

# *Promises*

*by*

*Mary Kirk*

## Selected Passages

*From Chapter One . . .*

She was making a mistake. Laurel knew it. She also knew she could do nothing about it. She'd made the commitment to attend the conference months ago; it was too late to change her mind. It was not too late, however, to brood over the consequences of her rash decision. Such fruitless activity had occupied her thoughts for the past eight hours, from London to Boston. Doubtless, it would keep her busy for the next leg of her journey, too.

The automatic door connecting Logan Airport's international and main terminals opened with a subdued whoosh of air. Laurel passed through it quickly, pausing only long enough to scan the overhead screens for information about her next flight. Then she hurried down the corridor, heading directly for her gate with an air of assurance that spoke volumes about how often she traveled.

Her gray eyes held a determined look. Nothing about her five-foot-ten-inch slender form, dressed in stylish spring clothing, hinted at the uncertainty she felt. Nothing except the dark circles under her eyes.

It would be smart, she knew, to ignore the negative aspects of the upcoming week in Annapolis and to focus instead on the

## *Promises*

conference itself. After all, it was an honor to be asked to participate in the annual Foreign Affairs Conference sponsored by the United States Naval Academy. The program's purpose was to teach the students what was involved when world powers met to discuss arms control. And of all the people the conference committee could have chosen to demonstrate the complex, critical process, they'd chosen her. She should forget everything else and appreciate how good it felt to be so highly regarded.

At the moment, however, she'd have sacrificed the ego boost for the chance to reconsider.

When she reached the boarding area, her tense expression softened a little as she spotted the person waiting for her.

Her father, Vice Admiral James Randall, was standing apart from the last-minute stragglers in line to board the plane, looking tall and imposing in his black uniform. She caught his eye and waved. He waved back and came to meet her.

"Laurel! I was afraid you weren't going to make it. It's so good to see you, honey."

"Dad." For a moment Laurel enjoyed the luxury of being close to her father as he caught her in a quick hug. "It's good to see you, too."

"Two years!" he exclaimed. "Has it really been that long?"

"Almost," she confirmed.

"Well, we've got from here to Annapolis to catch up." He held her at arm's length for a brief, assessing look. "Ready?"

Laurel nodded, draping her garment bag over her arm as her father collected her small case, and they headed down the boarding ramp.

As Laurel slid into her seat, she felt her stomach take a nervous flip. She wasn't afraid of flying; she was afraid of being in Annapolis. And she was counting on idle conversation with her father to keep her from dwelling on where this particular flight would end.

Taking the aisle seat beside her, her father put a hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Before we get too involved talking about other things,” he began in somber tones, “I want to tell you how sorry I was to hear about Jonathan Coltrane’s death. It was sad news.”

Laurel hesitated, wary of the new topic. “Yes, it was,” she agreed quietly.

“I imagine Nathan was pretty broken up,” he went on. “His uncle was the last of his family. Besides which, this leaves him holding the reins on the estate. I wonder what he’s going to do with all of it. Do you know?”

Shifting to find a more comfortable position, Laurel planned a response. She couldn’t talk about Nathan. Not when she was about to spend a week in Annapolis, where the memories would surround her.

Her hand trembled as she lifted it to inspect a fingernail. “Frankly, Dad, I don’t even know where Nathan is. I was in Geneva last fall and didn’t get to the funeral.”

She frowned at the nail she’d nibbled ragged somewhere over the Atlantic, then abruptly, dropped the hand into her lap and shot her father a quick smile. When he spoke, she knew she’d have to do a better job of dissembling.

“It’s going to be a hard week for you, isn’t it, honey?” he said.

Her gaze slid away from his as she hedged, “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You’ve never told me what happened between you and Nathan,” he noted. “When you two were having trouble, I was tied up with your mother’s illness and didn’t have time for anything else. But I’m not tied up anymore, and if you want to tell me, I’d like to know.”

Laurel’s reply was calculated and brief. “Nathan and I made a mistake, Dad. We shouldn’t have tried to turn our friendship into any more than it was. Instead of making it better, we

*Promises*

ruined what we had.”

Praying her tone had warned him that she didn't want to pursue the issue, she willed the knot in her stomach to go away. His next question, however, only made it tighten.

“Are you all right, honey? You look”—he hesitated over the word—“upset.”

“I'm fine,” she insisted, forcing a smile. “A little tired. You know how I am about trans-Atlantic flights. By tomorrow I'll be as good as new. Now, tell me about Lilly. How was she when you saw her last month?”

Her father's gaze searched her carefully disciplined features once more; then he went on to talk about her younger sister, who was due to have her third baby soon.

Feeling bad about deceiving him, Laurel realized that at least part of what she'd said was true. Though she'd mastered the logistics, she'd never get used to flying. She'd never find it easy to say goodbye to one place and hello to another.

The memory of one particular parting flashed through her mind, and as the big jet approached its destination, she thought about that first, horrible time she'd had to say goodbye. . . .

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“You'll write to me, won't you?” The little girl with the long dark braid gave her young friend a sad, half-hopeful look.

“I already promised I would.” The boy leaning against the big cork tree tried to pick a blade of grass between two bare toes.

“How much longer is your family going to be here in Spain?” she asked.

The boy pushed off from the tree to grab the swing that hung from a low branch. “I think maybe another six months, but I'm not sure.”

“Don't you hate not knowing where you're going to live?”

“Naw, it's sort of cool. I remember being in Charleston and, before that, in San Francisco, and I liked 'em both.”

“I don’t want to move.” The girl frowned, a stormy expression darkening her wide gray eyes. “I hate moving. I hate having my room packed in boxes. And I know Mommy hates it, too. I saw her crying twice yesterday.”

With a sensitivity rarely found in such youthful form, the boy sought to comfort his friend. “You’ll be okay, Lauri. It’ll be hard for a while, maybe, getting used to a different school and all, but I’ll bet you end up liking Charleston.”

The girl’s eyes filled quickly, unabashedly, with tears. “But I’m going to miss you, Nathan. I might never ever see you again.”

There was no denying it, and the boy didn’t try. The sadness in his dark brown eyes said that he didn’t like the idea any better than she did. Still, being the more optimistic of the two, he tried to look on the bright side. “I’ll write. And I’ll never stop being your friend, no matter where we are. I promise. My Dad says, when you’re in the Navy, you’re all part of the same family. It’s sort of like we’re related, and you don’t ever stop being related once it happens. Now, come on. Don’t you want one last swing ride before you go? Get on, and I’ll push you.”

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Laurel looked out over the jet’s wing and watched it slice through a bank of clouds as the pilot announced their descent into Baltimore/Washington International. She recognized her present feelings as the same ones she’d had on that sunny morning in Spain—fear, loneliness, and a longing for someone she expected never to see again. The difference was, this time it was true: Nathan and she had said their final goodbye.

Yet that had been more than three years ago. Why did the knowledge that she’d him still have the power to fill her with such deep despair?

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The passengers disembarking from Flight 566 out of

## *Promises*

Jacksonville, Florida, into BWI airport were a typical mix of students returning to college after spring vacation and weekend travelers who wanted to be home in time to watch the Sunday-afternoon Orioles game. Nathan Coltrane, Captain, U.S. Navy Medical Corps, was neither. But he'd long since grown accustomed to standing out in a crowd, if for no other reason than his size.

At six-foot-six and two hundred and thirty pounds, he knew he was built like a linebacker, and without a lot of conscious effort, he made sure he stayed in peak condition. Physically, at least. Emotionally, well, the haggard look on his face told another story. He looked like hell, and he knew it.

To those who'd expressed concern, he'd confessed he'd been working too hard. The truth, though, was that his burned-out look came from having spent the past three years trying to glue together the shattered pieces that used to be his life. His appearance was merely an indication that he hadn't succeeded.

But he *would* succeed. The lines that shot downward from the corners of his mouth spoke of his determination, and the long strides that carried him toward the main terminal were unhesitating. He was through pouring his energy into work in a futile effort to forget. He was through dating women whom he had nothing to offer but an already occupied space in his heart. Thirty days: that's what he was allowing himself to let go of the memories and the hopes. When he left Annapolis, his heart would be his own, for he'd have rid himself of everything that reminded him of Laurel.

Nathan hitched his garment bag over his shoulder and rode down the escalator that led to the baggage area. A minute later, as he was standing at the carousel waiting for his duffle to show up, his attention was caught by a sight that brought home exactly how much forgetting he still had left to do: a boy and girl, close to college age, hurrying toward the terminal exit. The boy had one arm wrapped around the girl's shoulders as he

carried a suitcase in the other hand. The girl was talking excitedly, and the boy's gaze was directed more toward her than where he was going. As they approached the doors, the boy stopped and pulled the girl toward him for a kiss that was anything but discreet. Oblivious to their audience, they enjoyed the moment for all it was worth before breaking apart and continuing on their way.

How many times, Nathan wondered, had that been Laurel and he? How many times had he stood at the arrival gate, waiting for her to get off the plane, his heart pounding, his stomach a knot of nerves, his mind racing with all the things he wanted to tell her? It had been that way when they were children. It had been that way later, when their friendship had shifted to accommodate a growing sexual awareness of each other and the beginnings of romantic love. And he knew that if, at that very moment, he saw her standing across the concourse, it would still be the same.

Which was why, since he wasn't likely to see her ever again, he had to stop remembering their hellos and remember, instead, that they'd said their last goodbye.

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Sitting in the passenger's seat of the rental car her father was driving, Laurel saw the past loom before her as they turned off North Street and into State Circle, in Annapolis. Her entire body was tense as though preparing for impact. Suddenly her heart was pounding and her hands were clammy. Seeing the steeple of St. Anne's soaring above the old building in the middle of the circle was like looking through her own photo album. She closed her eyes, but it did no good. Against the backdrop of her memory, the scenes sprang up one after the other and, along with them, a frighteningly vivid image of Nathan.

Obviously, she rationalized, there were still some remnants

## *Promises*

of emotion that needed to be put in their proper place. That was normal, wasn't it? Annapolis had been Nathan's home; for a while, when her father had been stationed at the Naval Academy, it had been her home, as well. Probably, she was suffering from a delayed case of melancholy. This desire she felt to see and talk to Nathan must be only a sentimental yearning for the good old days. She would remember soon enough that the good old days were gone and that many of them had not been very good in the first place.

The need to prove that the hastily constructed theory was true was fast becoming necessity. When her father pulled their car to a halt in front of the bed-and-breakfast where they'd be staying, Laurel made an impulsive decision.

"We made good time," James remarked. "After we register, I think I'll take a walk and stretch my legs. Want to join me?"

"No, thanks," Laurel replied, her gaze wandering toward the city dock and the street that led to the bridge across Spa Creek. "In fact"—she turned to him—"would you mind registering for me? There's something I want to do. And I'd like to use the car, if you won't be needing it."

"No, I don't need it," he replied, then, after a moment's pause, added, "If you're going to the cemetery, I'd be glad to come with you."

Laurel shook her head, not bothering to correct her father's misconception that she wanted to pay her last respects to Jonathan Coltrane. "I appreciate it, but I need to do this by myself. I'll be fine."

With a sigh that sounded disappointed, her father reached across the seat and patted her arm. "All right, then. I'll meet you in the parlor at seven-fifteen. You're not going to refuse me the pleasure of walking into that reception tonight with my accomplished daughter on my arm, are you?"

She smiled warmly. "Only if you refuse me the pleasure of walking in on the arm of my distinguished father."



A few minutes later, Laurel was headed out of downtown Annapolis, certain that what she needed to do in order to regain her composure was face the worst and get it over with. And that meant facing St. John's Landing.

Traveling along the familiar road, she held on to the thought that memories weren't real. They couldn't hurt her. Nor could they force her to think or feel any certain way. Nathan—who could hurt her and who could, she feared, still make her think or feel almost any way he chose—was somewhere on the other side of the world. She was in no danger of actually having to face him in her current unnerved state. Or ever, for that matter.

Yet her hands trembled on the steering wheel, and the knot in her stomach had become genuinely painful. She was scared and bewildered by the violence of her reaction. And when she reached the initial stretch of low fieldstone wall that bordered the Coltrane property, she knew the word *memory* didn't begin to describe the almost desperate longing for Nathan that was, by then, throbbing inside of her.

This wasn't a memory. It was a *vision*, crystal-clear and powerful. It was as if he were there, beside her. The air was heavy with the scent of him—not of the cologne he wore, but of that elusive fragrance that was dark and male and entirely his. She could see his intense brown eyes and the broad planes of his strong-featured face. As though she could reach out and touch it, she recalled the way his sensual mouth looked when he smiled. The way it felt as it rocked across her own in a seeking caress. The way it moved, open and wet and hungry, across her breasts. Her breasts that were, at that moment, aching for the touch of the first—and only—man whose impassioned loving had ever aroused them.

Laurel shuddered helplessly. It *must* be only nostalgia. Surely, she was merely feeling lonely and sorry for herself. The last three years of forgetting couldn't possibly have been a complete waste of time.

*Promises*

But with growing dread, she heard the voice of her heart insist that they had been.

*From Chapter Two . . .*

Sitting on the end of the Coltrane dock, with his back against a piling and his gaze fixed on the waters of the South River, Nathan rested one arm on his suitcase and wondered how long he could pretend he was relaxing rather than admit he was avoiding the cottage.

Aunt Louise had wanted to help him get settled in, but he'd sent her on her way with a promise to be at her house at noon the following day for lunch. He'd checked on his rental car in the garage, then walked through the main house—ostensibly to make sure the Historical Society was doing its job and that things weren't getting dusty, as Aunt Louise had claimed. Then he'd started down the path to the cottage with every intention of unpacking and taking a nap. Faced, however, with the imminent threat of seeing the old place—worse, lying in the bed that awaited him—he hadn't been able to follow through.

He was beginning to wonder if his whole plan didn't have some seriously masochistic overtones. Maybe he should take a real vacation. Go lie on a beach in Bermuda. Spend a couple of weeks in New York, seeing shows. Was it really necessary to put himself through this agony?

Unfortunately, he thought it probably was. The five days he had been here when Uncle Jack died had taught him that. At first, his attention had been focused on his dying uncle. Later, however, through the funeral arrangements and meetings with his lawyer, he'd been stunned by how powerfully—and how painfully—the Landing made him think of Laurel. There was nowhere to go, no place to rest his eye that didn't hold some memory of her. Long before his leave was over, he'd been frantic to get away. It had taken a long time to come to grips

with the experience and to realize what it meant in terms of the future.

He'd first come to the Landing a scared, heartbroken little boy, and Uncle Jack and Aunt Louise had tried in their separate ways to make him feel welcome. Uncle Jack had taken him sailing and told him about his ancestors, how the Coltranes had always drawn strength from their land and how it could give him solace for his grief. He belonged here, Uncle Jack had said. Aunt Louise's tactics had been slightly more effective; she'd baked him cookies and told him stories about his father as a child. Still, they were both strangers to him, and the things they'd said had made little sense at the time.

Only recently had he realized in a conscious way that, finally, it had been his friend Lauri and her continual assurance that he was loved for himself alone that had eased his sorrow and turned St. John's Landing from a formidable, foreign environment into a place he felt at home. He'd always known her love was important to him, but he'd never known how important. Not until last fall, staying at the Landing without her, had he fully realized how closely entwined were his sense of the Landing as home and Laurel's presence in his life.

When she'd left him, she might as well have taken the Landing with her. Uncle Jack's will said it was his, but it had ceased to be a place he thought of when he wanted comfort. It would never again bring him that sense of well-being when he thought of his ancestors who'd settled the tract of land. Yes, it was his; but without Laurel, it was an empty shell, and he could barely stand the sight of it.

The past winter in Jacksonville had been long and painful as he'd wrestled with his conscience. But he was sure, now, of what he had to do. The Landing was useless to him, except as a source of constant pain. And so, as sad as it made him, he was going to sell it.

His lawyer, Ted Gilliam, could have handled the details with

*Promises*

the Historical Society, which had expressed interest in the property. But he knew in his gut that he had to be the one who handed over the keys. He had to accept the fact that Laurel was truly and irrevocably gone, and part of that acceptance was saying goodbye to his memories of her. If he cheated himself of that opportunity, he'd always regret it. And there were enough regrets in his life already.

Nathan glanced down at the sailboat floating beside the dock. *The Scallop* had been his since his graduation from high school. How many hours had he and Laurel spent on it? More, he knew, than he could begin to count. As he stretched out one leg to rest his foot on the prow, he rubbed his eyes with a weary hand. He was incredibly tired. Too tired to face any more great emotional battles. All he wanted was some peace. He only wished the price he had to pay for it weren't so high.

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The white stones crunched beneath the car's tires as Laurel turned into the winding road that led to St. John's Landing. The driveway was canopied by old oaks and maples, their limbs newly budded. When she took the last bend in the gravel drive, the main house came into sight. Big, white, and meticulously kept, the early Georgian mansion sat on a high bluff overlooking the South River. As she circled past the carved oak front door, she slowed the car, remembering the first time she'd seen the Landing, the summer her father had been transferred to Annapolis.

She'd been nine, and the place had greatly intimidated her. Besides, she'd found it unbelievable that her friend Nathan, whom she'd left behind so long ago in Spain, lived in such a house. The Nathan *she* remembered had always looked a little scruffy, and he'd thought nothing of picking up dead birds and worms. Then Nathan had come bursting through the front door, dressed in ragged cutoffs and hollering, "Hey, Lauri! I

caught two catfish this morning, and Aunt Louise's gonna fry 'em for dinner! She said we could watch her skin 'em! Come on!"

Though a bit abrupt after such a long separation, Nathan's greeting had served to override her initial discomfort, supplanting it with the gruesome possibility of having to eat something called a catfish that had to be *skinned*.

As she parked her car, thinking about how much of her life she'd spent at the Landing, Laurel concluded that the place was the closest thing to a home she'd ever known. Yet this was not a homecoming. Uncle Jack was gone, and Aunt Louise lived in her own place now. And Nathan? If he'd been there, would he have welcomed her? Would she have wanted him to? The latter was a question she had to answer.

Feeling as though she were about to dip her heart in acid like so much litmus paper, Laurel walked across the lawn. She faltered briefly at the path that led into the woods, wanting to turn back but compelled to go on by the almost perverse need to see, to touch, to remember. It was absurd. Nothing had changed. The earth hadn't moved, yet it felt as though it had, for certainly her entire vision of reality was shifting.

She started downhill, continuing until she came to the edge of an embankment. There, she paused to look down at the patches of water glittering in the afternoon sunshine through the trees. The view tempted her to go down to the dock.

She'd learned to fish on that dock. Nathan had taught her. She had learned to kiss there, too. They'd taught each other. The memory of their first innocent kiss washed through her, her mind conjuring an image of two young people, both tall and slender and glistening with water from a recent swim.

Laurel hurried on, fearing she was questing after something she would regret having found.

The house St. John Coltrane had built when he and his wife had first settled the land was nestled in a small clearing. A

## *Promises*

simple white structure with a gambrel roof and two windows on either side of a heavy front door, it was every bit as enchanting as Laurel remembered it. As she approached the cottage, she felt the veil of unreality wrap her more closely in its folds.

She tried to believe it was only time and distance and loneliness that made this place seem so perfect in her memories. Memories were like that, weren't they? Improving or worsening with age until the past appeared either black or white, good or bad, with no gray areas of ambiguity. It was only a trick of her imagination that she remembered the days that Nathan and she had spent in the cottage as being everything romance and love could ever hope to achieve. Surely, with all the heartache that had come afterward, the memories the place evoked would be tarnished.

*Maybe*, a voice whispered as she stopped beside the window at the far end of the cottage and spread her hand wide on the wall. As though she could somehow absorb the richness, the wholeness, of the place itself and all it contained of her own life, her fingers moved over the weathered wood.

Nathan's presence was so strong. So alive. She could hear his voice, gentle and deep, as he spoke love words to her in the dark. Apprehensive, she leaned forward and peered through the wavy, leaded glass.

It was still there, and the force of its presence took Laurel's breath away. She sagged against the window, her gaze transfixed by the large canopied bed that dominated the bedroom.

As she'd known it would, the image of a young man and woman appeared before her eyes, and down to its smallest detail the picture mirrored the one engraved in the pages of her memory: The candles on the bedside tables. The bouquet of red roses, gardenias, and baby's breath on the window seat, streamers of white satin ribbon trailing to the floor. Moonlight streaking into the room, bathing it in silver. The woman was

*Mary Kirk*

dressed in a satiny white negligee that clung to the soft curves of her slender body. The man wore the black trousers of a tuxedo and a white shirt that hung open, baring a darkly matted, powerful chest. Standing at the crossroads of youth and adulthood, they looked very happy and very much in love.

Unable to prevent it, she allowed the scene to play itself out in her mind, and she knew that therein lay the truth inside her heart. . . .

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“You are incredibly beautiful,” the man said, his large hands cupping the woman’s face.

“So are you,” she replied, turning her head to brush his palm with her lips.

He brought his mouth down to hers and kissed her long and tenderly. Her fingers—a band of diamonds on one of them glittering in the candlelight—clung to his shoulders. When their lips parted, both of them were breathless.

“Lauri, you’re trembling all over,” he whispered, his hands running down her arms. “Are you scared?”

“A little,” she whispered back, dropping her gaze. “Oh, Nathan, I know it’s silly. We’ve known each other forever. We’ve kissed thousands of times before. It seems as if I’ve always known what you taste like, how it feels to have you hold me.” She ran an adoring hand across his chest, under the shirt that was so invitingly open. “I’ve touched you before, and you’ve touched me, but . . .”

“But we’ve never made love,” he finished for her when the words wouldn’t come. And, lifting his bride’s face to his own with a finger under her chin, he made it clearer still. “We’ve never been in bed together, with nothing on and all the time in the world to do exactly what we’ve been wanting to do for a very long while.”

Her eyes locked to his, she said solemnly, “I guess I’m worried you’ll be disappointed.”

*Promises*

“Not a chance.”

“I’m not, well—” Her lashes lowered. “You know this is my first time.”

“Hmm. Mine, too.”

Her startled gray gaze clashed with his gently amused brown one.

“You thought I was sowing wild oats when I claimed to be studying or out with the guys, didn’t you?”

She blushed and nodded. “I’m sorry, Nathan. I should have known better.”

“So, now you know,” he told her. “I’ve never wanted anyone but you. And I’m probably as nervous as you are. But I love you, Lauri, more than I’ll ever be able to tell you. I want to show you how much I love you. I’ve wanted to show you for so long.”

“Oh, Nathan!” she cried softly, throwing her arms around him. “I love you, too. Let’s not wait any longer. Please . . .”

And then she was trembling with something beyond fear as he began scattering kisses with eager abandon over her forehead and cheeks and lips. Inexperience was forgotten as, for the first time between them, passion was entirely unleashed. Neither was afraid. The end was a goal they both sought, and they had their love to guide them to it.

White satin slithered to the floor, and ivory skin was revealed, bathed in amber candlelight. A ragged breath was drawn. And then there was the moist sound of feminine flesh being tasted, suckled, until it flushed and swelled with pleasure. A zipper rasped, followed by a low growl as gentle hands discovered and measured the full extent of masculine arousal.

The diaphanous white drapes of the canopy enveloped the lovers as they sank down upon the bed, oblivious to the visual harmony their bodies, together, created. He was so very large, she so very slender. His skin was dark. Hers was ivory. His hair, lustrous and thick, was almost identical in color to the



mantle of luxurious, nearly black silk that spread across the pillow beneath her shoulders. Never had two lovers so clearly belonged to each other. They were matched, perfectly, as though fate had made them for precisely this moment.

And if that were true, then fate had planned well. For when the moment came, they fit together with a flawlessness that was breathtaking. For a time they lay still, their gazes locked, their lips barely touching, both captivated by the realization that they were, indeed, joined.

But their destiny lay yet ahead of them, and they began moving toward it together.

They knew the way. They had known it forever. Perhaps even when they'd been too young to understand, they'd known intuitively that someday their love would lead them to this: this incredible feeling of being lost in the other. Of giving up separate thoughts, separate wishes, so that they might live and breathe as one. There was no question of mistrust or of holding back. They gave everything freely, joyfully.

And when their knowledge of the other became complete, it was with an innocent and boundless faith in the future. They took what love gave them and returned it in full measure, certain that in doing so, they had become a part of each other for all time.

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No! *Not* for all time. It wasn't true that a man and a woman could be fated for each other or that people had no control over whom they loved. And it couldn't possibly be true, Laurel's common sense insisted, that her wedding night with Nathan had been as glorious as she remembered it.

More than fourteen years had passed since they first came together on that bed as husband and wife. No memory of passion could survive that long unchanged. And she was convinced that it was the ensuing years of struggling to salvage their marriage that had painted the memory of their wedding

## *Promises*

night in such rose-colored hues.

They'd had two short weeks of the sort of happiness that could have been lifted from the pages of a storybook. Then Nathan had announced that, if he were going to finish medical school, he had no choice but to apply to the Navy scholarship fund. And nothing had ever been the same again.

He knew, he'd said, given how much she'd hated growing up in a military family, that it would be hard for her, but they could make it work. Everything would be all right. How could it not be, when they loved each other so much?

It hadn't been all right, though, and none of the hundreds of things Nathan had done for her had made it so. She'd tried so hard to give up her intense longing for a home and a way of life she'd never had the chance to enjoy. Again and again, she'd let Nathan talk her into believing that, if only she tried harder, everything would be okay. She'd loved him so much and so blindly that it terrified her even now to think about it. And in her bedazzled state, she hadn't been able to see that she was destroying everything that had been good between them in her vain effort to fit into a life that she just couldn't accept.

Then, one morning, in the space of a few dreadful minutes, her world had exploded. The fierce, unwavering love she'd come to expect from Nathan, the love that she'd cherished all her life, was gone. In its place was resentment and unbridled fury.

Leaving him had been an act of desperation. If she'd stayed, she'd have had to live knowing that he didn't love her anymore, that he was only determined she honor her vows, no matter what. And so, in order to do what had to be done, she'd convinced herself that she must not love him, either, and that the power he held over her emotions stemmed only from dependency.

But it wasn't so. As she stood there on that warm afternoon in April, leaning against the cottage with her eyes closed and

her arms wrapped around her, Laurel could only wonder at the thoroughness—and the foolishness—with which she'd gone about believing her own lie. The truth lived in the longing of her heart and in the aching, sensual awareness the memory of her wedding night had aroused in her body. She couldn't go on denying it. She was as much in love with Nathan at that moment as she had been on the day she married him.

Suddenly, the cottage no longer seemed a place of beauty and enchantment but, instead, had taken on the qualities of a prison. It frightened her to think her heart might be trapped inside it and that she might be doomed to live without it—and, therefore, alone—forever. She needed to get away, to go someplace where she was reminded that she was in control of her destiny. With a purposeful shove, she pushed herself away from the cottage and turned to go.

Then she screamed, a choked sound, totally disbelieving.

“My God, Laurel, it is you,” Nathan whispered.