

“She’s torturing me.” Hannah slammed the car keys onto the granite kitchen counter.

“Honey, what did she do?” Brandon rushed behind her, folding his arms around her waist. “Sweetheart, what did Renee do?”

Hannah closed her eyes, reliving the scene from church this morning. Remembering how Renee had walked up to her. Taking slow steps with a wide grin. All four children in tow.

“Hannah, I don’t know why you’re upset. You were this way through the entire service.”

Hannah sighed and turned to face her husband. “She’s always bringing the children....”

Brandon stepped back a bit, although he still held her. “The children are supposed to be in church. They’re there every Sunday.”

Hannah nodded, but lowered her glance. That’s one of the problems, she thought.

“I thought you loved my children.”

She lifted her gaze. “You know I do,” she said as she hugged him. “I love Robert and Stella and Greg and Susan. I love all of them.” Before she uttered the last word her arms fell away from him. She sauntered across the wide space to the family room and settled into the softness of the cream leather couch. The smooth surface felt cool against her bare legs even though the August sun shined, full of promise, through the windowed wall. She closed her eyes when she heard Brandon’s footsteps clapping against the limestone floor, edging toward her.

Brandon leaned against the back of the couch and let his fingers rest on his wife’s neck for a few seconds before he began kneading the tightness. Hannah allowed her head to slump free, seamless like a rag doll. The tension eased, first from her face, then her neck, and next she felt the tightness loosen in her arms. She rested her head against Brandon as he continued to free her from the pressure that enveloped her muscles.

For long minutes, she escaped. But then the blackness behind her eyes filled with images. Her mind dragged her back to the church steps where she had waited as Brandon parked the car this morning. She smiled and kissed other parishioners as they filed into the church; some she knew by name, most she knew by sight only from Sunday services and Tuesday night Bible study. As she leaned over to kiss Miss Pearl, she saw Renee rushing up the steps toward her.

“Good morning, Hannah,” Renee said as she tugged at five-year-old Susan, pulling her along. She paused as if she had to catch her breath, then added, “Everyone say hello to your...stepmother.” She spoke the last word as if it were the punch line from a Queens of Comedy joke.

Hannah wasn’t even sure if the children had obeyed their mother’s command. All she could think about was why did Brandon’s ex-wife have to attend the same church?

Suddenly, Brandon’s fingers felt heavy against her neck. She opened her eyes and slipped from his grasp, moving to the French doors that led to the patio. The sun’s brilliant rays shimmered against the pool’s water, an inviting sight, a peaceful oasis – so different from what raged inside of her.

“You know I love you, Hannah,” Brandon whispered.

“This I know. I’ve never doubted it.”

“All that matters is that we’re together. And, that I can make you happy.”

Hannah turned to face him, fighting the water that threatened to spring from her eyes. She didn't want to cry again. She wasn't sure if she could. There had been so many tears shed. "Brandon, I want to make you happy, too."

"Sweetheart, you do. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. How many times do I have to tell you this?" When his wife remained silent, Brandon shook his head. "When are you going to believe me?"

"I believe you...." She paused, knowing that her tone wasn't convincing.

Brandon turned away. "Hannah, I don't know what else to do." He pressed his hands against his forehead. "We can't go through this every time we see Renee and my children."

"I know, Brandon." She rushed to his side and took his hands. "I don't want to do this either. It's just that you've given me so much. All of this...." Her eyes scanned the massive family room filled with designer pieces. She wanted to run through all five-thousand square feet of their home that Brandon had designed and built and just remind her husband of all that he'd done. "I want to give something back to you. I want to give you a baby."

"I want that, too, Hannah. But you know what? If it doesn't happen, I will be just as happy because I didn't marry you for that. I married you because I love you more than I've ever loved anyone."

Hannah wrapped her arms around Brandon's neck. "I love you, too," she whispered before she kissed his cheek.

As Brandon pulled her tighter and nestled his nose in the curve of her neck, Hannah closed her eyes. She was in the arms of her soul mate. She knew this within minutes of their first meeting. He'd walked into the law office where she was an associate attorney. She'd been standing at the receptionist's desk when he introduced himself. When she took his outstretched hand to shake it, she was sure an electrical surge had seared through her. She'd checked his left ring finger for the symbol of marriage and became more excited when she saw none. But her excitement was diffused with his next words...when he asked the receptionist to let Calloway Powell know that Brandon Carrington had arrived. Calloway was one of L.A.'s most prominent divorce attorneys.

She saw Brandon often in the weeks that followed, always managing to be around whenever he came into the office. But when he suggested that they go to lunch together, she declined. She didn't know his business, but she knew enough to figure out that he was getting a divorce. No matter how her heart fluttered when he spoke her name with that rich tone that could rival Barry White, or how her knees shook when he smiled and the dimple in his cheek winked at her, she refused to be on the bad end of a rebound. But seven months after his divorce was final, Hannah's resolve faded, and they had their first date. Seven months after that, they were married in a beachside ceremony in Maui.

Hannah never doubted Brandon's love. He was a faithful man of God who had loved his first wife – until he found out that she'd been sleeping with his best friend. After hours of counseling with his pastor, and even more hours of prayer, Brandon was able to set aside his bitterness for the sake of the children. The divorce was amicable, albeit still painful for Brandon who wanted to save his marriage. But, it was Renee who insisted on the divorce, telling Brandon that it wasn't him – it was just that she felt stifled after having four children. In a heart-wrenching declaration, Renee had proclaimed that all she wanted was her freedom...and six thousand dollars a month in child support and

alimony. Hannah always thought that was odd – just how much freedom could a woman have with four children living at home? But she would give anything to have just a quarter of the off-spring that Renee had.

Hannah hugged Brandon tighter. He had proven his love for her – from the diamond marquis she wore on her finger to the home he'd built for her on the ocean's edge in Manhattan Beach. His actions went beyond his words to let her know how much she was cherished. But long shadows of doubt rested over her. How could they be happy if their family was incomplete?

“I love you,” Brandon whispered once again into her ear.

Hannah nodded, but said nothing. She closed her eyes and prayed that his love would be enough.