



The low hum of music and laughter droned in Samantha Monroe's ears, and she began to feel woozy. Maybe it was the two margaritas. Maybe it was the hellish week she'd just put in at the salon. Maybe it was the latest threatening letter from Wee Ones Academy beginning with the ominous sentence: *'Due to your child's unresolved toileting issues, we must ask you to find other daycare arrangements within two weeks.'*

'... and then, you're not going to believe this!' Sam's best friend, Monté, continued entertaining the table with her blow-by-blow of last Saturday's date with the Mad Unzipper. Since Sam was quite familiar with the tale, she let her eyes wander through the happy-hour crowd at the Lizard Lounge, noticing the group of young, carefree women at the bar, enjoying life, and she had to wonder . . . had she ever looked that happy? Had she ever felt as wild and sexy as those girls clearly did? Did she ever wear spike heels that high? Was she ever that *young*? Should she call Lily again to make sure Dakota ate his fish sticks and that Greg didn't indulge in more than an hour of PlayStation?

‘ . . . and the man just stands his ass up from the couch, unzips, and says, “Monté baby, I got your python right here!” ’

The explosion of laughter made Sam smile to herself, and she returned her attention to her friends. She loved each woman at that table, even if their behavior was bordering on obnoxious. That was the whole point of their Drinks & Depression Nights, anyway. The last Friday of every month, they’d have a couple drinks, bitch about work, life, love (or the lack thereof), and laugh a lot. Then make plans for the next time.

Sam looked past the zebra-striped upholstered lounge chairs and out the picture window. It was a wet and cold early November evening, and the season’s first snow was spitting down on the streets of Indianapolis. It was nearly pitch-dark by six o’clock these days. The holidays were just around the corner. No wonder tonight’s group consisted of only the most hard-core D & D Night attendees.

Sam glanced to her right to watch Monté McQueen tell her story, her black braids swinging with the rhythm of her words. Monté had been her coworker for thirteen long years at Le Cirque. She was a damn fine stylist and the most steadfast friend Sam had ever had. When Mitchell left three years ago, Monté had held Sam’s hand and advised her that a woman with kids didn’t have the luxury of giving up. Monté certainly knew of what she spoke.

To Sam’s left was Kara DeMarinis, one of her most loyal clients, looking fabulous and powerful in her usual fabulous suit yet managing to be one of the most down-to-earth people around. Also at the table were Le Cirque owner and general business goddess Marcia Fishbacher and veteran salon patrons Denny and Wanda Winston, identical twin sisters with wildly divergent lifestyles.

And every one of these women was howling with laughter and smacking her palms on the tabletop at Monté's story. Every one but Sam. She knew she should force herself to be more cheerful tonight, because these get-togethers were her therapy. Unfortunately, she was too damn tired for cheerful. She was too tired for therapy. In fact, Sam knew that if the most gorgeous man-babe in the world were to saunter through the front door of the Lizard Lounge at that very instant, partially clothed and completely raring to go, she'd be too tired for him, too.

With a sigh, Sam managed to use her last bit of energy to order an unheard-of third margarita, and when it arrived, she ran the tip of her numb tongue along the freezing cold glass, scooping up a few coarse grains of salt. As she swallowed what would be her only solid food of the evening, a variety of concerns wafted through her weary, tequila-soaked brain. Rent was due in three days, but Mr Westerkamp hadn't fixed the garbage disposal as promised – so would she face eviction if she refused to pay? Lily was still gunning to go to France with her class next year, but where the hell was Sam going to get an extra three thousand dollars to send her there? And Greg refused to get back into speech therapy, deciding the stutter itself was less painful than the teasing his classmates gave him for going to a 'special' class.

Sam took another sip – a gulp, really – and felt her insides wash with the heat of the alcohol. Her mouth began to move. 'I never did understand what is so wrong with being a kept woman,' she muttered. 'If I could find a way to do it without damaging the kids, I'd gladly live in a penthouse with a chauffeur and a maid and a chef in exchange for giving some old geezer a little nooky every once in a while. I mean, where's the harm in that?'

Dead quiet settled over the table, and Sam realized she'd uttered those rambling thoughts *out loud*. Kara gripped Sam's upper arm and stared at her with big, brown eyes.

'If he's not too old or geezery, of course,' Sam added as clarification.

'Well, sure.' Marcia rolled her eyes. 'A girl's gotta have her standards.'

'Tell me if the old coot has a brother,' Denny said. 'I could use a sugar daddy myself, and it certainly wouldn't hurt if he was partial to lesbians.'

'I don't think lesbians have sugar daddies,' Wanda told her sister.

'I'm cuttin' you off, Sam.' Monté pried the stem of the margarita glass from Sam's tingling fingers. 'And I'm drivin' you home and puttin' you to bed. We have a wedding party coming in for updos and makeup at nine tomorrow and you need your rest.'

'God. I just *haaaate* weddings,' Sam moaned. 'I hate brides. I hate updos. I hate all those damn hairpins and all that freakin' happiness, and at nine in the morning! It's just not natural! I want to grab those brides by their shoulders and shout, "*Don't do it! Run away! Run before it's too late!*"'

Marcia blinked in concern, and Sam was making a mental note to never again have more than two drinks in the presence of her boss when Monté scooped her from her chair and stood her on her feet. 'C'mon, Cinderella. Time to take a ride in the carriage before it turns into a big, fat pumpkin.'

Kara DeMarinis leaned back in the leather armchair and studied Jack Tolliver at leisure, aware there wasn't a woman in the world who would classify the man as *geezery*.

Oh, she'd heard him called a few other choice things over the years, such as misogynist asshole, arrogant dickhead, and booty-call bastard, but never *geezer*. So at least that was one hurdle she'd already cleared.

Jack finished laughing and relaxed his long athlete's body against the antique cherry desk that once had belonged to his father, the late, great Indiana governor Gordon Tolliver. Jack shook his dark head and wiped his eyes. Apparently, Kara's suggestion had made him laugh so hard he'd cried.

'I've always loved the way you think outside the box, but, Kara babes, you're thinking outside the known *universe* with this one.'

'It's do-able, Jack. Remember when Errol Binder borrowed a neighbor's golden retriever for his publicity shots? The man hated pets. And how about when Charleton Manheimer used his press secretary's kids to stand in for his own grandchildren in that thirty-second public education spot? The grandkids were in boarding school in Vermont.'

Jack blinked. 'No way.'

'Yes. So there's some precedent for this. And I've known Samantha Monroe for twelve years. She's great. She's hardworking and responsible and middle-class – everything you're not. And she deserves a break. She's perfect.'

Jack raised an eyebrow and quirked those infamous lips of his. 'You cannot be implying that I'm an irresponsible trust-fund slacker.'

Kara smiled back at him cheerfully. 'Well, you are.'

'Fine, but if we're being blunt, then let me just remind you that no woman is perfect, especially the ones that you can buy.'

'She's not for sale. She would be more of a rental.'

Jack produced another hearty laugh. ‘Good God, Kara! I will not rent a fake fiancée! It is immoral and reprehensible, not to mention pathetic!’

Jack raked his large hands through his waves of dark hair, pushed himself up from the desk, and turned his back to Kara. He began to pace through the office as he thought aloud. ‘Besides, if I want to benefit from her strengths, I’ll have to eat her weaknesses, won’t I? Does she have a criminal record? Speeding tickets? How about her credit rating? Is she even registered to vote?’

Kara smiled to herself, watching the sway of Jack’s muscular bottom as he paced, the way the wide ledge of his shoulders rolled with each step. She knew there was no man less in need of dating intervention than Juicy Jack Tolliver. But Kara also knew that at this crucial point in his political career the emphasis needed to be on the quality of the women in his life, not the quantity, and Jack’s tendency to focus on the latter had suddenly become a bigger liability than ever.

‘I’ve already started opposition research on Samantha – anything and everything your challengers could come up with I’ve got covered. So far, a spotty credit rating after her divorce is all I’m seeing, and that’s understandable. Makes her more sympathetic even.’

Jack shook his head, still facing away from Kara. He spoke so softly she could barely hear him. ‘What about Tina? Damn. She was a redhead. You know how I love redheads.’

‘You’ve only been dating her a month.’

‘It’s been a real good month.’

‘She’s a twenty-five-year-old belly dancer, Jack, which may be entertaining to you personally but won’t exactly send the right message to voters. Besides, I don’t think she’s a natural redhead.’

‘The color might be from a bottle, but it looks good on her. And for the record, Tina is a pediatric nurse who only moonlights as a belly dancer. And she’s incredibly flexible.’

‘Good. Then she’ll recover nicely when you break up with her.’

‘No one’s going to believe I’m engaged anyway,’ Jack complained, staring up in exasperation at the room’s ornate pressed-tin ceiling. ‘I’m just supposed to wake up one day and *bam!* – I’m suddenly overcome with the urge to commit? Please. Who’s going to believe that crap?’

‘People change, Jack. The voters would accept that you’ve matured, that you found the right woman and decided to settle down. It happens to men all the time.’

He glanced over his shoulder, one eyebrow arched, a green eye narrowed at her in doubt.

‘And there’s plenty of time before the primary,’ Kara continued. ‘A dinner here, a basketball game there, an anonymous tip to the *Star*’s city desk, and pretty soon you’ve got a blossoming romance in place before the February filing deadline. It doesn’t look rushed. And you’re golden.’

‘Or I’m dead meat.’ Jack whipped around. ‘Surely you realize I’d be nailing down my own coffin lid if someone discovers this little business transaction? Maybe, I don’t know, someone like *Christy Schoen*?’

Kara had anticipated this concern, and she nodded crisply. ‘I will micromanage the hell out of the media. I will personally keep Christy on a short leash.’

Jack roared. ‘Careful. That little bitch will yank your arm right out of its socket sniffing out a lead story for *Capitol Update*.’

Kara smiled. She’d been a guest on Christy’s Sunday TV show more times than she could count, and she knew all about the journalist’s pathological disdain for Jack. Kara

couldn't exactly blame her – no woman likes to get kicked to the curb in public. 'You really were a real ass to Christy, you know.'

'Yes, I was. But pardon me if I feel the time for apologizing is long gone.'

'Well, we'll handle Christy, because we have to,' Kara said. 'As for the rest of the media, the secret will be a light touch. A little public exposure will go a long way with this. And you can always explain that Samantha and the children treasure their privacy.'

'Children?' Jack's eyes went huge. 'This rental woman comes with *children*?'

Kara shrugged good-naturedly. She knew this part would be the hardest for Jack, but it was also the piece that was going to appeal most to voters. 'Three kids. I know them. They're great. Her baby, Dakota, is the cutest little—'

'Stop right there.' Jack began laughing and his chortle had an edge of madness to it. 'Sure, I'd like to be the newest senator from Indiana. I'd like that just fine. But Kara, there will be no *babies* rented in order to get me there. No kids. This is insane.'

Kara waved a manicured finger in the air. 'Think about it, Jack. What would scream *reformed* more than having a hardworking divorced hairstylist and her three kids at your side? You can play it down. Let the voters make their own inferences. I'm telling you. It will work fabulously.'

'Absolutely not.' Jack shoved his hands down into the front pockets of his chinos and glared at her. 'And I would think that after four campaigns and twenty years you'd know me better than that.'

Kara tilted her head and paused for a moment, then sighed. 'That's just it, Jack. As your longtime campaign manager and dear friend, I can tell you the truth, and the

truth is that you've just been handed your last shot. Allen Ditto's decision not to run for the Senate again is a *gift*, and if you don't make it happen now, you never will.'

'That's just one possible scenario.'

'It is the only one.' Kara eased out of her chair and walked to where he stood by the wall of bookcases. She gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. 'Look, Jack, it's been four years since you ended your lieutenant governor gig and two years since Christy helped the voters decide you were a punkass, sexist pig not fit for the Seventh District congressional seat.'

Jack winced.

'Every focus group and poll we've commissioned has said the same thing – voters want to support you, but they can't get over your reputation as a player, especially women voters. That's all that's keeping you from winning, Jack. The money is there – the Tolliver name still opens checkbooks – and we're already well on our way to the three million it will take for this campaign. But honestly, I don't think there's enough money in Fort Knox to get you elected unless you make a gesture of the grandest kind.'

Jack squeezed his eyes shut and let out a hiss of disgust. Kara was pretty sure it was self-directed.

'You've got to show voters that you're not the same man who was caught ogling a speaker's booty at a teachers' convention two years ago! They have to see that you've changed. That you have a new perspective on life and family and can better represent hardworking Hoosiers in our nation's capital.' Kara paused, making sure Jack was following along. He seemed less pissed, so she continued.

'It's creative campaign strategy. It's a business arrangement. It's a way to tweak your private life into shape on incredibly short notice.'

'Oh my God,' Jack mumbled.

Kara smiled big. ‘Let’s say Sam Monroe and her kids hang around for six months or so, then after the primary you can have a quiet, amicable breakup and, once again, ask that the public respect her privacy. No one gets hurt.’

‘And how could we be sure she wouldn’t talk?’

‘A simple nondisclosure clause. If she talks, she has to give back the money, and she’ll want that money. Trust me.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And think about it! Remember how Manheimer droned on at that homeless roundtable about how the Tollivers were too rich to identify with those in need and even owned a mansion that no one even lived in? Hey – Sam and the kids could move in here. It would be seen as an act of compassion and generosity. Am I a genius or what?’

Kara watched Jack chew his lip. She watched his fiercely intelligent green eyes scan his surroundings, calculating the truth of her observations, weighing the risks of her plan, and plotting his next move. Kara had known Jack since their freshman year in Bloomington. Jack was sharp. He was a man who could think on his feet, keep a clear view of what was critically important, and make his move right in the nick of time. It’s what had once made him the NFL’s hottest quarterback. It’s what made him a natural politician, like his father and his father before him.

Kara waited for Jack to say something – anything. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Jack’s bright green eyes flashed and he gave her a decisive nod, exhibiting the kind of clarity of purpose he’d need to pull this off. At that moment, Kara felt truly proud of Jack the politician – and Jack the man – and waited for his pronouncement.

‘By any chance, is this woman a redhead?’

Sam eased her two o’clock client under the heat lamp with a cup of chamomile tea and a copy of *People* magazine, set

the timer for twenty minutes, greeted her two-thirty client with a smile and sent her off with an apprentice for a shampoo, then ran to the kitchen at the back of the salon. At the most, she had ten minutes to eat something and call the evil Mrs Brashears, administrator of Wee Ones Academy.

Sam hopped up on a countertop, grabbed the cordless phone, and took a bite out of her now-cold Taco Bell chicken-stuffed burrito.

‘Mrs Brashears?’

‘Well, hello, Ms Monroe. I was wondering when we were going to hear from you.’

Sam wiped her mouth on a napkin, realizing that though a week had passed since she received the note, she still hadn’t decided how to deal with this latest threat from the Montessori Mafia. Begging had worked in the past, but she had a feeling she’d used up all her sympathy points. And legal action was probably not an option because, as far as she knew, there was no such thing as discrimination against the potty challenged.

‘Dakota is showing little or no progress,’ Mrs Brashears said, her voice dripping with concern. ‘Have you found other arrangements for him?’

Sam swallowed a bite of burrito and felt her heart being swallowed along with it. ‘I’ve tried every approach out there,’ she said, hearing herself default to the sympathy tactic again. ‘I tried the star chart on the bathroom door, forced him to wear big-boy underwear, gave him a quarter for each successful potty, applauded, every time – oh God! Look, Mrs Brashears, my other two kids did the potty-training thing so naturally, I just don’t understand this!’

‘Ms Monroe—’

‘I even promised him we’d get another dog if he could only—’

‘Bribery will never build a child’s independence or encourage creative problem solving, and I certainly don’t think adding another dog to the mix will help your family dynamics in any way, shape, or form.’

‘Right.’ Sam took a swig of Diet Pepsi and checked her watch. If she left her two o’clock under the heat lamp too long her foil would fry.

‘And if I may say so, Ms Monroe, it appears to me that you are having some difficulty being present for your children lately. You might want to consider a more flexible work schedule, perhaps going part-time until—’

‘Until *what*? Until my ex-husband surfaces and pays all his back child support?’ Sam jumped off the counter and stood in the middle of the salon’s little kitchen, staring blankly out the small fogged-up window over the clothes dryer, calling to God or somebody to give her patience enough to survive this phone call – this day – without completely losing it.

‘All I’m suggesting is—’

‘And just an FYI, Mrs Brashears: I’ve been up to my *butt cheeks* in independence and creative problem solving for the last three years! How *dare* you imply that I’m not taking care of my kids!’

Sam heard an offended gasp on the other end of the phone. Though it would mean the end of Dakota’s private school experience forever, Sam couldn’t help herself. It was time for a Montessori smack down.

‘My determination to take good care of my kids is the only reason I’ve let your ridiculously uppity school hold me hostage for the last six months – it’s kept me sane to know Dakota was safe and nurtured while I work. But Wee Ones has more rules and regulations than the IRS!’

‘Ms Monroe. Really—’

‘I work incredibly hard to keep a roof over Dakota’s

head, along with the heads of his brother and sister, which makes a total of three heads, unless you count the dog, and that would make four heads! And if you add my own head, we're talking five! Five heads on one hairstylist's salary! Now how's that for *family-fuckin'-dynamics*?'

After a moment of stunned silence, Mrs Brashears cleared her throat and said, 'There are many other Wee Ones mothers in your position, Ms Monroe, and I can assure you that their three-year-olds have successfully navigated sphincter management.'

'*Sphincter management!*' Sam burst into laughter. 'Oh jeez, I've heard it all now.'

At that moment, the salon's apprentice poked her head into the kitchen and hissed, 'Your two o'clock's gonna burst into flames.'

Sam put her hand over the receiver. 'Take her out from under the lamp. I'll be right there.'

'You have one week, Ms Monroe.'

Sam sighed. 'Yeah. OK. Look. I'm sorry for saying the "f-word," but if you could just give me just a little more—'

'One week.' Mrs Brashears hung up, and Sam stood in the middle of the salon kitchen, a barely touched chicken burrito clutched in one fist and the cordless phone in the other, and she let the tears flow.

For two whole minutes, Sam let her shoulders shake and her spine soften, and she cried. Then she hung up the phone, threw away her lunch, blew her nose, and went back into the salon. She strolled through the clary sage-scented rooms color-washed in a Sonoma green, where the sounds of New Age flute and wolf calls floated through Marcia Fishbacher's vision of a southwestern oasis in the heart of downtown Indianapolis. Sam held up her chin, straightened her back, and knew that though everything in her life was falling apart, she'd still be expected to smile

and work her soothing magic on her appointment book full of stressed-out clients, giving them that mix of technical skill, artistry, and pampering for which Le Cirque was famous, and for which they were willing to pay obscene amounts of money.

Monté opened the back door to Sam's house without knocking. Her son, Simon, ducked under her arm and ran ahead inside, calling for his best friend, Greg. Monté kicked the door closed with her boot and headed to the dinette set between the tiny kitchen and living room of the Arsenal Street bungalow.

'Dinner is served!' she called out, tossing three large pizza boxes on the table. 'Best get in here before I eat it all!'

Lily sauntered into the dining room first, a quizzical look on her pale baby-woman face, followed by Dale, the family's raggedy little mutt. 'Sup, Monté?'

'Hi, sweet pea. How was school today? Where's your mama?'

Lily shrugged her narrow shoulders and ripped open the first pizza box. A straight waterfall of reddish-blond hair covered her face as she peered under the lid. 'Did you get a vegetarian?'

'Bottom one.' Monté hooked her purse on the back of a chair and threw her leather coat over it, then plopped herself down, looking at Lily in amazement. It seemed like only last week the child had been wearing that pink fleece coverall with bunny ears, riding around, her little cheeks like shiny apples, in that earth-mother backpack thing Sam used for all three kids.

Maybe it was just that Monté could see the changes better in Sam's kids than in her own tall and strong thirteen-year-old, but it seemed time raced by so fast it was a shock to the system.

‘So where’s your mama?’

‘Chasing Dakota. Trying to get him to wear Batman underwear.’ Lily took the few steps necessary to reach the kitchen cabinets and reached for a stack of plates. Monté checked her out from tip to toe and shook her head – the girl was all long legs and long hair and an all-wrong application of dark brown eyeliner that made her look like a blue-eyed raccoon.

‘Should I open a bag of salad?’

‘Sure!’ Monté hoped her cheerfulness didn’t sound too forced. ‘Let’s make this a well-rounded culinary experience!’

Lily smiled a bit, and Monté breathed easier. It wasn’t good news when a fourteen-year-old girl couldn’t muster up a smile on pizza night. ‘So? You didn’t say. How was your day?’

Lily returned with the plates and shrugged, helping herself to two slices. She was about to say something when Greg and Simon raced in, and the room was suddenly rocking with loud kid voices and laughter and Dale’s high-pitched barking and then Sam arrived with Dakota in her arms, the little redheaded angel-boy pressing his cheek against her shoulder, his eyes lighting up at the sight of Monté.

She reached out for Dakota and the baby fell into her lap, wrapped his arms around her neck, and gave her a sloppy toddler kiss.

‘Auntie Monté,’ he cooed, and Monté’s eyes locked with Sam’s in the middle of the chaos, and they smiled at each other. Monté knew exactly what was conveyed in that wordless greeting: *Who needs men to have a good time?*

By nine o’clock, Dakota was deeply asleep, Sam had rustled the older kids to bed, and Monté had washed the dishes. The two women sprawled out on the couch and shared a bottle of Chardonnay.

‘If I drink more than one glass of this, Simon won’t be the only sleepover guest tonight,’ Monté said, folding her legs under her.

‘The more the merrier,’ Sam said with a sigh. ‘Oh, I forgot to tell you – Kara’s on her way over. She said she wanted to discuss something with me.’

‘Kara? What in the world? On a Monday night?’

Sam shrugged. ‘She just said it was important and that she needed to see me right away. I told her to come over after the kids were in bed.’

Monté frowned. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Kara DeMarinis. Sam had been cutting her hair for a decade and had brought her into the D & D club six years ago – she was some kind of big-shot political consultant with an office in one of the new downtown buildings.

It was just odd that Kara was coming over to Sam’s on a school night.

‘Did you screw up the woman’s color or something?’

Sam laughed. ‘You and I both know that that’s never gonna happen. She said it was something to do with her job.’

This was getting stranger by the minute. ‘*Her* job?’

‘You’re off tomorrow, right?’ Sam asked absently, as if she didn’t even realize she’d changed the subject.

‘Yep.’ Monté studied her friend. Sam was looking more washed-out than usual. Monté wanted to come right out and ask her if there was something wrong – or something *newly* wrong – but the slight slump in Sam’s shoulders told her to go easy tonight.

‘So, what do you think of the salon renovation?’ Monté waited for Sam to respond, but her friend looked far away in thought. ‘As long as I got enough natural light at my station, Marcia could do up the place in early train wreck for all I care, but if you ask me, she’s taking the desert thing

too far – a big ole cactus in downtown Indianapolis? Puh-leeze. Next thing you know she'll be bringin' in Gila monsters or some shit and makin' us wear turquoise, and you know I don't look good in anything green.'

Sam finally giggled and looked up at her friend. 'Early train wreck has always been my preferred period, obviously.' She waved her hand around like a game show hostess. 'How'd I do?'

Monté quickly scanned the living room and grinned. The small space featured an indestructible microfiber couch and love seat in a stain-camouflaging beige, an inexpensive entertainment center in an oak finish, an oval coffee table, and a couple floor lamps. All of it was accented with the by-products of family life – various book bags, a stray sock or two, clumps of dog hair, Greg's comic books, CDs that belonged to Lily, and little Thomas the Tank Engine pieces strewn all over the carpet.

'Mmm-hmm.' Monté nodded with approval. 'You did a bang-up job, girl.'

Sam sighed, and Monté watched quietly as her friend began her ritual. She would stare at each of the eight paintings that hung on the off-white living-room walls making a silent evaluation of her art and her life, then move on to the next, until she'd reviewed them all.

Monté didn't need to look along with Sam – she knew each of her friend's brush strokes by heart. The combination of tiny dots and broad sweeping arcs defined all of Sam's oil paintings. The colors were so bold and rich it didn't seem possible that they'd come out of the petite, pretty, auburn-haired mommy sitting on that couch. But they had. And Monté knew those paintings were as much a product of Sam as her children were.

'You'll be able to paint again someday. I know you will.'

Sam took a sip of wine and offered Monté a weak smile. 'I'll start painting the day you get up onstage and belt one out like the old days.'

Monté laughed. 'Lord, that's not fair, and you know it! I couldn't squeeze into one of my stage dresses if my life depended on it.'

'Then buy a few new ones.'

'Hmmp. I think I'd be better off going to night school for my degree and maybe one day I can get off my feet.'

The doorbell rang, and Sam pushed herself up off the couch and went to answer it, ushering in Kara along with a cold blast of wind. Monté watched the women hug briefly, and Sam draped Kara's expensive shawl-collared dress coat on one of the dinette chairs.

'Hey, Monté!'

Despite the friendly greeting, Monté could tell Kara wasn't pleased to find her there. Now she was certain something was up. She could smell it. There was no way she was leaving now. 'Hey, Kara,' she said. 'We were having a glass of wine. Would you like to join us?'

Kara looked nervously around the room, like she was trying to make the decision to bolt or stay. 'That would be nice,' she said, just as Sam returned with an extra glass. Kara sat on the love seat and immediately let out a squeak and reached under her bottom.

'Sorry,' Sam said, holding out her hand for the small plastic figure. 'Seems you sat on Bob the Builder.'

'Hope it was as good for Bob as it was for me,' Kara commented drily, and everyone laughed.

'So what's up, Kara? Is there something wrong?' Sam leaned her elbows on her knees and stared at the new arrival, clearly as perplexed as Monté was.

Kara's eyes darted toward Monté, which prompted Sam

to say, ‘Whatever we need to talk about, I’m sure Monté won’t mind listening.’

Kara chuckled and put her untouched wine on the coffee table. She brushed the sleeve of her suit jacket. ‘Well, it’s a legal matter. A personal legal matter.’

Sam and Monté snapped to attention.

‘You suing Le Cirque?’ Monté asked, appalled.

‘*What?*’ Sam gasped, just as Dale loped into the living room and jumped up on Kara’s blended-wool pencil skirt.

‘No! God, no! Are you kidding?’ Kara laughed, placing the dog back on the floor without missing a beat. ‘Thanks to you, no one in this town knows I went gray at twenty-six. This has nothing to do with the salon. I love you guys.’

Monté sat up even straighter. Wild dogs couldn’t drag her ass out of there now. *Hell* no.

‘I don’t understand,’ Sam said, shaking her head.

‘*Diaper change me, Mommy, and don’t forget to use the wipes.*’

Dakota had suddenly appeared in the living room. He stood next to the couch in only a T-shirt, which hit just above his little knob of a belly button. A heavy training diaper sagged from his hand, and his little baby parts dangled in the breeze.

Sam sighed. ‘Sweetie, if you’d use the big-boy potty, you wouldn’t be uncomfortable every time you tinkled in your pull-ups.’

‘No. Nuh-uh. I don’t like the big potty. Change me now.’ Dakota held out the soggy lump of plastic.

Monté shook her head, watching this familiar but futile exchange between mother and son. Dakota looked like a redheaded cherub, but he was a devil child when it came to his bodily functions, no doubt about it.

‘How about we go on in and sit on the big potty just to see—’

‘No, Mommy! No. No. No! Change me now! Use the wipes!’

Monté and Kara stared at each other with raised eyebrows, not saying a word, until Sam returned a few moments later and collapsed on the couch. She sighed deeply. ‘At this rate, he’ll be wearing pull-ups when he goes up onstage to receive his diploma – and I’m talking the one from *college*.’

Kara cleared her throat. ‘Speaking of college—’

‘Oh my God!’ Sam sat straight up and smacked her palms on her denim-covered knees. ‘Does this have something to do with Mitch? Did you come here to tell me they found him?’

‘Oh, sweetie, no.’ Kara tilted her head and groaned. ‘Look, Sam. I have a proposition for you, an offer that could change your life and your kids’ lives. It’s a little off-the-wall, but I figure I can at least throw it out there for your consideration.’

Sam grew very still and said, ‘Okay.’

Kara cleared her throat. ‘Do you remember what you said last Friday at the Lizard Lounge? About how there was nothing wrong with being a kept woman?’

Sam blinked. ‘I said *what*?’

‘Sure she remembers,’ Monté said, uncurling her legs and placing her feet square on the floor. ‘Go on.’

Sam glared at her. ‘I do?’

‘Sure you do. You said if there was a way to swing it without damaging the kids you’d do it in a heartbeat.’

Sam frowned, then dragged her gaze back to Kara. ‘Obviously, Jose Cuervo was doing the talking last Friday, not me.’ Then she laughed. ‘Why? Did you go out over the weekend and find some loser who wants to be my sugar daddy?’

Kara folded her hands in her lap and bit the inside

of her cheek to keep a straight face. 'Actually,' she said, noting how Sam's grin was slowly melting into something akin to horror, 'I was hoping you might help him be a winner.'