled. But he did say he'd try to leave early."

"Maybe it would have been better if we waited and came tomorrow," Steven observed.

"No, no, we wanted you to come today," Tracy replied. "Considering that you'll probably leave early Sunday afternoon, driving down on Friday means you'll have two full days here. If you waited until tomorrow, it would be only twenty-four hours," she reasoned. She smiled at Steven. "Besides, Tierney tells me you want to see the Lincoln museum."

A grin spread over his face. "Yeah, I've been wanting to get down here to see it from the time it opened. They covered it in the local news. I love interactive exhibits like the ones they have."

"I suggested that he go to the museum this afternoon, Tracy," Tierney explained. "Sienna and I will go with him tomorrow to see the house Lincoln and his family lived in and the law office where he worked. So not only will you and I get a chance to dish this afternoon, but Sienna won't be bored by spending all afternoon in a museum. It shouldn't take long to see the rest of the Lincoln buildings."

"Sounds like a plan," Tracy replied. "I've been to them all, of course, and I found them fascinating. But why don't you leave Sienna here with me tomorrow afternoon? You're right to expect her to be bored. I'm not even sure kids her age are allowed to go through the Lincoln house."

Tierney and Steven exchanged a glance. "We don't want to put you out, Tracy," he said.

"You wouldn't be. It's wonderful for Kylie to have a playmate. I can take them to Chuck E. Cheese for pizza and games. Gabe will probably tag along, too."

Sienna's ears picked up on the name of the fun place children loved. "Ooh, Chuck E. Cheese!"

Tierney laughed. "Uh-oh. You're in for it now."

"Would you like to go there with Kylie and me tomorrow, Sienna, while your parents go look at some boring old buildings?" Tracy asked. At the child's enthusiastic nod, she grinned and said, "There. It's all settled."

"That's sweet of you, Tracy," Tierney said. She looked about the sprawling rooms of the private living quarters. "I'm still trying to adjust to our being here. It's pretty incredible to think that the governor and first lady of Illinois are personal friends of ours," Tierney said. "Just think, we're sitting here in the Governor's Mansion, having lunch with people who actually know the President of the United States and the First Lady."

"Keith knows them. I, on the other hand, have only met them," Tracy clarified. "There's a big difference."

"Six degrees of separation," Steven mumbled. Speaking more clearly, he added, "It was real nice of you and Keith to invite us down, Tracy."

"Well, it's pretty exciting for us to be able to say that the creator and writer of an upcoming cable drama—a surefire hit, I might add—is a personal friend of ours," Tracy countered. "This is a huge event, and we couldn't let it go unobserved." With a smile at Steven, she said, "Who knows? You might get to know that other Hollywood big shot with the initials S.S."

"Spielberg?" he guessed, grinning.

"That's the one. And then Keith and I can claim six degrees of separation between us and him."

Tierney felt happy as she listened to her husband and friend joke with each other. She missed Tracy, but she liked how their friendship had grown to include Steven now that Tracy had remarried. In addition to attending the wedding, she and Steven had been dinner guests at the Norwood home several times, both before they took up occupancy here at the mansion and during their weekend visits to Lake County. One thing Tierney could say about her husband—he could hold his own with people from all walks of life, and Keith Norwood, despite his wealth, was completely grounded and real.

After they finished with lunch, Tracy gave Steven directions to the Lincoln Museum. The housekeeper began the cleanup process, and Tierney, Tracy, and their daughters settled in the living room. Sienna and Kylie sat on the floor, busying themselves by rolling a large plastic ball back and forth between them. The air was punctuated by Kylie's attempts to communicate, which came out in the form of happy squeals and giggles and an occasional decipherable word, her favorite being the one she called everyone, "Ma!"

"Tierney, I can't tell you how happy I am about Steven selling his script," Tracy said.

"It's taken a huge load off my shoulders, that's for sure. I feel almost guilty. I mean, not just a script, but a series creator fee and screen credit as well. I never thought in a million years this would happen." She chewed on her lower lip before adding, "I guess that doesn't make me a very good wife. It's like admitting I didn't have any confidence in my husband."

"It doesn't mean that at all. You were just working and scrimping pennies for so long, that you started to give up and get discouraged. It's a human reaction, Tierney. Don't beat yourself up for it. Heaven knows I was feeling hopeless myself before I met Keith. My life had become an endless cycle of working, college classes, scrimping to get the bills paid, and panicking when there wasn't enough money to cover everything. One time Gabe actually had to wear a sock on his hand when he lost his gloves before payday."

Tierney took a moment to look at the children playing. Sienna seemed to be having so much fun, even with the much-younger Kylie. Once again guilt stabbed at her. "Six of one, a half dozen of the other. Steven probably sold stories more often than Clint got acting jobs, but I'm sure Clint's acting jobs paid a lot more than Steven's stories." Brightening, she added, "But who would have thought you would one day marry the

governor?"

"Well, he hadn't been elected yet when I married him," Tracy pointed out, "but yes, I've really been fortunate. I thought romance was only something you found in books and movies. And I felt I was just resigned to a life of hard work, with nothing to show for it except gray hair and wrinkles. To tell you the truth, Tierney, I didn't think Clint's acting career was ever going to go anywhere, either." Tracy's first husband, Clint Pegram, had left her when their son Gabe was an infant, saying that if he didn't pursue his dreams of becoming an actor before he got too old, opportunity would pass him by. For years he slept on friend's sofas in New York, working whatever night jobs he could find while auditioning during the day. Eventually he got jobs here and there: TV commercials, narrations, the occasional small part in a TV show or movie. He sent Tracy money whenever he could, but he was rarely flush, and for the most part she had to pay her own way, as well as that of their kids. But two years ago Clint had scored, with a regular supporting part on a TV show and a few parts in movies. His melodious speaking voice also kept him in demand doing narration and recording audiobooks as well.

It occurred to Tierney that she and Tracy had both been married to men who put their dreams ahead of their families...but at least Clint Pegram hadn't expected Tracy to support him while he pursued his.

"That's okay, Tracy," she said. "After all, you and Clint were divorced. You weren't required to believe in him anymore."

The two of them laughed, and then Tracy sighed. "Oh, Tierney. As happy as I am for you, I have to wonder if I'm ever going to get to see you after you go out to California."

Tierney felt her spirits dampen, as if someone had lowered her face into a bucket of water. She tried to force it away. "No need to feel that way, hon. We'll be back for visits."

She considered confiding her ambivalence about moving to Tracy, but decided against it. She was still trying to work through her own feelings. She supposed she needed to do that before sharing her thoughts with anyone else. But in spite of the rosy future that awaited her in the land of milk and honey, the sense of dread had grown as wide as the Mississippi River.

She really didn't want to go to California with Steven.

Tracy seemed to pick up on her apprehension. "I guess it's a scary prospect to leave your friends and go two thirds of the way across the country. I know I was pretty nervous about moving down here, and it's only a four-hour drive from Gurnee. Fortunately, we're able to get home often, and Amber and Josh visit us as well. The important thing is that I'm going to school." Tracy, who had dropped out of college when she became pregnant with Amber and married her first husband, was determined to earn her degree. "I can't say this is where I would choose to live, but it's important to Keith's career. He plans on running for a second term, so it looks like I'm going to be living here for another six years

or so before we can go back home to Gurnee." She shrugged. "Sometimes you just have to go along with your husband's goals."

"Well, I don't want to come across as unsupportive of Steven, and I know there's nothing particularly exciting about being an administrative assistant, but I like what I do, Tracy. I'm good at it, and I don't know if I'm ready to give it up to be...a housewife. I mean, maybe the reality will be different but from what I hear, there are no jobs in California. What would I do all day, sit and look at the palm trees or the Pacific Ocean? Sienna will soon be starting school." Tierney glanced at her daughter, who was too busy playing to pay her any attention.

"You can always have another baby," Tracy replied with a smile. She quickly grew serious at the sight of Tierney's unsmiling expression. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to make light of your situation."

Tierney sighed. "I know you don't. I just feel so torn." She realized she was saying more than she'd intended to, but she had a sudden need to voice her thoughts aloud. What Tracy said about wives supporting their husbands' goals had struck a nerve. Speaking quietly so that only Tracy could hear, she said, "He sure as hell hasn't shown me any support all this time, and now I'm supposed to pick up and leave my life behind because he's caught a break? It's not fair."

Tracy gave her a reassuring smile. "Just try to relax, and see how things go. I'm so glad you were able to get out of town for a few days."

"We really couldn't afford to go anywhere before," Tierney admitted. "It took some finagling of the numbers just to buy an extra tank of gas to get down to my mother's, and that's just a two-hour drive." Her lower lip jutted out in anger. "Of course, if Steven had agreed to baby sit while I was at work, the budget wouldn't have been quite so tight."

After a brief hesitation, as if considering her words, Tracy said, "Tierney, I think you might be being a little too hard on Steven. He considered his writing as much a job as his old nine-to-five. He couldn't have done that very well if he was babysitting an active preschooler, either. So he didn't help with the cooking or cleaning...he didn't do any of that when he was working, did he?" At Tierney's head shake, Tracy added, "Is it really fair for you to expect him to pitch in just because he was working from home?"

Tierney sighed. "Maybe you're right." She attempted a chuckle. "He did help with the laundry...that was one thing he didn't do, even before. He said that he would work out plot angles while folding the clothes and linens."

"See? The important thing is that you're here now," Tracy soothed. I want you to think of this as a mini-vacation. Heaven knows, I can't think of any two people who need it more. You two have a nice romantic bedroom to stay in. Have some wine with dinner tonight and loosen up a bit. I think the tension that's built up over the last few years may start to melt away, in the right setting." She winked.

Tierney slipped on the new nightgown she purchased. This was her one splurge, and she hadn't even allowed herself that until after the contracts were delivered and Steven signed them. When the offer came, her mind ran wild with possibilities for about five minutes before common sense took over. She only allowed herself cautious optimism, not wanting to act on the windfall until she actually had it in her palm. Even now, Steven had yet to receive payment. The agent he signed with suggested they negotiate a few changes, so there was a nerve-wracking period of back-and-forth in which Tierney feared the network might want to withdraw their offer. The check wouldn't be mailed until after their legal department returned the signed contract to them, but she figured it wouldn't hurt if she charged one nightgown and matching robe for herself. It wasn't an obviously sexy nightgown...the red, white, and brown jungle print wasn't sheer, nor did it go all the way to the floor, instead falling to just above her knees, but the spaghetti straps and snug lace-trimmed bodice made her feel...well, beautiful and desirable, neither of which she'd felt in quite a while. She wondered what Steven would think.

The financial strain they'd been under had slowed down their sex life, and when they did come together—down to just once or twice a week—it seemed to be devoid of any emotion other than pure lust. The intimacy was confined to a rapid session of foreplay followed by intercourse, with no cuddling or pillow talk afterward.

Tierney massaged her scalp and checked to see that her bobby pins were secure. She'd long since let her perm grow out; regular salon visits for touch-ups were a luxury she could no longer afford. It became unruly as her natural texture grew in, and she generally braided it after she washed it to give it a wavy texture, then unbraided and pinned it close to her head, making it resemble a short wavy haircut. She'd already begun looking at hairstyle magazines to help her decide on a style for when she resumed going to the salon.

She adjusted a few pins, then lowered her arms. It was time to stop fussing and go into the adjoining guest bedroom with its four-poster bed and fireplace. She told herself not to expect too much. She'd been in here so long showering and primping, chances were that Steven had fallen asleep already.

She remembered Tracy's ill-timed joke about having another baby. That was out of the question...but Tracy might have been right about one thing. If she and Steven were ever going to re-discover each other, this was the time for it to happen.

She slipped the matching robe on, tied the sash loosely around her waist, and flicked off the light switch with one hand while simultaneously opening the door with the other.

The bedroom was dark, lit only by the orange flames of the fireplace, the only sound the snapping and crackling of the logs as they burned. Steven was nowhere in sight.

He'd obviously started the fire, but where had he gone? Disappointment oozed from

Tierney's every pore. Was he waiting for her to get into bed and fall asleep? Tracy had been right—this was a wonderfully romantic bedroom, especially now with the fire glow and popping sounds. Had things gotten so bad between them that Steven was no longer interested in sleeping with her?

She removed her robe, draped it over a chair, and slid between the sheets halfway between the edge of the mattress and its center. The room had become noticeably warmer from the fire, and the quilt covering the bed was thick and warm, but she didn't mind the heat. Her heart felt frozen...and she now found herself feeling just plain weary.

She'd closed her eyes and was listening to the soothing sound of the snapping flames when the door suddenly opened. Within seconds Steven lay on his stomach just inches away from her, barefoot, wearing his usual winter sleepwear of sweatshirt and sweat pants. "Hey there."

"Hey. I thought you left."

"No. I figured I'd look in on Sienna while you were showering. She's not used to sleeping anywhere else than in her own bed."

"Oh." She instantly felt guilty. "I checked her before I took my shower. She was sleeping soundly."

"She still is. It was smart of you to bring her night light. If she wakes up she won't be scared." He smiled at her. "You're a wonderful mother, Tierney. I wasn't implying otherwise. I just thought I'd take a look at her and save you from having to do it. You do so much as it is."

She shrugged. "I guess I can't argue with that."

He covered his hand with hers. "I'm not as insensitive as you think," he said softly. "I know how difficult these last two years have been for you. Maybe I could've done more to make it easier," he admitted, "but I knew that time wasn't on my side. It's foolhardy for a writer to think that any of their ideas haven't been thought of by anyone else...probably dozens of writers with the same idea. It's a question of who comes up with the best execution first. I knew I had to concentrate on getting my idea conceptualized and expanded. I had to get it down on paper and make it shine up like a newly minted penny. In order to do that, I had to make the most out of every day and have as few distractions as possible. I know most people think writing is simple...but it really isn't. It's as challenging as any other job, and even more so than many."

"I know," Tierney murmured. "I've seen all the storyboards you've been working with." They lined one wall of his office, and they looked so complicated, with color coding and arrows, that she hadn't been able to follow them. "I've seen you agonize when you got stuck on something. I know it isn't easy, Steven. But I'm glad you realize all I've been carrying on my shoulders."

"I do know, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate your struggling to stretch every dollar to keep up. And now that it's paying off, I promise to make it up to you." There was an earnestness on his face that she hadn't seen for a long time. "I want you to have everything you ever wanted. I'm going to do my best to make sure that you and Sienna don't want for anything. I'm not going to just be a one-show wonder, Tierney. This is the start of a new career for me. I plan on becoming a major player in series development, like David E. Kelley or Shonda Rhimes." His lips formed a dreamy smile. "I'm going to call my production company Sienna Productions. I'm already thinking about other projects I'd like to do."

"That sounds real nice, Steven." Warmth began to spread throughout Tierney's body. Part of it was a reaction to his promise to make it up to her, but part of it came from something else...something below her waist.

He peeled the covers away from her, telling her that he felt that same heat. "Hmm... what's this?" he asked, taking in the bright print of her nightgown.

Tierney felt her cheeks grow warm. It was silly...this was her husband, not some stranger, looking at her in her nightgown. Everything about her had become familiar to him long ago...so why did it suddenly feel like it was the first time?

"I, uh, treated myself to a new nightgown and robe. I figured it was okay."

"You can treat yourself to a lot of new things now, Tierney. Hmm. This is nice." Steven fingered the brown lace trim just to the side of her armpit, then traced it down and toward the center. His fingertip brushed against her breast, and their eyes met and held. He moved forward, touching his lips to hers at the same time as he covered her entire breast with his palm.

Tierney's libido went into overdrive. Instinctively she knew this would be no satisfaction of a basic human need, like sex had become for them. For the first time in a long time, her heart would be involved.

She rolled from her side to her back and watched as he pulled off his sweat shirt, revealing a finely muscled chest. When he stretched out atop her she did something she hadn't done in a long time...she held out her arms. She wrapped them around his back, and a sigh of contentment escaped her parted lips as he fed her his tongue. The feel of his erection against her thigh filled her with breathless anticipation; her heart hammered in her chest.

"Steven," she whispered when their lips broke apart.

"I know, sweetness. I feel it, too."

Tierney closed her eyes as he nuzzled her neck. His hand slipped inside the fabric of her nightgown to touch her bare breast, and her nipples stiffened like beaten egg whites. She

bent her left leg outward, eager for him to touch her between her legs. He was moving with maddening slowness, sucking on her earlobe, inserting a moistened tongue into her ear, returning to kiss her again. By the time he finally reached between her legs she was wet with wanting.

Steven quickly removed the rest of his clothes, then lifted her nightgown over her head. He positioned himself above her, and she eagerly lifted her legs astride him. Tierney's mouth formed an O of pleasure as he filled her, his erection hard as granite, then moaned aloud. He leaned forward, and she reached out for him, running her hands over the rippling muscles of his back. Her back arched, and her nipples brushed against his chest as her breasts thrust upward. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so good...

They lay close together on their sides, facing each other. Tierney reveled in the feel of Steven's hand wrapped around her forearm, massaging her skin with the pad of his thumb. "It hasn't been this good for us in a long time, Tierney."

"I know. I miss how it used to be."

"Money problems will sour a relationship every time. But if I have my way it won't ever be a problem again. You and Sienna will be taken care of, I promise."

She found she couldn't keep her eyes open. "Mmm. That sounds nice."

Steven pressed his lips to her forehead. "Get some sleep. It's been a long day, and I know you're tired." He released his hold on her forearm. "I guess I'd better put out the fire."

Tierney, both body and mind exhausted after a long day, felt herself drifting off. She had a vague awareness of Steven raking the coals, heard him closing the glass doors. She was sleepily aware of his getting back into bed with her. She felt his arms go around her, heard him speak softly to her...he said something that didn't sound quite right to her ears, but sleep she could no longer fight off completely overtook her at that moment, and she wasn't able to process his words.

Upon opening her eyes next morning, Tierney immediately stretched her entire body. She expected her hands to make contact with Steven when she stretched them to the side. When her hands met with nothing but air and pillows, she turned her head in that direction and saw she was alone in the bed. She glanced at the clock on the side table, saw that it was ten minutes before eight and decided he must have gone for his early-morning run.

She stretched again. It felt divine, working so many of her muscles. Muscles she thought slyly, that she hadn't used much of late. They'd made love once more at some point

during the night. Her diaphragm had never been so busy in all the time she'd been using it. She wasn't even sure when to take it out; she was supposed to leave it in for eight hours.

Tierney made a mental note to go see her gynie doctor and get a more convenient method of birth control. Who knew, maybe before too long they could think about having another baby...it would be a joy to stay at home in that case. She'd only taken three months off when she had Sienna, and she hated like hell to have to leave her in someone else's care, but she couldn't afford to take any more time off.

Tierney smiled as she slipped back into her nightgown, then tied her robe around her waist and went to check on Sienna. Funny. The idea of going to L.A., while still a little scary—after all, she was a lifelong resident of the Midwest and feared she'd be out of her element—didn't seem quite as objectionable as it had just yesterday...

"Good morning, Miss Tracy," Sienna said politely.

"Well, hello there, Sienna!" Tracy stood at the kitchen island, peeling potatoes. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes." Sienna glanced around. "Where's Kylie?"

"She's still asleep. I'm going to go and check on her, though. She'll probably be awake any minute now." Tracy met Tierney's eyes. "Steven went out for a run."

"I figured as much. What can we do to help you?" At her friend's amused look, Tierney added, "Sienna likes to help me cook. She does things like stir pancake batter and crack eggs. Don't you, Punkin?"

"I hardly ever get the hard part in," Sienna said proudly.

At Tracy's confused look, Tierney whispered, "The shells."

Tracy nodded. "I'll bet you don't, sweetie. Why don't I get you some eggs, and you can crack them? I want your mommy and daddy to have a good breakfast before they go out." Sienna gave a happy nod, and Tracy retrieved a carton of eggs from the refrigerator, then took a bowl from the cupboard. "Tierney, you can chop the onion and peppers for the home fries while I finish the potatoes."

The sound of Kylie's faint cries drifted into the kitchen.

"Sounds like somebody's awake," Tierney said in a singsong voice.

Tracy was washing her hands at the sink when Keith's voice called out, "I've got her, Tracy."

She promptly shut off the water and dried her hands.

"That's so sweet of him," Tierney said.

"Is it any wonder I love him so much?" Tracy gave a Mona Lisa smile, then grew thoughtful. "I really should apologize to you, Tierney, for not being truthful with you about Keith and me. Just between you and me, we both had an agenda when we got married. His ex-girlfriend found out about us and threatened to go to the media with the whole story about the hit-and-run. Keith hadn't told her about it, but somehow she found out. Clint—" she referred to her first husband—"was making noises about petitioning for custody, since he'd gotten a steady income and wanted me back, but I wasn't interested in a reconciliation. Keith never doubted she'd go through with her threat, and he was worried about the effect a scandal would have on the election. I was worried I'd lose my kids. We did the only thing we could to salvage the situation. But one thing I didn't lie about...I really was in love with him when we got married. It's just that...he didn't love me. He cared about me, but he always demonstrated that, even from the very beginning, before we got involved romantically. I believed I could get him to love me."

Tierney was almost afraid to ask. "He didn't love you then, but things are different now, right?"

Beaming, Tracy replied, "Yes. It's everything I ever dreamed of."

"Then that's what counts. I can't say I'm surprised he fell in love with you, Tracy. I'm happy for you both. Not only are you and Keith a perfect couple, but your kids get along so well, like they've always been siblings."

"Josh is a sweet boy. It's true I wanted to strangle him when he broke Gabe's leg with that car, but he won me over when he asked to apologize to Gabe. He's really the one who brought Keith and me together, at least indirectly. From the day he met Gabe and Amber he's been like a big brother to both of them."

"And of course now that you and Keith are married he really is their big brother," Tierney observed.

"That's right. Amber's going to miss him next year."

"I can't believe he's graduating already."

"Did I tell you? He decided to go to Northwestern. He was considering the University of Wisconsin, but Madison is so far away."

"Isn't there a college right here in Springfield?"

"Yes, the University of Illinois, but Josh doesn't want to come down here." Tracy giggled. "Besides, that's where I go. I still have a few more credits to go before I get my degree, and I'm sure he doesn't want to bump into me on campus. I think he wants a little

distance between him and the family as well. A little independence is good, since he's proven he can handle it in the years since the accident. But he'll be able to get here often if he's in Chicago, and Keith will see him when he's up there on state business."

"I'm glad it all worked out." Tierney took a moment to instruct Sienna, who was singing as she worked, on how to hold the bowl steady with one hand while beating the eggs with a fork in her other hand.

"Us, too." Tracy looked at Tierney, a knowing look in her eyes. "I must say, you're looking very content this morning. Actually, you're glowing."

Tierney touched the fingertips of her left hand to her cheek. "Does it show?"

Tracy laughed. "Let me just say, you remind me of Scarlett O'Hara the morning after. I'll bet you woke up with a song on your lips." She winked. "I told you a romantic setting was all you'd need."

"Oh, come now." Tierney went back to her chopping.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Tierney. I think it's wonderful."

"Tracy, it's going to take more than one night of good—" she broke off, remembering Sienna's presence—"you-know-what to fix what's broken here."

"But it's a start."

Tierney spoke in a low voice. "I have to confess. I really do feel a renewed sense of hope. I'm thinking it won't be so bad after all."

"That's the ticket." Tracy placed a palm on Tierney's shoulder. "You worked so hard, and for so long. It's time to live a life of leisure, at least for a little while. Who knows, you might find you like it."

"We'll be home in five minutes," Steven announced as he guided the car down the exit ramp of I-94.

"There's no place like it," Tierney said, smiling. It had been a wonderful weekend, but she had to go to work tomorrow. She was glad they'd left reasonably early, right after brunch. It was only three o'clock.

"And a good time was had by all," Steven concluded.

Sienna piped up from the back seat. "I had fun at Miss Tracy's, Daddy."

"I'm real happy to hear that, Sienna. I know you and Kylie had a good time."

"Can we go back soon?"

"We'll see what we can do about that." Steven smiled at Tracy across the console, then addressed Sienna again. "You know Daddy loves you very much, don't you?"

Sienna beamed in the unabashed happiness of a child with no reason to hide her emotions. "I love you, too, Daddy."

Tierney took a deep, satisfying breath. This weekend away had been just what they needed. Sienna felt happy and loved, and all three of them had a wonderful new life to look forward to.

It wasn't until Steven had pulled into a parking space and turned off the ignition that she recalled what Steven had said to her on Friday night after they made love, just as she was falling asleep...

"You'll always be special to me, Tierney. I'll always be grateful to you for taking care of us."

This weekend had been wonderful...and Steven had said some wonderfully sweet things to her, both Friday and Saturday nights....

Except the one word he'd just said to Sienna...the one word that mattered the most.

###

A Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this prequel to **Love Will Follow**. Please share [this free link](#) with your friends who enjoy a good story. And if you'd like to know more about Tracy and Keith, you can read all about them in my eBook [Isn't She Lovely?](#) (which is on sale only at my [eStore](#) through Mother's Day 2013).

As for Tierney and Steven, some (not all) of the questions you may have about them will be answered in the following pages, which are the opening chapters of **Love Will Follow**. At the time this prequel is being uploaded, **Love Will Follow** has not yet been published, but please check my [eStore](#) to see if it's ready for purchase (its page will have links to Amazon and Barnes & Noble, if you prefer to purchase from those sources). My eStore will also list my other books. If you'd like to be notified when this eBook is published, you can send me an email at [bettye @ bettyegriffin.com](mailto:bettye@bettyegriffin.com) (no spaces) with "Love Will Follow notification" in the subject line and I will inform you!

Now, the opening chapters of **Love Will Follow**!

Excerpt, Love Will Follow

Chapter 1

“What do you mean, you’re leaving?”

Steven’s calm reply was a direct contrast to Tierney’s shrill demand. “Just what I said. I’m packing. My plane leaves tomorrow morning.”

Tierney put her hands on her hips. “You mean, you’re leaving now to get settled, find a place for us, and Sienna and I will join you later.” She tried to sound as calm as he did, but her stance suggested she really didn’t believe her own words.

“No, Tierney. I’m going to stay out there, by myself. I’m sorry. I really tried to make it work—we both did—but all the trying in the world can’t save us.”

All her attempts at composure vanished like lotion into dry skin. The volume of her voice escalated with each word. “You mean, now that you’ve gotten paid for the screenplay and series idea you sold, it’s not working. But before that, it worked just fine, because I went to work every day and supported the three of us. You used me, Steven Simmons. How dare you treat me like that! You came home just this afternoon from meeting with the producers, for heaven’s sake. I rushed home from work to make your favorite linguine with clam sauce, and you have the nerve to tell me you’re leaving again, this time for good?” Yelling now, Tierney abruptly stopped at the sound of crying. She turned to see her four-year-old daughter standing in the doorway to the master bedroom, tears running down her face. As she rushed to the child, she said over her shoulder, “Look what you made me do. Sienna’s upset.”

“You’re the one who’s screaming at the top of your lungs.”

His composure infuriated her. How dare he announce he was leaving her and their daughter? To think that after weeks of apprehension after he made the sale, she’d worked so hard to embrace thoughts of their family leaving northeastern Illinois for a new life in sunny Southern California.

Her apprehension stemmed from the fact that they really hadn’t been getting along; the strain of her being the sole support—other than an occasional short story sale Steven made—of the three of them had been too much. She feared she would grow old pinching pennies, and when he informed her that a cable network wanted to buy his script and develop it into the series he envisioned, then named the dollar amount they offered him, she’d been floored. The first thing that occurred to her was that their financial difficulties were over. Then she realized that they would have to move to California...and she didn’t like that idea at all. She had a good-paying job with a good company here in Illinois...she had friends...her church...her mother and stepfather lived in Indiana, just two hours

away...why would she want to give that up to go live with a man she wasn't even sure she loved anymore?

Her friend Tracy Norwood, who was married to the governor, invited them to come down to Springfield for a weekend, during which they would celebrate Steven's big sale. For the most part they'd been stuck in Lake County the last two years, lacking the funds to go anywhere other than the occasional two-hour drive to visit Tierney's mother. The weekend had been perfect. Not only did Steven behave in a loving manner toward Sienna—he often demonstrated impatience with her—but he'd treated her the same way. They spent two nights at the Governor's Mansion, and both nights they found peace in each other's arms, as if they were new lovers again. When they left Sienna with Tracy to go see several tourist sites related to Springfield's favorite son, Abraham Lincoln, he'd captured her hand in his. Things had gone so well that she began to reconsider her reluctance to relocate.

In the four weeks since their return, Steven had met with a financial advisor, had them make wills, worked on screenplays for the series, deposited his check, and flown to the Coast to meet with the producers to discuss the direction of the show and the scripts he'd written. Then he hit her with this bombshell...he planned to move out West alone and leave her and Sienna behind.

Now Tierney couldn't help wondering when this decision had been made. Had he made up his mind to leave the moment he made the sale? She felt like a fool. He'd deceived her in one of the worst ways a husband could deceive a wife. Only cheating on her could sting worse.

No, she forced herself to admit, that wasn't how it happened. Steven was right when he said that despite their best efforts, their marriage had lost its luster. Sure, they were polite and considerate to each other, much more so than during those lean times, during which short tempers ruled; and their sex life had taken on a tenderness that had long been missing, starting that weekend in Springfield. In hindsight, that probably stemmed from the special affection they held for each other, perhaps out of a longing for old, happier times. But as hard as they tried, they simply hadn't been able to recapture their old feelings. Kindness and consideration, and even good sex, could only carry a couple so far. There had to be that sense of true love and dedication...and for them it was gone. Maybe they should have been honest with each other and confessed it was hopeless before Steven left for California.

Tierney knew what had kept her from being honest...Sienna. Her child was the number one priority in her life, and Tierney felt she had seen and heard enough. Tierney felt responsible for that unhappy look on her daughter's face. For half her young life, it seemed as if all her parents did was bicker. Even in the face of Steven's announcement, Tierney felt she should have done a better job of controlling her temper, for her daughter's sake.

She bent and scooped up the child. "There, there, Punkin. Mommy's here," she soothed, her left hand massaging Sienna's back. "Nothing to cry about."

"Mommy, you scared me. You were yelling."

Guilt shot through Tierney. Her own parents had broken up when she was seven, but she barely remembered any dissension between them at all, just a sense of weariness, a lot of heavy sighs. In hindsight, she realized they must have taken special pains to keep their faltering marriage hidden from her, to keep her feeling safe and happy. Her daughter deserved that same consideration. "I know, baby," she said as she cuddled her daughter. "But it's okay. There's nobody here but Daddy and I. I promise we won't make so much noise. Okay?"

Sienna nodded. "Okay. I wanna talk to Daddy."

Tierney wasn't sure how receptive Steven would be. No doubt that he loved his little girl, but he could be short with her, as he'd demonstrated many times over the past two years as he rushed to perfect and polish his script before, as he explained to her, another writer beat him to it. His improved demeanor toward her in the few months since the offer couldn't possibly be enough to wipe out her frequent memories of making Daddy upset, and right now he was more focused on his preparations to leave them, which didn't exactly mesh with being a loving father. Reluctantly, she carried Sienna over to him.

He smiled as he reached out to take her. Normally, the sight of her husband smiling would have made Tierney do the same, but today she simply glared at him, her hostile expression warning him not to be unpleasant to their daughter.

He held Sienna by her armpits and swung her high above his head, the way she loved, before lowering her to cradle her in his arms. "How's my baby girl? I missed you while I was away."

Tierney grunted. If Steven thought he missed Sienna after his brief trip to the Coast, how did he think he'd manage now that he planned to move out there permanently without them? There was probably two thousand miles between Waukegan, Illinois, an hour's drive north of Chicago, and L.A.

"I missed you, too."

"That's my good girl." He kissed her cheek.

"You and Mommy scared me, Daddy," she said accusingly.

"I'm sorry about that. You know we didn't mean to. But I have to ask you if you'll be a good girl and go play in your room. Mommy and Daddy have to finish talking. Would you do that for me?"

"Okay, Daddy."

He lowered her to her feet, and the moment she left the room Tierney raised her chin defiantly, but said nothing.

"All right," Steven said, his tone conciliatory. "I probably should have talked to you about my plans earlier. I knew it wasn't going to work even before my check came. Waiting until the check cleared was kind of cowardly on my part. I'm sorry, Tierney. But that doesn't change anything," he added. "It doesn't change the fact that you and I just aren't in love anymore. Things haven't been the same since I got laid off."

"Because it's been so much of a struggle for me to make ends meet, Steven. I'm only a senior administrative assistant. It's hard to support a family of three on fifty-five K a year. This apartment is expensive." They'd rented in one of the nicest apartment complexes in the city, because they were both working at the time and they could afford to. It had been difficult to make the rent for their two-bedroom-plus-den apartment each month, though, when they only had her salary with which to foot the bills. "One minute we were looking at houses, and the next you didn't have a job and everything was on my shoulders. That's why I asked you to get a job, even something part time, just to have a regular paycheck coming in. Would it have killed you to spend a few hours in the evening doing a little bartending or working at Sam's Club?"

"I did make some money writing, Tierney. You make it sound like I contributed nothing to our household that whole time."

"And then you insisted that Sienna stay in daycare. You wouldn't even allow that cut in expenses."

"We've already gone over that. I couldn't concentrate with her wanting to play every five minutes. I had to get my concept completed and polished so I could attract an agent. Plus I was trying to spend part of each day working on stories I could sell for immediate income." He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "Maybe if you'd believed in me, you wouldn't have been so damn resentful."

Her mouth set in an unforgiving line. "I did believe in your talent. When you got laid off I agreed you should see if you could make it as a writer."

"Yeah...for the four weeks my severance pay lasted. Not that I'm complaining. Hell, I was lucky to get that much, since I only worked there for a year. But I barely had time to lay out my idea in four weeks, much less work on writing it."

Tierney silently conceded that Steven had worked on his writing seven days a week, with diagrams outlining plotlines and characters she didn't understand. Four weeks seemed like a long time to her. "I still think you could have worked part time and wrote the rest of the time. You used to do it with a full-time job."

"And I'd still be working on my idea instead of having sold it. Hell, someone else might have beaten me to it."

"But they didn't," she snapped, "and Sienna and I are being cast aside now that someone's paid you a six-figure amount for creating a series." Tierney had to force herself to keep her voice down after promising Sienna there would be no more frightening shouting. Her harsh whisper made her anger clear. "I've been nothing but a meal ticket to you."

Steven's eyes narrowed. "For your information, I left three-quarters of the money in your account. I have a certified check for one-fourth of it, which I'll deposit into my new account out west."

"It used to be our account," she said softly. Her shoulders drooped in defeat, even as she considered that this was probably for the best. Her anger came from being disappointed. She'd gotten accustomed to the idea of relocating, tried to tell herself she was still in love with Steven, even if in her heart she knew it wasn't true. At any rate, if he didn't want her anymore, that was it. She had too much respect for herself to want to hang on to a man who no longer wanted her. At least he was providing for her and Sienna financially. What was that he'd said to her when they were down in Springfield? "You'll always be special to me, Tierney. I'll always be grateful to you for taking care of us." It hadn't sat too well with her at the time he said it, but she'd been falling asleep at the time. When she was able to recall what he'd said, she chose not to ask him about it, but she couldn't help thinking it sounded more like parting words than a pledge of undying love.

Steven had suspected even then that their marriage was over. And if she'd had any sense, she would have considered it, too.

Tierney straightened her shoulders. Above all, she wanted to behave in a dignified manner. The argument they were having now only cemented the fact that they needed to be apart. "But if you want a life apart from Sienna and me, I'm not going to try to stop you. I have dinner to make." The water she'd put on to boil for spaghetti before Steven asked to speak to her was probably boiling by now, or at least about to.

"Like I promised you, Tierney, I'm going to take care of you and Sienna."

"That's big of you," she said bitterly. "You're doing what you're damn well supposed to do. But supporting your daughter is one thing. When do you plan on seeing her? Or do you just plan on being a cash register that she only has vague memories of?"

"Of course I'll be seeing her, Tierney. She's my daughter."

"How, exactly? You'll be living two thousand miles away!"

"I haven't worked that out, exactly...but I absolutely plan on being a part of her life." Steven looked at her, his eyebrows raised. "Why are you giving me such a hard time, Tierney? You put a good face on it, but I know that deep down you haven't been any happier than I've been. Are you angry because I made the first move toward ending it?"

She drew in her breath as though he'd slapped her. "How dare you accuse me of that! This isn't about my ego, Steven. It's about my jumping through hoops for you the last two years, going along with you at every turn. You wanted to write full time when you lost your job, and I went along with it. Then you sold your script and said it meant moving to L.A., and I went along with that. Now you say you're moving, but without Sienna and me. You haven't considered my feelings at all! That's why I'm so ups—"

The sound of an ear-piercing scream just then sent Tierney into immediate action. She raced toward the direction of the scream, which wasn't Sienna's bedroom.

It came from the kitchen.

Good Lord. The pot of hot water on the stove...

Steven practically knocked Tierney down in his rush to get to Sienna, who stood screaming next to a puddle of water, the toppled Dutch oven on the floor, pointing to her left arm.

"Get ice!" Tierney screamed. She reached for her injured daughter, careful not to touch the affected arm.

Steven opened the freezer door and grabbed ice cubes, applying them to Sienna's arm. They dissolved within seconds.

"We have to get her to the emergency room," he said. He took more cubes from the freezer and applied them to her arm. "Hold these in place."

Tierney mutely did as he said, watching as he filled a zipper-sealed bag with ice cubes and sealed it. "Keep this on her arm. Let's go."

Chapter 2

Prentice frowned as he examined the toddler's arm. How in God's name could a parent allow a child to get close enough to a stove with a pot of near-boiling water? Common sense dictated that the pots used for cooking should always go on a back burner, well out of the reach of curious little hands.

The child had been sedated for the pain and received a strong dose of antibiotic as a loading dose, with more being delivered intravenously, and her burns salved and bandaged. She looked so tiny and helpless in the hospital bed. A beautiful little thing she was, too. At least the bulk of the burns were limited to her arm. She had suffered minor splashes to her left cheek and chest, plus smaller burns to her neck and shoulder. Even the soles of her feet had been slightly affected. But her most serious burns were on her arm. Had she been standing directly in the path of the falling pot, her injuries would have been much more extensive, and her face might not have been spared.

"All right, I'm done," he said to the nurse who accompanied him. You can change the bandage now."

The nurse nodded. "Dr. Blake, the child's mother is waiting."

Prentice peeled off his gloves. "Fine. I'll talk to her now."

He made a few written notes on the chart, then pulled his compact handheld voice-activated recorder from the pocket of his smock and dictated the fine points of the child's physical examination. He'd refer to that when he made his final report for Child Protective Services of Lake County, who retained him to follow through on their open cases. In addition to his private practice, he, with the assistance of a staff of social workers, investigated suspicious injuries of the county's children, and made recommendations as to whether the child should be returned to the home environment or whether the child needed to be placed into foster care.

Prentice loved children, considered them to be a gift from God. How those to whom they had been born could either mistreat them or allow them to be mistreated by others was difficult for him to understand. His predecessor in the position had warned him that some of the cases he'd have to investigate would truly turn his stomach. Prentice began work feeling prepared, but nothing could have readied him for some of the cases of outright cruelty he'd seen in his eighteen months on the job. For every one case of unfortunate accidents due to momentarily distracted parents not watching their kids, it seemed there were two cases of abuse. He'd seen unbelievable situations, like short-tempered mothers and fathers who put out cigarettes on their children when they were being rambunctious, women who allowed their boyfriends to slap and shake their youngsters, or parents who only cared about where their next fix was coming from. He felt it was criminal to treat defenseless children that way...

He opened the door of the private room and entered the hall, where an anxious-looking young woman of about thirty stood. "Mrs. Simmons?"

"Yes."

"I'm Dr. Prentice Blake. I'm a pediatrician on staff at the hospital, and I also review cases for Child Protective Services."

"Can I see Sienna now? I spent the night with her. I went to get some breakfast, and they told me I had to wait before going in because you were with her. I wanted to be there when she wakes up."

"I'm afraid you'll have to spend a few minutes with me first. Your daughter will be fine, but we need to find out the exact circumstances of her injuries. She received mostly second degree burns with some areas of third degree. That's a serious situation, Mrs. Simmons."

She shook her head. "Surely you don't think that I—"

Prentice had seen many a distraught parent since he'd worked with the CPS, but it did little to ease his suspicions. He'd grown accustomed to it, and he knew that their contriteness was borne of regret that they'd been caught administering way-too-severe punishment to their children. He and his colleagues at the various area hospitals saw these cases every week.

"If you'll just come with me, Mrs. Simmons, he said politely. "This won't take long, and then you can see Sienna." He noted that this mother certainly looked as if she'd had a bad night. Her hair, worn in a short cut that under normal circumstances probably looked quite nice, was flat on one side, as if she'd slept on it. Her eyes held a haunted look, suggesting she hadn't slept well. Of course, that could be simply because the reclining chair at her daughter's bedside wasn't all that comfortable...

He led her to his office near the nurse's station and gestured for her to sit at the oblong table with six chairs in the corner. "All right, Alyssa, we're ready," he said. Instead of seating himself at one of the heads of the table, he took the chair directly next to hers. Taking this position made him seem less imposing and tended to make parents loosen up when talking out the circumstances of their children's accidents.

The social worker who'd been assigned to the case entered the office, wearing a navy pantsuit, a zipped leather portfolio tucked under her right arm.

"Mrs. Simmons, this is Alyssa Palmer," Prentice said. "She's with Child Protective Services. She's going to interview you."

"I thought you were Child Protective Services. Why do I have to talk to two of you?" the child's mother asked, looking like a frightened animal.

"I'm a social worker, Mrs. Simmons," Alyssa explained as she sat opposite them. "Dr. Blake examines the patients, sits in on the interviews, and gives a recommendation."

Mrs. Simmons's eyes grew wide. "Recommendation for what?"

"I'm sorry for not explaining thoroughly," Alyssa said apologetically. She was well suited for her position, Prentice thought. Young—in her mid-twenties, he guessed, making her a contemporary of most of the mothers they interviewed—she had a way of putting the most nervous parent at ease. "We're required to make a full report of the circumstances behind Sienna's injury. Most cases turn out to be just accidents—"

Prentice pretended to study his notes. That wasn't exactly true, but he and Alyssa felt it best not to frighten possibly innocent parents unnecessarily.

"—but in a few isolated cases the injured child or children are removed from the home."

Mrs. Simmons looked at Prentice, then at Alyssa, disbelief etched on her face. "This was

an accident. Surely you don't think I poured boiling hot water at my child deliberately."

"We're here to make an official determination," Alyssa replied.

Mrs. Simmons shook her head. "You mean I could actually lose custody of my daughter over an accident?"

"Mrs. Simmons, please don't worry," Alyssa said soothingly.

"The doctor just said Sienna's going to be all right." Mrs. Simmons turned to Prentice. "She is going to make a full recovery, isn't she?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, Mrs. Simmons. We're protecting her against infection with an antibiotic drip, and she's also receiving pain medication. The majority of the most severe burns were confined to her arm, but the skin of her feet, chest, neck, and face were also affected. We're still waiting for the plastic surgery consult to determine whether or not she'll need skin grafts in the areas of the most severe burns." He paused. "What we need to understand is how Sienna came to be burned in the first place."

The child's mother appeared to swallow before answering. "Um...my husband and I, we were...talking in another room. Sienna wandered in, and we asked her to go and play in her room for a few minutes. She's usually an obedient child, but I guess she went to the kitchen instead. A few minutes later we heard her screaming. We put ice on her arm and brought her straight here."

Prentice kept his face expressionless. "You didn't check to make sure she was in her room, or escort her there? After all, she just recently turned four."

He watched as the mother squirmed in her chair. "Um...no," she said. "We asked her to go to her room, and she said she would. She usually does as she's told." Her brown eyes met his in a pleading look that gave him pause, for in his experience many guilty parents tended to look away while being questioned.

Prentice gave Mrs. Simmons—the chart said her first name was Tierney—credit for being direct, but that hardly exonerated her. He was highly suspicious of the Simmons's motives for sending their four-year-old to her room in the late afternoon. Mrs. Simmons was a young woman, and he presumed her husband was a relatively young man. Prentice wondered if the couple banished their daughter from the room so they could have a quickie. He noticed Mrs. Simmons hadn't identified the 'other room' where she and her husband had been at the time of Sienna's accident, but he'd bet a hundred bucks it was their bedroom.

"How is it you had a pot of water heating on the stove?" Alyssa asked.

"I'd started to make dinner as soon as I got home from work. I was working in the kitchen when my husband asked if I had a minute."

Prentice kept his expression impassive, but he thought, A euphemism...the husband probably asked her to give him head. "And you put the pot on the front burner, where Sienna could easily tip it over?"

"It's gas stove, and there's a...a curvature on its back wall. The front burners are the only ones with room to heat a Dutch oven."

Prentice admitted she had a point; his parents' stove, although a newer model, was like that. Still, he had a good instinct about these things, and his gut told him Tierney Simmons was holding something back. She was probably too embarrassed to admit what she and her husband had been doing at the time Sienna tipped that pot over, certainly understandable. But he had a burning curiosity about a major factor, one he knew wouldn't escape Alyssa's sharp mind, either.

It was her very next question. "Mrs. Simmons, may I ask where your husband is this morning?"

There was no denying the woman's discomfort. She chewed on her lower lip and seemed to tremble with fear. "He...he had urgent business in California. He was here at the hospital last night, but...his plane left early this morning. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to reschedule."

"What does he do?"

"He's a writer. He's going to be starting a new job." She named a prominent cable network.

Prentice's eyebrows shot up. "Not exactly a practical commute from here."

"He was going to get settled first. Sienna and I will be joining him later."

"I see," Prentice replied. "I have to tell you, Mrs. Simmons, that it strikes me as highly irregular for a man to leave town the morning after his little girl is badly burned."

Her reply came fast. "He didn't want to go, but he felt he had no choice. The producers wanted him out there right away." Her eyes anxiously searched both their faces. "You see, my husband was laid off over two years ago, and I've been footing all the household bills. Things have been...tight for us financially. But he just sold an original script, and the network wants to build it into a series. He didn't want to miss out on this opportunity." After a brief pause, she added, "Not only did we need the money, but it's important for a man to feel like the breadwinner."

Tierney wished this interview would hurry up and end. She understood that Lake County's children had to be protected, but she wasn't about to admit to this doctor and social worker that Steven planned to stay in L.A., or that they had been discussing the fact that he was leaving her at the time of Sienna's accident. She wanted to get through this ordeal with her dignity intact.

She deeply regretted Sienna's injury. The pain made Sienna scream all the way to the hospital, and there hadn't been anything Tierney could do to ease her child's suffering, other than apply the makeshift ice pack, which quickly melted. And to think she'd been making a dinner for Steven to celebrate his return home. If only she'd roasted a chicken, her baby wouldn't be lying in a hospital bed. Not only was she about to lose her husband, but her daughter might be scarred for life.

Alyssa scribbled something down in her notebook. "Mrs. Simmons, what type of work do you do?"

"I'm an executive administrative assistant." She named her employer. "I'll be taking the next few days off to sit with Sienna."

Prentice made a mental note of her words, but the skeptic in him wondered if her devotion was genuine or put on for his and Alyssa's benefit. The most neglectful or abusive parents, even as they planned to whip the child for getting them into trouble the moment CPS signed off the case, could project selfless concern for appearance's sake during an interview. He wasn't impressed with either Mrs. Simmons or the absent Mr. Simmons. Prentice understood that a man who'd gone from unemployment to the big bucks of Hollywood been unemployed for the long-term wouldn't want to jeopardize his new position, but most employers were compassionate. They may well have agreed to delay his start for a week to allow him to be with his daughter who'd suffered burns. Then again, perhaps Mr. Simmons had been retained to work on a project already behind schedule and the studio brass would have refused his request, but from what Mrs. Simmons said, her husband hadn't even tried to delay his departure. That bothered Prentice tremendously. "Is there anything else you'd like to add, Mrs. Simmons?" he asked.

"Only that I'm a good mother and I love my daughter. I take all kinds of precautions to keep her safe. It's just that this one time..."

"Thank you," he said abruptly, recognizing a familiar refrain. "If you two will excuse me, I have patients to check in on. Alyssa, I'll catch up with you afterward."

"Yes, Dr. Blake." Alyssa turned to Tierney. "Mrs. Simmons, I have just a few more questions for you...."

Prentice, accompanied by a group of interns, completed his rounds. He updated the patient charts, wrote discharge orders for one post-tonsillectomy eight-year-old, then went to his office at Child Protective Services, which was located across the street from the hospital. He knew Alyssa couldn't be back yet from speaking to the Simmonses landlord, so he left word that he wanted to see her upon her return.

In his office he sat and gave serious thought to the case of Sienna Simmons. It didn't look

like she'd need grafting, and hopefully her scars would fade with time. Her mother's concern did seem genuine, but something bothered him just the same...

He looked up at the sound of knocking. "Come in."

Alyssa entered his office. "What did you think?"

"I'm leaning toward recommending foster care."

"Don't you think that might be a little harsh, Doctor? There've been no prior complaints leveled against these people, nor have they ever been investigated. I was thinking the usual talk about adequate supervision plus the parenting class might be in order. The child's mother is clearly beside herself, and the rental agent thinks very highly of them. They've lived in the same complex for more than six years, moving to a larger apartment when their baby was born. She's worked at the same company since she graduated from the College of Lake County, and she works for a vice president."

"How stable is screenwriting?"

Alyssa nodded knowingly. "You're worried about the father."

"Yes, the mysterious father who jets off to the Coast for a meeting while his baby girl is lying in a hospital bed."

"I checked with the E.R. staff. They remember the Simmonses bringing Sienna in. Her father was holding her, shouting for a doctor. He was still there at change of shift."

"Does anyone at the nurses' station remember seeing him this morning?"

"Apparently, he was already here at shift change at seven. They're not sure, but think he might have spent the night in her room. They do remember seeing him leave; he stopped and asked them to take good care of his baby."

Prentice grunted. "If he was so concerned, you'd think he'd have stayed here instead of flying out to L.A. He left his daughter to cope with her pain without his hand to hold and left his wife to undergo a CPS interview alone."

"It probably never occurred to them that there'd be an investigation," Alyssa pointed out. "Only the guilty think about such things."

"I've got a bad feeling about this, Alyssa. I think the mother isn't telling us something, and I think it has to do with the father."

"She's going to take it very hard if you recommend foster care for Sienna."

"It's the child I have to think of, not the mother. And I'm not talking about a permanent situation, just until I'm satisfied about the home environment. Especially with her planning to take the girl out of this jurisdiction."

"I've set up a home inspection for tomorrow." Alyssa paused. "Do you want to tell me what's on your mind, Dr. Blake?"

He hesitated a moment. Alyssa had worked with him on previous cases of child abuse, including sexual abuse, and they had discussed sensitive topics before. Social work wasn't for the squeamish or the coy. "Her explanation about how she and her husband were 'talking' when Sienna tipped that pot over. I think they were having sex, or about to, because Sienna was in her room, but she put a crick in their plans by entering their bedroom. That urge would explain why neither of them made sure she went to her own room. They just wanted her out of their hair for a few minutes. They didn't count on her wandering into the kitchen."

Alyssa's forehead wrinkled. "Doesn't that fall under the category of an accident?"

"Maybe, but here's another scenario. The child walked in on them, and one of the parents—my guess is the father—thought he'd punish her by taking her to the kitchen and dumping the contents of that pot in her direction."

"Dr. Blake!" Alyssa recoiled in horror.

"Maybe I'm way off. But it isn't as though we've never seen this type of thing before, and the mother seemed so nervous, like she was hiding something. She might be protecting her husband. And I don't like the idea of his going out of town the morning after. I mean, he didn't even wait to ask if he could delay his arrival; he just rushed to catch his plane."

"Mrs. Simmons's explanation made sense to me. After being out of work for so long, he didn't want to jeopardize his new job. Their family has a lot riding on his success. He probably felt it wouldn't be appropriate to ask for time off for anything less than a death."

Prentice still wasn't convinced. "How do we even know the man's a screenwriter?"

"The woman who works at the rental office of their apartment complex was very helpful. She told me they're a lovely young couple, and that he's the one who stays at home with Sienna while the mother works. She said he would give her free copies of magazines that published his short stories." Alyssa looked at him carefully. "We should probably withhold final judgment until after the home environment is looked at, but Dr. Blake...I honestly think you might be reading something into this that isn't there."

Prentice wondered if his own trust issues were affecting his judgment. It was true that he held parents who didn't protect their offspring 24/7 in low regard. Children were the most precious gifts of all, and they deserved love and good care. He'd looked forward to becoming a father himself, but he'd divorced his wife when he found her cervical cap birth control while looking for a new bar of soap when they were supposed to be getting ready to start a family. She lied to him, afraid to tell him she "wasn't into parenting right now." Instead she wanted to have fun, travel, dine out, and meet her girlfriends for twelve-dollar cocktails at trendy restaurants and bars in downtown Chicago, where she worked.

His role was either as companion or as the one who'd foot the bill.

To Alyssa he replied stiffly, "I always make it a point to be objective in all the cases I handle. And my impression of Mr. and Mrs. Simmons is that they can be very doting parents...when it's convenient."

Alyssa winced. "I'm sorry, Dr. Blake. I didn't mean to imply any improper behavior on your part."

"It's all right, Alyssa. I understand. Let's just forget it, shall we? As far as Sienna Simmons is concerned, go ahead and do your home inspection. She won't be ready for discharge for several days at least. In the meantime I'll try to observe Mrs. Simmons, see if I can determine if her devotion to little Sienna is real or more because she's covering for her husband."

Alyssa nodded. She picked up her notebook and silently left the office.

As Prentice headed for an early lunch before seeing patients that afternoon, he thought about Alyssa. She'd looked so hurt at his tight response to her comment. Bright and ambitious, she worked hard and did an excellent job, free of the weariness that plagued some of her older co-workers who'd seen some truly horrifying cases. She was also, as several of his colleagues pointed out, quite pretty. Prentice was human enough to notice, but was content to keep their interaction professional. He wasn't too keen on workplace romances, and besides, Alyssa Palmer was about a dozen years his junior.

Prentice hardly lacked for female attention. He was aware of admiring glances from female staffers at the hospital, and one of his early post-divorce relationships had been with a nurse practitioner in OB/GYN before she relocated to the Sunbelt. He enjoyed his time with her, but he knew from the beginning of her wish for a warmer climate and saw no reason to ask her to stay in Illinois, so they parted on good terms. They'd been discreet, and no one knew about the affair.

His colleagues constantly urged him to get to know some of the flirtatious females he came in contact with daily, but Prentice was reluctant. He'd made the mistake of confiding the circumstances of his divorce to one of his physician colleagues, who later admitted having mentioned it to two other people he was lunching with. Before long, it was all over the hospital. Anyone who knew Prentice Blake knew he'd been made a fool of. Even after three years, he still smarted from knowing his divorce had been a topic of gossip around the water cooler.

The only woman he wouldn't mind getting closer to was a colleague, general surgeon Hailey Booker. About his own age, never married, their professional paths rarely crossed, for most of his patients who needed surgery were related to either ENT or orthopedics. He did see her every now and again at the restaurant in the medical building that was a popular alternative to the hospital cafeteria. Unfortunately, whenever he was unattached she always seemed to be dating someone, and vice versa. The last he heard, she was

seeing a retinal specialist from Chicago. Apparently the man came up to Lake County one day a week to see patients locally and came by to take her to lunch. Hailey seemed very happy as she performed introductions and graciously invited Prentice to join them, but he declined, cocking his head toward some other colleagues who were beckoning him to come over.

Maybe it was for the best, he told himself. He did have occasion to consult with Hailey every now and again. It might not be a good idea if they took it to a social level, for they'd still have to work together, even if it ended badly, and that might be awkward. Best to leave it alone.

Hard to believe he was now thirty-seven, and he wondered if his dream of becoming a father would ever happen.

Love Will Follow, coming Spring 2013!

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