

CHAPTER 1

“Mr. Kester? You have a--a rather unusual delivery at the front desk.” The hotel clerk sounded as though he were trying not to laugh.

Ty Kester pushed his damp hair off his forehead. “I’m right in the middle of something. Can you send one of the bellmen up with it?”

“Uh--no sir, I really think you’d better come down.” A brief pause, and then the clerk added, “As soon as possible.”

“All right, I’ll be there in a minute.” Hanging up the phone, Ty grabbed his towel and rubbed it vigorously over his face and arms. He’d been busy doing the leg stretches ordered by his physical therapist and hated having his workout interrupted. Particularly for what was probably a prank.

The guys in the Raging Wrestling Federation were famous for their “ribs.” It was a way to lighten up the monotonous round of travel from town to town, day in and day out. When it came to a good rib, no one was exempt, from the wrestlers, to the valets, all the way up to the federation’s owner.

As Ty headed down the stairs, he knew he’d better be a good sport about whatever was going on. After all, he’d participated in quite a few ribs himself, even invented a few. His mouth quirked up as he remembered how he and Big Bad John had put an entire bottle of hot sauce into the Handsome Brute’s muscle-building protein drink.

He pushed through the door into the lobby. Because the RWF’s owner had obtained a special deal, they were staying at an upscale hotel this week, the other end of the spectrum from their usual run-down motor lodges. Ty felt out of place in his gray workout shorts and tank top as he crossed the lobby, with its elegant white-marble walls, gilt-edged mirrors, and stately cherry furniture. His discomfort increased when he saw two of the female staffers glance at him and then giggle.

Maybe the delivery wasn’t a practical joke, but something embarrassing from a fan. Or, heaven forbid, a fan in person. He thought of the time he’d been accosted at his motel room door at midnight by a blonde teenager wearing an extremely revealing negligee. He’d driven her home immediately, making her cry when he’d told her in a stern tone, “If I were your dad, you’d be grounded for a year.”

But he didn’t see anything unusual as he strode up to the registration counter. Two women and a man were checking in or out. A baby’s carryall was perched up on the counter and there were suitcases and duffel bags scattered around the floor.

Ty leaned on the counter. “Delivery for Kester?” he asked when the clerk turned toward him.

The clerk reached out and patted the baby’s carryall. “Right here.” Smirking, the clerk handed him a letter.

Ty gazed from the letter to the baby and back again.

Oh, dear God, please let this be a rib!

He tore open the envelope.

Dear Ty,

I know this will be a huge shock for you. I'm sorry. I just don't know what else to do. I should have told you earlier that you have a son.

I can't deal with him any longer. I've tried so hard for the last six months. Having a baby was never part of my plan for this point in my life. I'll never be able to complete my doctorate and care for him at the same time. Another complication is that my father hates him and still hasn't been able to accept that I gave birth to an illegitimate child. So now I am giving him to you

Don't try to find me. I have moved out of my parents' house and changed my name.

*Sincerely,
Liz*

P.S. Please forgive me.

Stunned, he folded the letter back into its envelope. The child babbled and waved his fists. Ty stared down into the big brown eyes of the baby Liz claimed was his son.

“Are those boobs real?”

Taken aback, Julie Hayes looked Molly Greene in the eye. She knew all about showing respect to a more senior member of the profession, but that question was just plain rude.

“Nope--I'm renting 'em by the week.” She grinned to take the edge off her words.

“No offense,” Molly answered, her tone unconvincing. Her glance was coldly appraising as her eyes raked over Julie. “If they're real, you're darned lucky. The fans will go nuts for your figure.”

“I was hoping they'd like my wrestling style.”

Julie's two roommates looked at each other and smiled knowingly. “Yeah, right,” Bernice drawled. “You could be the world's greatest technical wrestler, rookie, but it just won't matter. What the fans like to see are those boobs bouncing around.”

Julie had had enough of the small, smoke-filled hotel room and more than enough of her roommates' company. “I'm going out for some air,” she said, stepping onto the balcony.

She had hoped Molly and Bernice wanted to be friendly when they invited her to share a hotel room. Wrestlers had to pay their own hotel expenses, so they almost always shared rooms as they traveled from town to town. But now Julie wasn't sure what to make of the two women. Molly and Bernice had chatted with her about her background and previous experience, but Julie had sensed some hostility there, too.

She was an outsider. When an outsider came into an established group, there would be testing, questioning, and hazing of the newcomer.

She set her mouth resolutely. Well, she'd been through it before and could do it again.

The hotel suite was on the eighth floor and she had a panoramic view of the twinkling lights and long lakeshore of Cleveland, Ohio. She drew deep gulps of crisp fall air, leaning out

over the balcony rail, and looked upward. No stars. The night sky was overcast, filled with heavy dark clouds.

Wish upon a cloud? Well, why should the stars corner the market on wishes? She gripped the railing tightly. I wish...I wish for Cassie to be happy in college. I hope she'll settle down and do well.

The last week had been hectic. After several days of frenzied shopping, she'd rented a truck and taken Cassie to the University of Dayton. Returning to her alma mater had made Julie nostalgic for her college days, but Cassie had turned a deaf ear to Julie's talk about the fun activities and interesting people at school. Cassie complained that she didn't want to be at college, that it wasn't what she wanted to do with her life.

She sighed, remembering her sister's sulky face as they'd said goodbye. The night breeze ruffled her long red hair and she pushed it back behind her ears. Turning, she considered going inside. But it was pleasant to have a few moments alone.

Maybe she should make a wish for herself, too.

I wish for success in my new job. Fame and fortune with the Raging Wrestling Federation.

Satisfied, she took a step toward the sliding balcony door.

Molly and Bernice were standing on the interior side of the door. Before Julie could open it, Molly turned the locking lever. "See you later!" she called through the glass, waving her cigarette mockingly.

Bernice added, "Have fun out there!" Laughing, she pulled the curtains shut.

Julie tried the door, but it was locked. Fuming, she threw herself into the plastic patio chair, wondering what to do next.

Ten o'clock at night, and the baby had been crying for over an hour. In the hotel room next to Ty's, someone banged on the wall and yelled, "Shut up!"

"I'm not any happier about it than you are, pal," Ty muttered. He picked up one of his newly purchased baby-care books, found a section called "What Makes Baby Cry," and read down the list. It couldn't be hunger, since the baby had had a bottle an hour ago. He'd been burped. His diaper was clean.

The list said nothing about babies who had been abandoned by their mothers.

Ty lifted the baby out of the portable crib, cuddling him against his chest. "I'm just not the person you want, am I?" he murmured, looking down at the tiny, angry face. Jiggling the child rhythmically, he began pacing the room.

As he passed the dresser, he spotted the pacifier. Holding his breath, Ty gently inserted it in the baby's mouth. The child sucked on it. Finally, the room was quiet.

The books disagreed on whether pacifiers should be used, and Ty almost hadn't bought one. Now he thought that the author who discouraged their use should be hunted down and punched. The darned thing was a godsend.

He walked around the room a few more times, then laid the baby carefully down in the crib. He didn't dare put the television on, but that was all right. The child care books he'd bought awaited. Picking one up, he settled into a chair.

When he heard the knocking, he jumped to his feet, wondering who would come to his door at night. Oddly, the noise didn't seem to be coming from the hallway, but from the outside.

He rushed to the balcony door, thrusting the curtains aside.

His mouth opened in surprise as he gazed at the lovely woman standing on his balcony. For just a moment, he wondered if he was experiencing one of those angelic visitations people talked about. Dressed in a long white nightshirt, the woman was tall and slender. Her abundant red hair swirled softly around her face in the night breeze. Full lips, slightly parted, broke into a smile as she saw him.

Ty's gaze traveled downward. The woman's perky, uptilted breasts were barely hidden under the thin cotton, and they were large in contrast to her slender waist. Her legs were long and perfectly proportioned.

The heavenly impression vanished as he noticed her fuzzy pink bunny slippers.

She waved at him cheerfully. "Hi! I got locked out of my room. Would you let me in, please?"

Sliding the door open, he took an astonished look outside, trying to figure out how she'd reached his seventh-floor balcony. "How the heck did you get out there? Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, now that I'm inside. Thanks a lot!" Her cheeks were flushed, either from the nippy evening air, or embarrassment at her predicament. Big brown eyes looked up at him imploringly. "You probably think I'm an idiot, but really, it wasn't my fault. I was on my own balcony, and my roommates locked me out for a 'rib.'" His eyebrows rose at her use of wrestling slang, and she added, "I mean--it was a prank."

If she knew the lingo, she had to be a fan. . . one who was going to extreme lengths to meet a wrestler. "But how did you get onto my balcony?" Ty demanded.

"My room's right above yours. When they locked me out, I decided to climb down here and see if anyone was in the room."

"You climbed down?" he repeated, not sure whether to believe her.

"It wasn't hard. I stepped onto the outer ridge and crouched down, then I held onto the bars of the railing while I dropped to your balcony." She grinned and held up her right arm, pushing up the sleeve of her nightshirt. Her arms were slender, but she revealed an impressive bicep as she clenched her fist. "I'm very athletic."

Wanting to show that she wasn't fooling him, he said, "That was reckless. I've heard of a lot of damn-fool things that fans do, but this is the worst yet."

"What are you talking about?" Her voice rose as she asked, "Do you think I'm a liar?"

She seemed so honestly indignant that he backpedaled, "Okay, maybe it happened just like that. But don't you think you were foolish to be climbing around outside? I'm sure your roommates would have let you back in eventually."

Her face took on a stubborn expression. "I didn't want to let them get the better of me."

A cry rose from the portable crib. Ty hurried over to the baby and picked him up. The baby gurgled and tugged at Ty's short beard.

"You've got a baby! May I see?"

"Sure." Ty brought the baby over to her. "He's been fussy tonight."

"What a cutie!" She smiled down at the baby, then stroked his cheek. "Maybe he misses his mom. Did she leave you in charge for the evening?"

"She left me in charge, period." She was looking at him with a mixture of curiosity and sympathy. Still not entirely convinced that she wasn't a starstruck fan, he decided to unburden himself. Hearing that he was a single father would strip away some of that celebrity glamour. "I've only had him for a few days. His mother dropped him off here with a note. . . actually, I'm not even one hundred percent certain he's my son."

Her eyes widened. "My goodness!"

“I wish she’d stuck around and talked to me about him,” he went on, unable to keep the troubled tone out of his voice. “She never told me she was pregnant. I didn’t know anything about him until she left him here.”

“What’s his name?”

Ty gave her a rueful smile. “His birth certificate just says, ‘Baby Kester.’” Looking down at the baby thoughtfully, he added, “I think I’m going to call him Tybalt Jeffrey Kester--same as me.” He stroked the child’s hand with one finger.

“Tybalt?” she asked. “That’s not a name you hear every day.”

“My brother has it worse--his name is Romeo, from the Shakespeare play. ‘Tybalt’ is from *Romeo and Juliet* too.”

She looked up into his face, eyes twinkling. “Then we have something in common. My name’s Juliet. But everyone calls me Julie.”

“I go by Ty. And I think I’ll call this little fellow by his middle name, Jeffrey.”

“He looks a lot like you.” She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing the baby’s face, then looked back up at Ty. “His eyes are like yours, the way they turn down at the outer corners. And his hair’s the exact same light brown.”

The baby started crying again so Ty resumed pacing.

“Try singing to him,” Julie suggested. “Babies like music.”

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to give it a shot. Ty thought about it for a few moments, rapidly reviewing the songs he knew, then softly sang a few verses of “Frog Went a-Courtin’.” To his surprise, Jeffrey settled down and closed his eyes.

“There, you see?” She tossed her head, pushing her hair back behind her shoulders, which gave him a nice view of shifting curves. “Well, I enjoyed the entertainment! I’m going to head back to my room now.”

“Do you think they’ll let you in?”

She grinned. “I’ll trick ‘em. Disguise my voice and call out, ‘Pizza!’” She stepped close, looking down at Jeffrey. “Good luck with the kid!”

“Thanks.” Cuddling Jeffrey against his shoulder, Ty walked her to the door and opened it for her, watching as she hurried down the hall to the elevator. She looked back once and waved.

He was fairly sure now that she hadn’t been lying to him. She had shown more interest in little Jeffrey than in Ty the wrestler. She hadn’t so much as asked for his autograph.

With a sigh, he locked up again, thinking about how differently the evening might have turned out if this had happened a few weeks ago. Back then, he would have offered to walk her back to her room. Perhaps she would have agreed to get dressed and go down to the bar for a few drinks. He would have enjoyed getting to know her. He could have listened to her enchantingly breathy voice all evening.

Good Lord, he hadn’t even found out her last name.

Well, it didn’t matter. He was a free man no longer.

Julie rode her Harley downtown to the Gund Arena early the next morning and rushed inside with her duffel bag. She didn’t want to be late for her appointment with Jack Brown, the man who had hired her for the Raging Wrestling Federation. The backstage pass he’d given her the day before got her past the security guards.

This was the first time she’d been in Cleveland, but the backstage area of the Gund

seemed familiar, similar to a dozen other arenas she'd visited during her four years as a wrestler. Same old ugly cinderblock walls and linoleum floors. Although there was nothing going on for the public this morning, the pervasive odors of caramel corn, pizza, and beer from hundreds of sporting events and rock shows lingered in the hallways.

She found the women's dressing room without too much trouble and changed into her red and orange Firegirl costume.

When she came into the main exhibition hall, the referees and roadies were just completing the wrestling ring, which had to be erected anew at each location. As she watched, the referees spread a bright blue cloth over the floor of the big rectangular ring. Two of the roadies carried over a set of metal steps and placed them up against the ring.

Julie took one of the seats about ten rows from the ring, settling down to wait for Jack.

"Hey, guys, everything ready?" A tall, bare-chested man with a breathtaking physique, wearing red tights and black wrestling boots, came striding down the entrance ramp. Julie drew a deep breath, recognizing the Handsome Brute, one of the RWF's top wrestlers.

"Sure, go ahead, Brute," said one of the roadies. "Got a partner?"

"Tornado's on his way." Brute jumped up to the ring and threw the towel he was carrying over the ropes. Inside the ring, he began a series of stretches. Julie nodded approvingly. She was a firm advocate of stretching before working.

Another man, wearing purple shorts and a matching vest, came jogging down the entrance ramp. Letters on the back of the vest spelled out his wrestling name, "TORNADO," but they weren't what caught Julie's attention. She stood up to see his face.

No doubt about it, Tornado was the man who had helped her out last night--the man with the baby, Ty Kester.

No wonder he'd seemed so suspicious of her when she'd climbed onto his balcony. He'd thought she was a fan trying to meet a wrestler. Frowning, she wondered why she'd never seen him on television.

The two wrestlers "locked up," grappling with each other. Each one seemed to be testing the other's strength. Then Ty threw Brute over his hip.

Brute landed flat on his back and grinned. "Good one, Tornado."

Ty grinned back, showing perfect white teeth. Julie liked his smile. *Geez, he's good looking. Great body, too.* She'd been aware of that even last night, when he'd been wearing a worn, oversized t-shirt and sweat pants. Today's outfit showed much more of his muscular frame. The open vest revealed the breadth of his chest and shoulders and the rounded biceps of his powerful arms.

Brute "kipped up," rising from his back to his feet in one fluid jumping motion.

"Show-off," Ty told him.

"You betcha!" Brute replied, taking him down with an extended forearm. Ty sprang back up and ran at Brute, who dodged him. Rebounding off the ropes, Ty came back fast and Brute caught him, raising him off the ground. Ty twisted and somehow managed to break the hold. He ducked swiftly around and took Brute down again.

"Man, you are *hot* today!" Brute gasped, rolling sideways.

Julie thought he would be hot any day. Her eyes lingered on Ty. She had always been attracted to big men with beards.

Jack Brown entered through one of the south doors, accompanied by another man. An Irish wolfhound trailed behind them. Julie jumped to her feet and walked up the aisle to meet them.

Jack, a retired wrestler who was now the head booker of the wrestling federation, introduced Julie to Carl Murphy, the promoter and part owner. Julie shook Murphy's hand, glad she'd taken so much care with her makeup and hair that morning.

"I watched your tapes last week," Murphy told her in a deep, gravelly voice. A middle-aged man with a thick head of gray hair and a sharply intelligent face, he smiled as he looked Julie over. "You've had some damned good matches. Me and Jack, we're hammering out a good storyline for you."

"Great!" She bent slightly to let the wolfhound sniff her closed hand. "Am I going to be a heel or a face?"

"Faces" or "babyfaces" were the good-guy heroes of wrestling, while "heels" were evil characters who fought dirty and tried to defeat the faces. Julie had played both in her career.

"No decision on that yet," Murphy answered. "C'mon up to the ring and show us what you got."

The big dog rose to his full height, putting his paws on Julie's shoulders and trying to lick her face.

"Down, Mac!" Murphy commanded.

"That's okay, I love dogs." Julie rubbed Mac's ears.

As they approached the ring, the men inside stopped wrestling and came up to the ropes.

"Hey, Murphy, Jack," Brute greeted them. Ty gave them each a nod. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw Julie. She smiled at him and waved.

"Guys, this is Julie Hayes--Firegirl--formerly with the Southwest Wrestling Association," Jack announced. "She'll make her debut with us this week."

"Hey, Firegirl, welcome to the RWF." Brute's long black hair had come loose during the practice. Banding it back, he said, "Jack showed me one of your tapes the other day. You've got some cool moves."

"Thanks!" Julie jumped up to the ring.

Ty hastened forward, sitting on the middle rope and holding the top rope up so Julie could step through easily. "Hello again." His dark eyes were intent on her face. "I didn't know you were a wrestler!"

She gave him a wicked grin. "I told you I was athletic."

Murphy rapped the surface of the ring to get everyone's attention. "Okay, folks, listen up! Brute, stop by my office later. We need to talk about the next pay-per-view."

Brute gave Murphy the "okay" sign and picked up his towel from the ropes, apparently taking Murphy's words as a dismissal. Exiting the ring, he wiped his forehead and started back up the ramp.

"Where the hell's Molly?" Murphy demanded. "I wanted her to wrestle Firegirl."

Jack shrugged. "She was supposed to be here this morning. I don't know what happened to her."

Murphy frowned. "Damn it, I want to see what Firegirl can do." He gave Ty an appraising glance. "Okay, we don't usually do inter-gender matches in the RWF, but we're gonna have one now. You guys put a quick match together--two minutes' worth. Firegirl, you're the babyface. Take five to plan it out." Beckoning to Jack, Murphy sat in one of the front-row seats. Jack seated himself next to him and the two men began to talk together, low-voiced.

All morning, Ty hadn't been able to stop thinking about the woman who had appeared on his balcony the night before. As he bathed and dressed the baby, he recalled how she'd said Jeffrey was cute. When he let that day's babysitter into the room, he noticed she was attractive, but not nearly so much as Julie.

Cut it out, Kester! He tried to put her out of his mind as he changed into his wrestling gear in the men's dressing room at the Gund. *Your number one priority is to find Liz. Your boy needs his mother.*

As he practiced with Brute that morning, he wondered if Julie ever came to wrestling shows. So when he looked up and saw her standing with Murphy and Jack, he was both startled and pleased at the sight of her.

She was even prettier than he remembered. Her eyes seemed bigger and more lively, her lovely hair fuller. Her tall red wrestling boots accentuated her long legs. She wore a tight-fitting, short-skirted glittering costume that was much sexier than last night's white nightshirt. The color of the costume resembled a flame, red at the bottom, dark orange in the middle, tapering into yellows at the low neckline.

At six feet two inches, Ty was tall for the real world but average for the wrestling federation. Julie had to be about five foot ten, he judged, since she was able to look right into his face as they planned their match.

"We'd better keep it simple," she said in a business-like tone. "Let me have some offense on you, then you get some heat on me. In the last thirty seconds, I'll do the babyface comeback. Okay with you?"

"Sure. Do you have a good finishing move? It had better be convincing, if I'm going to 'job' to a little thing like you."

She frowned as though she didn't like that description of herself. "Believe me, it'll be convincing. I'll do a back-somersault from the top of the turnbuckle."

"Sounds good, if you can really pull it off."

She tilted her head, giving him a long, cool look. "Just watch me."

They quickly planned out more sequences of moves. At the end, she warned him, "Don't get too stiff with me, or I swear I'll make you sorry later."

He was taken aback. "I wouldn't get rough with a woman!"

"Sorry, but you never know." She shrugged. "I say that to everyone the first time I wrestle 'em."

"I'll take good care of you in the ring," he told her, his tone serious.

"Just treat me like any other wrestler."

"That's exactly what I meant."

They moved to the center of the ring. Julie called out, "We're ready!" Murphy and Jack stopped talking and looked up attentively.

Julie offered her hand to Ty. She must have watched "RWF Ring Rage," Ty figured, since she knew that every RWF match started with a handshake. They shook hands, then stepped apart. As they had planned, he ran at her, trying to take her down with a "clothesline" punch. She ducked under his arm and went into a cartwheel, ending up on the other end of the ring. Both of them ran the ropes, rebounding and charging at each other. Smoothly, she slid under his legs, once again avoiding him.

He let her get the first spot of offense, allowing her to back him into the corner and chop him in the chest a few times. She certainly knew how to deliver a stinging blow. He tried to reverse their positions, but she ducked away, evading him.

She was fast. She went to one corner of the ring, where the metal post, the “turnbuckle,” held up the ropes. With a quick movement, she jumped to the top rope. As he came toward her, she sprang at him, but he caught her in midair and took her down to the mat.

“Headlock,” he murmured, kneeling behind her, and held her head back in his arm while she pretended to struggle. He wasn’t really putting any pressure on, but she groaned, “selling” the move, making it look like he was putting her in agony. She reached out with one arm, fingers writhing, trying desperately to reach the ropes, which meant he would have to break the hold. Inch by inch, she wriggled away from him until finally she managed to grasp the lowest rope.

Watching Murphy out of the corner of his eye, Ty saw him nod decisively, as though he were pleased with Julie’s selling and facial expressions.

They went through a minute of Ty putting Julie in various holds and whipping her into the ropes. The more the heel did against the face, the more impressive it would be at the end if the face managed to fight back and win the match.

When they reached the planned position in one of the corners, Julie executed a dropkick on him, leaping into the air and hitting him with both feet. Ty dropped onto his back as though he’d been hurt. Julie jumped to the top rope again and paused. Ty held his breath, watching as she gathered herself for the next move. If she landed incorrectly, she could hurt herself badly.

She flipped through the air in a back somersault--a “moonsault.” Her elevation and positioning were perfect. As she landed on him, she grabbed and raised his right leg.

Throughout the match, Ty had been intent on executing his own moves correctly and keeping the action flowing. He could have been wrestling anyone. But now that he was lying flat with Julie’s warm body on top of his, he was suddenly aware of the vanilla scent of her hair and her soft breasts pressed against his chest. No wonder inter-gender matches were so rare. He was supposed to be lying there in defeat, but all he could think about was how much he’d like to kiss her.

Murphy came forward. “Beautiful! Damned impressive move there, Firegirl.”

Julie drew back from Ty and effortlessly kipped up. “Thanks!”

“I think we’ll start you in a feud with Molly,” Murphy continued. “Your styles will mesh real well.”

“Okay.” She looked pleased.

“How’s the leg holding up, Tornado?” Murphy asked.

“It’s fine.” Ty pushed his hair back from his forehead and stood up. An injury to his kneecap had kept him out of action for the last few months. “Do you need me for anything else, Boss? I’ve got an appointment this morning.”

“Go ahead. Me and Jack, we’re going to take Firegirl around to meet some of the boys.”

Ty gave Murphy a mock salute and turned to leave. Julie said, “See ya later.”

I hope so. Ty watched as she climbed out of the ring.

She’s not the type of woman I usually go for.

I guess I’ve got a new type.

Ty got into his rental car and adjusted the seat back as far as it would go. Little Jeffrey was fussing in his car seat, but Ty knew he would settle down once the car got into motion.

It was amazing how much stuff you needed when you had a baby. Formula, jars of food, diapers, carrier, stroller. A portable crib. Little clothes. Toys. And you couldn’t go anywhere

without taking a whole mountain of it with you.

“All right, hang on, Jeffrey.” Ty fastened his seat belt. “We’re going to hit the road.”

When they got to their destination, Jeffrey did not take kindly to being moved from the car seat to the stroller and yelled out his displeasure at this outrage. It took Ty a few minutes to find the pacifier since it had somehow disappeared under the car seat. He popped it in Jeffrey’s mouth and the baby was quiet again.

When he entered the outer office and told the receptionist that he had an appointment, she smiled at him with a lot of warmth. “Ms. Princeton will be with you in a few minutes. What an adorable child! How old is he?”

“Six months old.” Ty picked Jeffrey up out of the stroller. The child’s big eyes tracked the receptionist cautiously as she leaned forward and stroked his silky, light-brown curls.

“Hi there,” she said in a pretty, coaxing voice. “Do you like going out with Daddy, Big Boy?” Jeffrey sucked hard on his pacifier and remained aloof.

There it was again, what Ty had mentally dubbed “the Baby Effect.” Funny, because no one looked twice at a woman alone with a baby. But a man alone--hell, he had never had so much approval from women in his life. Just yesterday, walking through a park with Jeffrey in the stroller, three different attractive women had stopped to coo over the child.

Not to mention Julie’s reaction to him.

Ty smiled at the receptionist and sat, holding the baby in his lap. Jeffrey looked around the little waiting area. It was surprising to Ty how much the baby seemed to actually notice his surroundings. Somehow, he had always imagined babies of this age to be inert blobs, but now that he had one of his own, he knew how wrong that was. Jeffrey seemed to be always observing and taking things in. Jeffrey already knew him, Ty was quite sure of that. He’d had the baby only five days, but when he picked him up from the baby-sitter earlier, Jeffrey had babbled something and reached out to him.

“You can go in now, Mr. Kester,” the receptionist said.

Ms. Princeton stood up as Ty came into the room and offered her hand. The gray-haired attorney had a strong grip for a woman, Ty noted.

“Good morning, Mr. Kester.” She looked Jeffrey over with a stern expression. “So this is the child in question?” She seated herself behind her oversize desk, putting on a pair of reading glasses.

“Yes, meet Ty Jeffrey Kester.” Ty sat, pulling the stroller closer, and tried to put Jeffrey into it. The baby made it clear that this did not meet with his approval. Hastily, Ty picked him up again and held him in his lap. Jeffrey quieted down.

Ms. Princeton raised an eyebrow. “Ty Jeffrey Kester? Aren’t you rather anticipating things, naming him after yourself? You can’t possibly have DNA test results yet, do you?”

“No, I don’t have test results. But I’m fairly sure he’s my son.”

“Very well.” She took out a legal pad. “Tell me the whole story in detail. Please start with the child’s mother. How did you meet her, and where?”

This was going to be the embarrassing part. “I’m not sure how much your secretary told you about our conversation...well, right now I’m a pro wrestler, employed by the Raging Wrestling Federation. We put on between twelve to sixteen shows a month, traveling all over the Midwest, moving to a new location every three to five days. I’ve got Jeffrey’s birth certificate here, and a schedule for our show locations for several weeks before and after the time when his mother must have got pregnant with him. But I’m afraid I don’t recall exactly where I met her.”

The attorney took the birth certificate from him and read it carefully. “She named you as the father,” she observed. “Under Ohio law, that means that there is a ‘presumption of paternity.’ Ohio assumes you are the father unless it is proved otherwise by genetic testing. So we need not get any state agencies involved.”

Ty breathed a sigh of relief, since that had been one of his main concerns.

“Please tell me what happened when she left the child with you. Did you speak to her at that point in time?”

“No. She came to my hotel and asked the desk clerk to call my room. She said something like, ‘Can you call my boyfriend and ask him to come down here? Just tell him there’s a delivery for him.’ When I got down to the front desk, she was already gone. She left this letter for me.” Ty handed the letter to the attorney, who read it with grave attention.

“So, Mr. Kester...you spent a night with Ms. Hardesty, but had no further contact with her until she delivered the child to you?” Her tone was neutral but Ty could sense her disapproval.

“I spent two nights with her.” He wondered if two nights sounded better than a one-night stand, or twice as bad. After a moment he added, “You have to understand how it is with us. Usually after we do a show, we all head for the nearest bar to unwind. There’s nothing else to do aside from sitting alone in a hotel room. There are always women who...who try to hook up with wrestlers--”

“Groupies.” Her tone revealed what she thought of women who would engage in such behavior.

Ty nodded. “Liz and I were just looking to have a little fun. She knew I would be moving on almost immediately. I remember her very well, but I just can’t connect her with a specific location.”

She was busily writing notes. “And you didn’t use any form of birth control?”

“Actually I did, but condoms aren’t one hundred percent effective.”

At his cold tone, the attorney looked up, raising her brows. “I’m merely exploring the possibilities, Mr. Kester. As you are a celebrity--of some sort--we have to consider the possibility that this boy is not your child. Perhaps Ms. Hardesty chose to name you as the father only because you are a celebrity, or she thinks you’re rich because you’re on television.”

Ty was surprised at the pang he felt as he considered this possibility. He said slowly, “I understand your caution...but he looks just like my baby pictures.”

She sniffed. “People often see what they want to see. So our first step will be to get the genetic tests done. I’ll send you to a lab and they’ll take saliva swabs from you and the baby. Those will be sent out for DNA testing.”

“Is that test accurate without the mother’s DNA sample?”

“Yes. You’d be surprised how many married fathers have their children tested without their wives’ knowledge. But let’s discuss what you want, Mr. Kester. What, precisely, is your desired outcome here? You told my secretary that you want to find the mother, this Liz Hardesty...”

“Yes.” Ty was silent for a long moment, wondering how much to say. “I think...I think Liz and I need to get married.”

Ms. Princeton looked up sharply, raising her eyebrows.

“I’ve put a lot of thought into this,” Ty went on. “Just look at what she said in her letter. It sounds to me like her family’s been giving her a lot of grief about the baby. Marrying her would make that right.”

“You shouldn’t get married merely to make Liz’s father happy.”

“No, of course not. It’s just one piece of the whole thing. She must feel guilty about what’s she done, raising Jeffrey for months and then suddenly giving him up like this. I can hardly imagine what she’s been through, but I know I’ve caused her a lot of trouble. If I marry her, she’ll see that the two of us are in this together.”

“You can support the child without marrying the mother. In fact, you have a legal duty to provide support.”

“I know, but...I feel like I should offer Liz the option. I’m from a small town, Ms. Princeton. I have small-town values. I believe a child should have both parents in his life. My boy needs his mother.”

Ms. Princeton picked up Liz’s letter, lying on the desk with the birth certificate and wrestling schedule. “I can’t deal with him any longer...my father hates him...” It sounds to me like she needs a break from him.”

Ty was taken aback. “Well, I think her main problem was lack of money. She was living at home, trying to do it all herself. If I married her, Liz could have her own apartment at school. I’d pay for day care, babysitters--”

“But Mr. Kester, what kind of woman simply abandons a baby the way this mother has? Her letter makes it sound like she wants nothing to do with him any longer.”

“She was under a lot of stress and got fed up, temporarily.”

“Perhaps.” She scribbled down some more notes. Jeffrey began to whimper. Ty, who was already growing familiar with his different sounds, knew this was his hunger cry. He got the bottle out from the carry-bag hanging on the back of the stroller, shifted the baby on his lap, and started him on the bottle.

“Have you thought of other alternatives?” Ms. Princeton asked. “Foster care? Perhaps even adoption?”

Ty was shaking his head before she finished the sentence. “Hell, no, my son isn’t going to be raised by strangers. Now that I know he exists, I’m going to be part of his life, even if I can’t raise him myself.”

“Suppose we can’t locate the mother. Do you have any relatives who might be interested in taking him?”

Ty hesitated. “Possibly my sister. But I think the key is finding Liz. Even if she doesn’t want to get married, I’d like everything to be--organized. Shouldn’t she sign papers giving Jeffrey up officially, if that’s what she really wants to do?”

“Absolutely,” said the attorney. “I’ll see what I can do to locate her, starting with the Indiana hospital listed on the birth certificate. If I find myself at a standstill, my next step will be to hire a private investigator. Does that meet with your approval?”

Ty nodded. Jeffrey was reaching for the bottle again, so Ty shifted him slightly to make sure he got it at the correct angle.

“You’re very good with the baby, Mr. Kester.”

Ty looked up with a smile. “It isn’t very different from taking care of newborn puppies and kittens. I’ve had a lot of experience with that.”

“I think my husband fed our daughter exactly once. I got her handed right back to me when she spat up on him. Have you considered keeping the baby and trying to raise him yourself?”

“I don’t know how I could, especially being on the road all the time.”

Ty looked down at the baby regretfully. Traveling by tour bus from city to city was his mode of

life right now. He didn't see how a child could fit into that.

“How have you coped so far?”

“Well, people in the RWF may laugh behind my back, but they've been very helpful. I've been taking the baby along when I practice with the other guys, or work out. And so far the two hotels I've stayed at have been good about finding babysitter services when I've needed them.”

Ms. Princeton nodded. “Very well, I'll get things rolling on this end. I'll be in touch as soon as I can tell you anything specific.”

“Good. I gave your secretary my e-mail address. Or if you need me in person, I'll fly in right away. And if you do hire a private investigator, get someone good. Don't worry about the expense.”

They shook hands again as he got up to leave. This time she unbent enough to pat the baby's head.

Returning to the hotel, Ty felt he had made some progress. The attorney seemed competent, although it still made him angry when he thought of how casually she had mentioned adoption. As if he would just give up his own son like that. As if he were like the irresponsible people who took in a dog or cat for a few months, got tired of it, and dumped it somewhere in the country.

He thought about his upcoming match with the Handsome Brute. It would be sweet to get a win off one of the top-ranked wrestlers in the entire federation--if only he could talk head-booker Jack into scripting such an outcome. Sunday's match would be his first since the leg injury that had taken him out for several months. Winning it would show the audience that Tornado was back, with a vengeance. Could they plan something tricky that would give him the win without hurting Brute's status? And what could be done about TB? The wrestler Mr. Tingle Berry, Brute's tag-team partner and closest friend, almost always accompanied Brute to the ring. The fans expected him to interfere when Brute got into trouble.

Ty smiled to himself as he had an idea. He hoped Jack would go for it. “Just wait until you're old enough to watch your daddy's matches, little fella. You'll see something worth seeing.” The baby smiled back as though he enjoyed hearing Ty's voice.

Julie sat in a Starbucks across the street from the hotel, sipping Amaretto-flavored coffee, and fired up her laptop. She loved sitting in a coffee shop while she did the day's computer work. It was pleasant to be around people rather than alone in a hotel room, and most of the time the other customers were quiet and respectful of each other's privacy.

As always, she went first to her own website, www.wrestling-firegirl.com. Willis had put up the new photographs from her farewell match with the Southwest Wrestling Association. Not too bad. She linked over to the chat area and skimmed through some of the day's discussion. ILuvJulie was online, as usual, and so were CheezNut and rrSmith2. Sometimes she worried about those three fans. They were all college students, but they seemed to spend most of their time on their computers.

CheezNut was concerned about Julie's move to the RWF. “Murphy may not know how to use her right,” he had written. “I'd hate to see Julie doing some of that schlocky stuff, bikini

matches, mud wrestling with Mad Molly, etc. etc. She's a real WRESTLER, not just eye candy!! I wish she'd stuck with SWA."

Julie snorted and exited her website. Didn't those guys have any idea what a leap her career had made, going from tiny SWA to a big federation like the RWF? Goodness, she was going to have a regular salary instead of being paid by the match. It would make a tremendous difference in her life, and hopefully in Cassie's as well. She was so glad now that she had convinced her sister to start college this fall. "How the heck do you think you're going to pay for that?" Cassie had asked, but Julie had told her, "I'll find the money somehow." And she had, thanks to her RWF signing bonus.

Next she went to read her e-mail. Willis had sent her a message. Terse and unromantic, as usual. Well, she had stopped expecting otherwise. He mentioned that he had visited Cassie in her dorm room and set her computer up. Julie smiled. That had been really nice of him. She knew Willis had done it purely as a favor to herself. She wrote him back a loving message, adding at the end, "I may appear on the next Ring Rage which is on Sunday at eight o'clock, so be sure to watch. The boss is working on a storyline for me."

Finally she went into her word processing program and wrote a diary entry for her website, telling about her first day with the RWF.

She sighed as she sent it off to Willis so he could put it up. She tried to be honest in her diary entries, but there were too many issues today that had to be skirted. For instance, she wasn't at all sure what to say about Molly and Bernice. They had let her back into the room readily enough last night, laughing over Julie's cleverness at climbing onto another balcony. But she had the distinct feeling that they weren't accepting her wholeheartedly yet.

And what could she say about Ty Kester? She had written, "I watched the Handsome Brute wrestle Tornado, and then Tornado and I had a practice match." She was dismayed at the little thrill she'd felt as she typed Ty's wrestling name. Closing her eyes for a moment, she tried to remember exactly what was so extraordinarily attractive about him. Impulsively, she got into the RWF website and looked up his biography.

There was a good photograph of him gazing off into the distance, wearing a black and yellow vest with no shirt underneath it. She could see his deep chest with the faint curling hair and his broad shoulders. The picture had been taken outside and the strong sunlight turned his light-brown hair and well-trimmed beard almost golden.

He was from Priam, Ohio...not too far from her own hometown of Dayton. And he was just three years older than herself, twenty-nine. He had attended Ohio State University. *Darned skimpy biography.*

What the heck was she thinking, anyway? Not only did she have a boyfriend, but she made it a rule never to date anyone in the same wrestling association. Dating one of the boys was just asking for trouble.

Shutting the laptop down, she jumped as her cell phone rang.

"Julie? Julie, it's Cassie." Julie sighed, her heart sinking as she recognized the hysterical note in her sister's voice.

"Julie, I can't stand it here! Everything is so hard. They expect us to write a paper on philosophy *every single week*, can you believe that? And my roommate is so cold and insensitive. I knew I would *never* be able to live with another woman!"

It took Julie almost an hour to get Cassie calm again. At last she convinced her sister that a thousand-word paper once a week was not impossible, and promised that she would call Cassie's residence advisor and try to get her a single room. She rehearsed phrases to herself:

“you have to understand that my sister is a very high-strung individual.” She wondered how Cassie would have coped if she had been the oldest sibling, left to raise two younger children when their mother died, under the care of a father who was always working and seldom available for his children.

She sat up straighter, bracing herself, and dialed the number of Cassie’s residence advisor.

Not until later did she wonder why Cassie had never mentioned Willis’s visit.