## Chapter 1

## "... from what if's to reality."

"I can't look." Elbows planted on her drawing board, Gayle clamped both hands over her eyes. Ever since she sent the final sketches, specs and fabric samples, she had worried she left out something important, or that it wouldn't look the way she imagined. Or that it was a great big mistake.

"What are you worried about?" Pat dug through the squeaky mass of packing peanuts like she was searching for buried treasure. Yesterday the doll maker they had contracted said the original doll was on the way, and all morning Pat had worn a rut between her desk and the big windows at the front of the third floor walk-up office, scanning the horizons of West 23 St and Eighth Avenue, willing the Fed-Ex truck to round the corner before it's usual mid-morning run. Pat grabbed hold of an arm and pulled. "She's beautiful!"

Gayle peeked through her fingers, then she was out of her seat. "Oooh. Let me hold her." Gayle had started drawing Ell Crawford, with her two fat braids crisscrossing the top of her head, blue jeans, a pink velour shirt and big brogans like the clunky ones her daughter had to wear to support her feet, after four year old Vanessa tossed her shoes down the laundry chute, fully expecting they'd be lost forever. Gayle created a s/hero whose formidable footwear fit her as well as Cinderella's slipper, and magically transported her to far off times and places. Ell helped Vanessa feel better about having to wear "boy shoes", and even after the industrial strength laceups were gone, Vanessa still looked forward to Ell's next adventure. It was hard to believe, but five years had passed since Pat convinced Gayle that other little girls would enjoy Ell's exploits.

Twelve books later they still did, and clamored for more. Now the first Ell doll was cradled in Pat's arms, looking so much like Vanessa it gave Gayle chills.

"Thought you couldn't look." Pat tucked the doll behind her back, enjoying a playful moment now that she could see the two years she'd spent on the project—the first convincing Gayle it was the right move, then working with a doll artist— were going to be worth it.

"Changed my mind." Gayle couldn't believe Ell Crawford looked like she had just leapt off the page, from the mischievous gleam in her big brown eyes, to the grosgrain laces in her sturdy oxfords, tied with big bows the color of bubble gum. Gayle had come up with the ploy to make the shoes special. She would change the ribbons to go with Vanessa's outfits. The doll's shoes were patent leather, but Vanessa's father had kept hers polished so they gleamed, a memory Gayle chased out of her head. *I will not let Ramsey spoil this*.

"OK. I'll share." Like when we were eight. Pat handed over the doll.

Gayle and Pat had gone from sharing a room with twin beds when they were kids, to an office with twin desks, arranged face to face, today. In the semi early days— after they'd made the leap from dining room table to a real office— they would clear both desks to create mailing central where they packaged and labeled their orders, excited about each and every one and where it was going. And they celebrated across the desks with champagne and a sausage and mushroom pie from the greasy pizzeria on the corner when they shut down the assembly line and hired a fulfillment house to handle getting the books from printer to customer— definitely slumming it after Pat's days of luxe expense account dinners and her plush office in a sleek glass tower, but this felt even better. She and Gayle had built it from what if's to reality.

The dueling desks also made it easy to talk. Some days they did a lot of that, about ad buys, color separations and production schedules. But also about Vanessa's grades, Pat's

anniversary surprises, shoes on sale, and where to get the best manicure. Articles written about the slow and steady growth of The Ell & Me Company and it's catalog of fanciful picture books, always played up the life long friendship shared by founders Patricia Reid and Gayle Saunders. It still made them smirk and shake their heads because they remembered how it started—in kindergarten when Pat was too country, Gayle was too prissy, and nobody else wanted to be their friend. As kids they pretended to be lots of things: mommies, gypsies, private eyes, and the Vandellas, but co-presidents of their own company had never been on the list.

Pat, the Ivy League ex-advertising exec who regrouped after a musical chairs merger left her with no desk when the music stopped, and Gayle, the former stay-at-home mom who turned a reversal in life into a creative springboard, made for a study in opposites; one hard driving and business savvy, the other whimsical and creative. Like they planned it, or even thought about it that way. They each just did what they did best and somehow it worked out.

"Sure she's not too big?" Gayle placed the doll in the stand that was sent along and leaned back to examine her.

"Don't start." Pat knew that look and tone. Gayle's exuberance was about to dissolve into a sinkhole of doubt. "We've been over every finger, toe, eyelash..."

"I know. You're right." Gayle lifted Ell's pant leg, smoothed a polka dot sock.

"She's perfect." When it came to how Ell looked, Gayle had very specific notions and getting to "just right" had plucked Pat's bottom nerve. Thy had weighed and debated the possibilities from pocket size to life size and decided on 18 inches as a manageable height for all ages. It took months to get the right complexion, a special blend of chocolatey golden hues their artist called sun-kissed cinnamon. And the hair—curly, kinky, wavy and corn-rowed, they had

been through it all. Pat was not about to revisit their decisions.

"I just want to be sure." Gayle perched on her stool. Pat had anted up the money to start the business since she said Gayle had created their product. Besides, at the time Gayle only had enough to get back on her feet and buy a little breathing room. But it was Gayle who suffered the sleepless nights while they set the wheels of their fledgling company in motion, terrified Pat was wasting her time, talent and a heap of her termination agreement money. Anxious herself about what she would do for a living if this crazy scheme didn't work out. But they were equal partners, fifty-fifty. They split the proceeds and made decisions jointly.

All the paperwork they had to sign when they incorporated made Gayle's stomach hurt, but Pat explained every move. Gayle had been amazed at the way Pat called in favors from former associates to get them going, and didn't break a sweat negotiating toe to toe with contractors. After their first print run was sold out and they went back to press, Gayle was thrilled, but underneath it all she had worried when the devil would jump up and take it all away. She still did. Her marriage was the last thing she had counted on and that turned out to be so much smoke and mirrors. When the air cleared, Ramsey was gone, her mother was dead and she and Vanessa were homeless. The big house, expensive clothes, luxury cars—all lost. Gayle accepted that some of what happened was her fault. Ramsey didn't hide his gambling that well. She just spent too much time squinting through rose colored designer glasses instead of seeing what was in plain sight. With Pat's help she'd been able to put the shelter far behind her. But the dark circles under her eyes, shapeless wardrobe in fifty shades of beige, the unruly gray that sprouted prematurely when she lost control of her life—all symptoms of post-Ramsey-stress-disorder, still lingered.

"You're never sure." Pat sat at her desk.

"You don't exactly have a crystal ball. There are lots of dolls..."

"And none of them speak to the little girls who adore your stories."

My stories. Gayle had a hard time taking credit. She was only a high school graduate with no formal training. Drawing came naturally to her, since she was little. And the stories— just something she had made up to entertain her child. Except that when she read them to Ell's fans at libraries and schools, and they called her Ell's Mom-- it did give her a charge. And when she examined her bank and brokerage accounts, which she did regularly, and balanced them down to the penny, she was proud to be paying her way in life—finally.

"So rude." Rosalind, their receptionist, office manager, cheerleader and sounding board came around the half wall. "People just bang the phone in your ear when they dial a wrong. . . Will you look at her." Lindy stopped, put both hands on her hips. "Standing up there like she's about to talk. The very first one, and goo gobs more to come. Ah sookie sookie now." She did her victory shimmy. Not much bigger than a doll herself, Rosalind flitted like a hummingbird and watched over Pat and Gayle like a hawk. And made sure they marked special occasions properly. "Where we having lunch?"

"Rain check, Lindy." Pat picked up the phone. "Our new star has an appointment. Gotta plan her first photo shoot. You can order me a Greek Salad. I'll eat when I get back."

"Chicken Parmesan, side of spaghetti," Gayle added.

Pat looked at the remnants of Gayle's breakfast bagel and cream cheese. That was the same as when they were kids too. Gayle never gained an ounce and Pat still battled the pounds that threatened with every fork full. "It's just not fair."

Lindy shuffled back to her desk and Gayle tried not to vibrate off her chair. Planning the

doll had been an exercise for Gayle. Seeing her there, discussing pictures for the catalog, that made it too real. Pat had asked Gayle if she wanted to go. She begged off, wanted to finish the drawing on her board. It was for the book that would go with the doll launch so she felt pressure to make it extra special. All morning Gayle worked on the illustration – of Ell in a covered wagon, gingham ribbons in her shoes, heading for the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889 – but it seemed like the doll was looking over her shoulder, questioning every stroke. By the time Pat packed her up for the trip across town, Gayle felt like she'd done more erasing, pencil sharpening and staring at the kaleidoscope of photos, swatches, nick knacks and whatnots she collected for inspiration on her 'Brain Strain' bulletin board, than actual drawing.

Pat heard Lindy buzz someone in, just as she was putting on her coat to go. "Sure you won't come?"

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" The question had haunted Gayle all morning. "We could eat the loss on development. . ."

"Wasn't I right the first time- when we started all this?" Pat slipped on a glove.

"Yeah, but..."

"If I listened to you, the stories would be in a trunk collecting mold." Pat thought she'd nipped this bud, but the roots were deep. She understood Gayle's reluctance, but she also knew that forward was the only way to go—her own life had taught her that.

"But we don't know anything about the toy business."

"Will you cut it out. This is going to be huge. Enormous. Colossal." Pat picked up the bundle. "Gigantic. Stupendous. Mammoth..."

"No. You'll have to leave." It was Lindy's 'I'm not playing' voice.

They looked at each other, then Pat went to investigate.

She rounded the corner and saw the fresh faced cutie. Cornrows released a cascade of curly hair that brushed the shoulders of her jacket, a snowball of white fake fur.

Haven't had one of these in a while. Every now and then one of Ell's fans would show up in person to tell them what the stories meant to her. This one looked to be in her late teens. A little old. Must have read them to her baby sister.

Lindy shot Pat a 'get lost' look which she thought was odd. The girls were always sweet, although sometimes they had a big weepy breakdown when they met Gayle.

"Mrs. Carter?" The voice was small, like a fairy or a six year old. A beauty mark punctuated the upturn of her smile.

Pat went from warm-hearted to wary in four syllables. "Can I help you?" Nobody called her Mrs. Carter, unless she was with Marcus at some sports shindig. That's how she could tell it was somebody who knew him by name and reputation only. Everyone else was aware she'd kept her own name. It was just easier doing business that way. *And what business do you have with me?* 

"My name is Tiffani Alexander. Tiffani with an 'I', not a 'y'..."

"And Miss Tiffan "I" would like to get in touch with her supposed father." Hands on hips, Lindy cut to the real nitty gritty. "Marcus Carter."

All morning Pat had been hanging ten on the crest of a can-do wave. Now she felt sucked into the undertow, unable to breathe and unsure which way was up. Early in their marriage, she and Marcus weathered a spate of accusations by women with cuddly babies and lawyers who offered to keep matters confidential for a mutually agreed upon settlement. And while he admitted that before they were married he hadn't exactly been a saint, Marcus assured her he

hadn't been stupid either. Well, she hadn't exactly been Sister Patricia of the order of the crossed legs, but her playmates had the good sense to stay gone. And while none of the claims received the DNA seal of paternity, Pat still found it unsettling being confronted with Marcus' ex'thangs', who were definitely more cinnamon buns and fruit tarts than a well balanced meal.

"But who did I marry?" What was she supposed to say? You *have* to eat your vegetables, but would you really rather have a Twinkie? Still, nobody had shown up damn near grown, on their own and on *her* doorstep until now.

Gayle came out, not liking the sound of this.

"Where is your mother?" It was the most logical thing Pat could come up with.

Tiffani's smile froze into a grimace, then the corner of her lip began to tremble. She hid it behind her hand. "She died. . . last November. . . I'm sorry." She swiped at fat tears that dripped down her hand. Unzipping her pink mini-backpack, she handed Pat a glossy white folder.

Behind her Lindy mouthed, "I can get rid of her."

Pat shook her head and rifled the folder, not letting herself focus on any of the articles and photos taped to black construction paper. "And what makes you think my husband is your father?" Pat, who rarely referred to Marcus so possessively, was suddenly feeling very proprietary. She couldn't say she saw him in Tiffani—her caramel complexion, the shape of her face, her nose. What would his child look like? They didn't have any to go by.

"I never asked her til she got really, really sick. It was always just the two of us. I was so scared of losing her. . ." Tiffini sniffed back more tears. "She said they met one summer, when he played for the Orioles– in Erie. . .Pennsylvania. . .that's where I'm from."

Gayle's ears perked up. That would have been back in the days when she and Marcus

were young, and engaged to be engaged. Before she let Ramsey sweep her into his fantasy.

"And what made you decide to show up here?" Pat folded her arms across her chest.

"I read this article, about you and Mr. Carter and your, like companies. I put it in the scrapbook." Tiffani motioned for the book so she could find it, but Pat didn't budge. "I went to his building this morning, but the guards wouldn't let me upstairs. So I came here." Tiffani managed a shy smile.

Pat knew getting past security in the G & C Pro Sports building required photo ID and a phone call to reception. No appointment, no ride to the  $40^{th}$  floor. "So you just got up this morning and took the bus from Erie..."

"I took the train, Mrs. Carter. I live with my aunt in New Jersey now."

"Whatever. And if you read the article you'd know my name is Ms Reid."

Gayle could tell Pat was rattled. "What is it you want, Tiffani?"

"Just to talk to him. About my mother and stuff." Tiffani looked down at her feet, then back at Pat.

"I'm sorry for your loss, but I can't help you." Pat held out the folder. "If you insist on pursuing this, you should have your lawyer handle it." The girl hardly looked like a threat, but her appearance out of nowhere was creepy.

"I don't have a lawyer." Tiffani looked wilted. "My phone number and stuff are in the scrapbook. . . . I made it for him."

The injured ache in Tiffani's voice threatened to crumble Pat's hastily constructed control of the situation, but she wasn't about to open the door to some stranger, no matter how sad her story. Pat tucked the folder under her arm again, but didn't say another word.

It was clearly the end of the audience. Tiffani picked up her purse. "Thank you, Ms Reid."

"Do you have a ticket home?" The mother in Gayle couldn't help but make sure Tiffani would be all right. *She's about Vanessa's age. Maybe a little older*.

Tiffani nodded, gave a little wave. "Bye." And she was gone.

"Could be one of BeBe's Kids as soon as Marcus'." Lindy was unmoved.

Pat stormed into the office.

Gayle got the emergency bag of macadamia nut chocolate chunk cookies out of Lindy's bottom drawer and followed.

"I don't want to talk about it." Pat tossed the folder in the trash and slung her coat on the chenille sofa in their sitting area. Playing 'I've Got a Secret' was absolutely not on her agenda for the day.

"You're going to have to tell him." Gayle offered Pat a cookie, but she was too busy fuming to take it.

"Why? She had no business. . . "

"At least you have warning. . . Some control." *The magic word*. Pat always hated being out of control, even when they were kids. Gayle retrieved the folder. The first page had a death notice with a postage stamp sized picture of a woman who had a warm smile and Tiffani's eyes. Simone Rae Alexander had worked at the Jewelry Chalet for twenty one years. Seven years older than she and Pat, on November 18<sup>th</sup> she passed on from ovarian cancer. "So young."

"What?" Pat turned, saw Gayle flipping the scrapbook pages. "Oh, come on." She marched across the room to confiscate it, but saw a photo of Tiffani and her mom over Gayle's shoulder. Simone had sunken shadows beneath weary eyes, but the sparkle of her spirit still

showed in them. A red and black turban covered her obviously bald head. "It's a sad, sad story, but what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Give it to Marcus. It's his hot potato. Let him handle it." Gayle turned the page, to a wobbly snapshot of Simone and Marcus, cheek to cheek. Gayle remembered the summer Marcus came back from Erie wearing the thick gold chain he had on in the picture—one he was not wearing when he left St. Albans. "The good news— it was before you two were together so it's not like he was cheating on you." *He was cheating on me. Not that it matters*.

Pat's breath made a foggy circle on the window as she peered outside. "It's weird. Like she's out there somewhere."

"She's just a sad little girl."

"Exactly what I don't need." Pat pulled on her coat, picked up the doll and barreled out of the office for her appointment.

The mid-winter sun was unseasonably warm, and since she had angry energy to burn, Pat decided to hoof it, striding like she had the answer before anybody else had the question and you better not get in her way. She had half a mind to head for Marcus' place, but one office surprise was enough for the day. She was not interested in acting like some crazy shrew for the delight of his staff— so unprofessional. Besides, he wasn't having the greatest week.

As a championship baseball player turned sports agent after an injury ended his career on the diamond, Marcus had the marquee name in their household, but his clients were a lot harder to handle. The last week or so he'd been bellowing like a bear with his paw caught in a trap, severely P.O.'d that one of his hot prospects, a hard throwing lefty with a promising curve ball, was acting shaky. After all the time, attention and money they had spend grooming him, now he

was making noises about jumping ship, leaving Gallagher & Carter Pro Sports in favor of one of the mega sports management companies, just as he was on the verge of the majors and a real payday. Ouch.

After a few hours of brainstorming with the photographer, Pat recouped some of the morning's excitement. She couldn't wait to get back to the office to share the ideas they had come up with. Ell would get her own portfolio, consisting of studio shots against a rainbow of backdrops. Pat even had Polaroids in her purse of some samples they had taken. They would have a miniature of the latest book created so Ell could hold her own copy. They would also cast for little girls to be pictured hugging Ell, which was really the whole point—putting the *Me* in Ell & Me. When all the proofs were in, she and Gayle would decide which picture would herald their entre to the next level of the game.

For a while Pat had missed the high octane action of her former career. But before they had cut her loose she'd been kicked upstairs, away from the daily dose of adrenalin she got from producing commercials, and the endorphin rush of seeing them air. She had a prestigious title and a better office, but riding herd on the other producers to keep their bottom lines from getting flabby had sent her down a lonesome road with no trail mates and no glory in the end.

Now she got to cut her own path, with no office politics to navigate, and no boss who needed anything kissed. Each day brought new challenges and rewards. Whether it was the afternoon she and Gayle got wired on a twelve cup pot of coffee and a batch of snickerdoodles and came up with a name for the company– they were so giddy, neither remembered who suggested The Ell & Me Company, but they knew that was the one. Or the day they sent out their very first catalog– a tri-fold brochure really. She couldn't get Gayle to stop crying because she was sure no one would place an order. But Pat was certain they had a winner. And the spring

in her step as she zigzagged along the crowded sidewalks was because she felt the same way now. Gayle was Ell's Mom, the public face of the company, and Pat was happy to stay behind the scenes and plot their course.

It was dark by the time Pat got back to the office. She would have gone straight home except she wanted to drop off the doll, show Gayle the pictures.

Lindy buzzed her in just as she was leaving. "V-attack."

"Great." It was their code for Vanessa having some kind of melt down.

"Just needs one good butt whipping. Night." And Lindy made her exit.

Pat hoped it was just one of Vanessa's near weekly emotional outbursts. Honestly, she didn't know how Gayle could take it .Pat loved her best friend's only child, but Vanessa had been challenging even as a 'tween. That was nothing compared to these teen years. But they had had more than one go-round about Gayle's discipline style, which usually ended with Gayle saying "You talk to me when you're a mother." If this was motherhood, Pat didn't know how anybody could take it.

"Nessa. . . I know how hard you practiced. . . . Oh, Honey. You thought it went so well . . ."

Whatever it was wasn't tragic, so Pat dropped some of the photos on Gayle's desk. She'd hear the Vanessa saga tomorrow. She stuffed Tiffani's folder in her bag. Pat still wasn't sure what she would do with it, but it was making the trip home.

\* \* \*

"Simone." Marcus sank to the brown suede sofa when he opened the scrapbook. *Sweet sexy Simone*. "I can't believe it."

Not the response Pat bargained for. She didn't even like the way he said her name, like a warm, soothing secret. On the bus ride up to West 79<sup>th</sup> Street she'd had time to find some logic in the situation. All Marcus really had to do was give up a little DNA– a swab of the cheek would tell the whole story. There was no reason to think Tiffani was his daughter any more than the others had been, so Pat decided to start the evening with her, get it out of the way so she could get to her good news.

"Did she say how long her mother was sick?"

"I didn't ask," Pat snapped, and cinched the belt of her leopard print robe. If she'd known Marcus was staying late to work out contract minutia with a manager on the west coast, she'd have booked an hour of tennis at the club near her office so she could smack something. Instead she took a long hot shower and drank some green tea in search of serenity. She was still searching. And if she'd known Simone would bring back such fond memories. . . "Is there something you need to tell me?

"No. It's just a shock." He closed the book, pressed it between his palms. "Simone was a long time ago."

Pat could see the one dimple in Marcus' cheek that appeared whenever he clenched his jaw. She'd known that expression since they were ten--- at his brother Freddy's funeral. It meant he was holding back, holding on. And what was he holding now? His thoughts? His sadness? *Let him handle it.* Deciding to hold her tongue, Pat came up behind him, rested her hands on his shoulders. He let out a deep sigh.

Marcus had retired from professional sport, but not from the gym. His body was as sleek and sculpted as any of the athletes he represented— said he had to give the young punks something to aspire to. But Pat could feel the tension knotted beneath the surface, so she kneaded

his muscles, pressed circles across the swells of his chest with the heels of her hands, pulsed down his biceps, his forearms. Marcus closed his eyes, let his head loll against her belly.

Looking down into his face made Pat calmer too. Some mornings she still woke up and got the flutters when she saw him across the pillows.

Not to say being married was easy. Everything, from finding an apartment that suited them both, to figuring out what to put in it had required negotiation and compromise, and neither one was a natural at diplomacy. For a while Marcus had tried to convince her a houseboat on the Hudson would be cozy, but Pat was not about to live with him in less space than they already had and floors that swayed with the tides. Eventually they found a place on Riverside Dr, with a wide open view of the river. Combining his macho utilitarian decor with her Metropolitan chic proved challenging too, but eventually they found a balance between comfort and style.

Except it wasn't just the big things that required work. Which brand of mayo, where to go for vacation, whose bank— the day to day decisions took energy and effort as well. Then add all the career pressure that came with being a two entrepreneur household— pressure to stay ahead, be on top, see and be seen at the right places, with the right people, say the right thing. It was certainly never dull. And she never, ever wanted to be dull— the kind of woman who got lost in the shadows, left behind.

Pat pressed fingertip spirals along his temples, across the buttery skin of his forehead. And the daytime pressure didn't subside at night. Their mismatched schedules meant their bed was mostly for sleeping. She couldn't pinpoint when that happened—little by little, over time. Some racy lingerie and a long weekend used to be enough to get them in sync, but somewhere along the line those interludes stopped making it to their calendars.

Pat was about to lean over, press an upside down kiss to his lips. . .

... when Marcus opened his eyes. "I'll give Tiffani a call tomorrow."

"What for?" That snagged Pat's groove like a needle scratching vinyl.

"To see how she's doin'. To express my condolences."

"Marcus, the girl shows up out of nowhere, says you're her father and you're talking about a sympathy call. It doesn't make sense. Unless you already know..."

"I don't know squat. Aw-ite." Except Simone was his first, his burning sands to cross, his guide. He was a lame teenager in man clothes, with milk breath, and she was patient, taught him a little about life, about himself. Simone threw him a line before he knew that's what he needed, then tossed him back because she knew he wasn't grown enough to reel in– all in one summer. He never forgot her for it. And now her daughter had shown up to tell him she was gone. *My daughter?* 

"So are you planning to take her word you're her Daddy? Maybe she could move in the guest room. . ."

"It's what her mother told her so it's all she knows. I can't blame her for that." Marcus stood up. You, of all people, should have a little sympathy . . ."

"That's different." Marcus had snatched Pat, head first, back to the pursuit of her own father, a fact she'd conveniently overlooked when Tiffani appeared.

"How? All you had is what *your* mother told *you*. You never believed anything else the woman had to say, but you took that for gospel."

What could she say? Pat had worked so hard for so long to make herself successful, worthy of her father's acceptance. But he had dismissed her with a brittle cackle. "I have all the children I plan to acknowledge."

Marcus saw the hurt in Pat's face, came over and surrounded her in his arms. "I'm just saying I'll check it out." He tilted Pat's face up to his, met her mouth with a slow kiss. "You got nothing to worry about."

"Me worry?" Pat slid her arms under his cashmere sweater. Turned on was about the last thing she expected to feel after her encounter with Marcus' potential progeny. Especially since it had been so long since they were both tuned into this channel at the same time.

"That's what I like to hear." Marcus continued the lip to lip conversation, then steered them toward the bedroom.

And the urge to share their deep connection allowed Pat to be swept along. She'd had enough talk for one day. The doll could wait until tomorrow. So she lounged on the bed, waited for him to slide in beside her.

Marcus pulled her on top, looked into her eyes. "You know, you and me make a little somebody, wouldn't be no questions about who's the mommy and who's the daddy."

Nothing was a faster fire extinguisher. Why would you bring that up now? "Come on.
You leave for Florida in two days. I've got a doll launch to plan. . ."

"Think of it as on the job training." He eased his hands under her gown, let them explore familiar hills and hollows. "Might inspire new stories. Another doll. . ." He nibbled kisses along the curve of her neck, down her collarbone.

Pat considered not answering, just going with the flow, but she couldn't let her silence be mistaken for yes. "Now is not the time. . ."

"It's never now." The tender moment quickly congealed. Marcus slid Pat to the side and sat up.

"That's not fair." Pat sat up too, wrapped the sheet around her, feeling the need for cover.

They retreated to separate isolation booths, each staring straight ahead.

"There's part of me that hopes that girl is mine." Marcus got up, stepped into the pants he'd dropped in a heap.

For the second time in the day Pat felt herself drowning, swallowed this time in waters that had always seemed safe.

"At least I'll have one child." Marcus left the room.

Leaving Pat adrift . . .