

THE NOVELS OF NORA ROBERTS, VOLUME 3

THE VILLA
MIDNIGHT BAYOU
THREE FATES
BIRTHRIGHT
NORTHERN LIGHTS

NORA ROBERTS



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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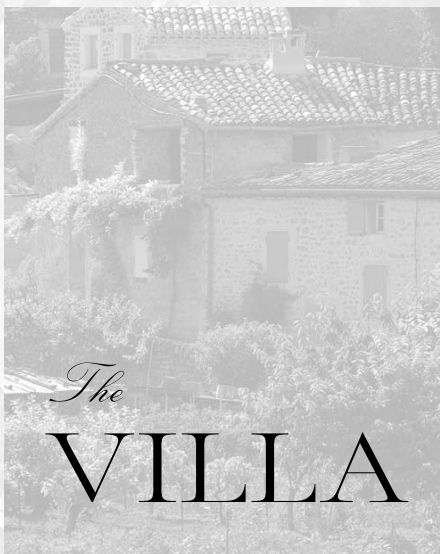
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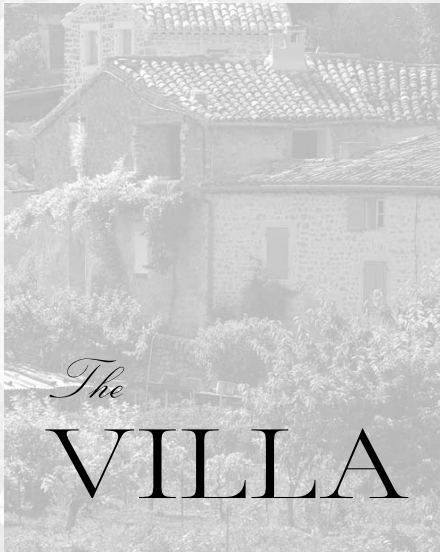
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The
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THE VILLA

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To family, who form the roots.
To friends, who make the blossoms.

The
VILLA

PROLOGUE

On the night he was murdered, Bernardo Baptista dined simply on bread and cheese and a bottle of Chianti. The wine was a bit young, and Bernardo was not. Neither would continue to age.

Like his bread and cheese, Bernardo was a simple man. He had lived in the same little house in the gentle hills north of Venice since his marriage fifty-one years before. His five children had been raised there. His wife had died there.

Now at seventy-three, Bernardo lived alone, with most of his family a stone's throw away, at the edges of the grand Giambelli vineyard where he had worked since his youth.

He had known *La Signora* since her girlhood, and had been taught to remove his cap whenever she passed by. Even now if Tereza Giambelli traveled from California back to the *castello* and vineyard, she would stop if she saw him. And they would talk of the old days when her grandfather and his had worked the vines.

Signore Baptista, she called him. Respectfully. He had great appreciation for *La Signora*, and had been loyal to her and hers the whole of his life.

For more than sixty years he had taken part in the making of Giambelli wine. There had been many changes—some good, in Bernardo's opinion, some not so good. He had seen much.

Some thought, too much.

The vines, lulled into dormancy by winter, would soon be pruned. Arthritis prevented him from doing much of the hand work, as he once had, but still, he would go out every morning to watch his sons and grandsons carry on the tradition.

A Baptista had always worked for Giambelli. And in Bernardo's mind, always would.

On this last night of his seventy-three years, he looked out over the vines—his vines, seeing what had been done, what needed to be done, and listened as the December wind whistled through the bones of the grape.

From the window where that wind tried to sneak, he could see the skeletons as they made their steady climb up the rises. They would take on flesh and life with time, and not wither as a man did. Such was the miracle of the grape.

He could see the shadows and shapes of the great *castello*, which ruled those vines, and ruled those who tended them.

It was lonely now, in the night, in the winter, when only servants slept in the *castello* and the grapes had yet to be born.

He wanted the spring, and the long summer that followed it, when the sun would warm his innards and ripen the young fruit. He wanted, as it seemed he always had, one more harvest.

Bernardo ached with the cold, deep in the bones. He considered heating some of the soup his granddaughter had brought to him, but his Annamaria was not the best of cooks. With this in mind, he made do with the cheese and sipped the good, full-bodied wine by his little fire.

He was proud of his life's work, some of which was in the glass that caught the firelight and gleamed deep, deep red. The wine had been a gift, one of many given to him on his retirement, though everyone knew the retirement was only a technicality. Even with his aching bones and a heart that had grown weak, Bernardo would walk the vineyard, test the grapes, watch the sky and smell the air.

He lived for wine.

He died for it.

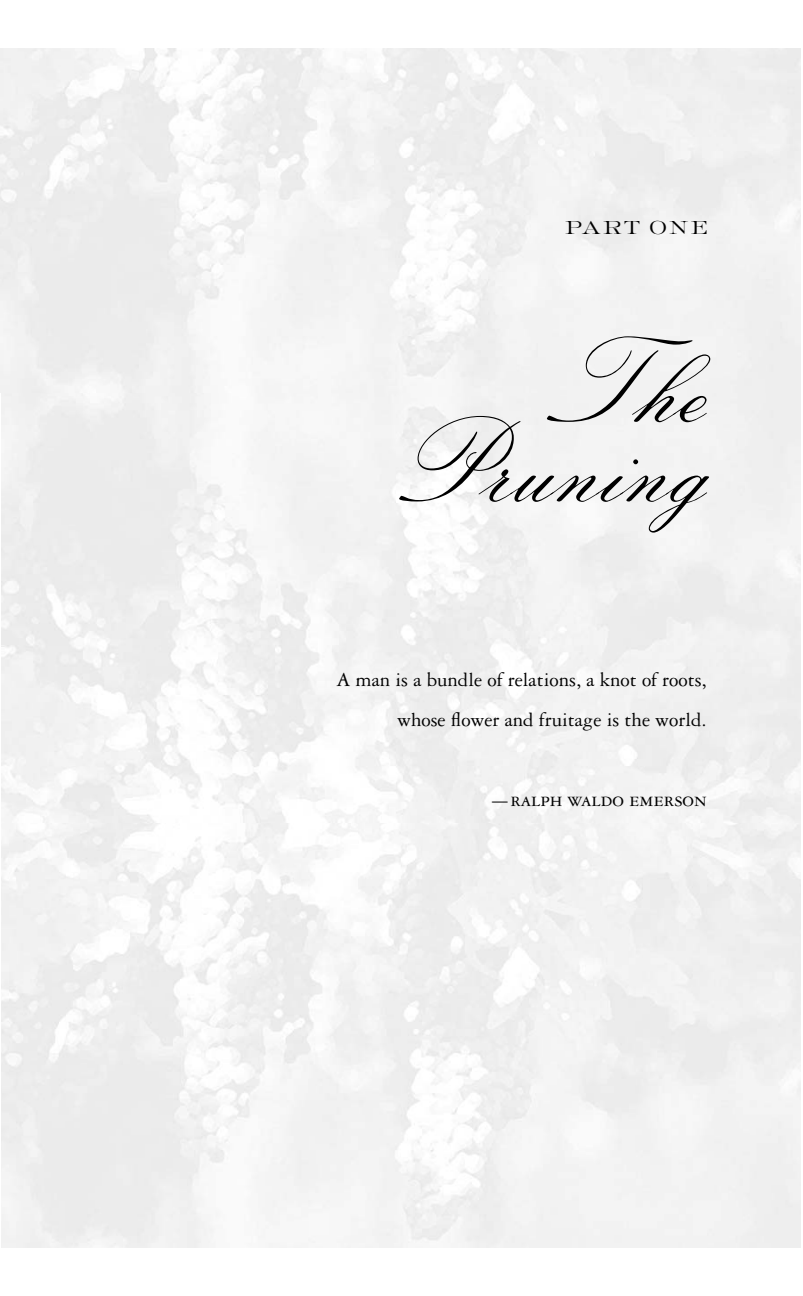
He drank, nodding by the fire, with a blanket tucked around his thin legs. Through his mind ran images of sun-washed fields, of his wife laughing, of himself showing his son how to support a young vine, to prune a mature one. Of *La Signora* standing beside him between the rows their grandfathers had tended.

Signore Baptista, she said to him when their faces were still young, we have been given a world. We must protect it.

And so they had.

The wind whistled at the windows of his little house. The fire died to embers.

And when the pain reached out like a fist, squeezing his heart to death, his killer was six thousand miles away, surrounded by friends and associates, enjoying a perfectly poached salmon, and a fine Pinot Blanc.



PART ONE

The Pruning

A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots,
whose flower and fruitage is the world.

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

CHAPTER ONE

The bottle of Castello di Giambelli Cabernet Sauvignon, '02, auctioned for one hundred and twenty-five thousand, five hundred dollars, American. A great deal of money, Sophia thought, for wine mixed with sentiment. The wine in that fine old bottle had been produced from grapes harvested in the year Cezare Giambelli had established the Castello di Giambelli winery on a hilly patch of land north of Venice.

At that time the *castello* had been either a con or supreme optimism, depending on your point of view. Cezare's modest house and little stone winery had been far from castlelike. But his vines had been regal, and he had built an empire from them.

After nearly a century, even a superior Cabernet Sauvignon was likely more palatable sprinkled on a salad rather than drunk, but it wasn't her job to argue with the man with the money. Her grandmother had been right, as always. They would pay, and richly, for the privilege of owning a piece of Giambelli history.

Sophia made a note of the final bid and the buyer's name, though she was unlikely to forget either, for the memo she would send to her grandmother when the auction was over.

She was attending the event not only as the public relations executive who had designed and implemented the promotion and catalogue for the auction, but as the Giambelli family representative at this exclusive, pre-centennial event.

As such, she sat quietly in the rear of the room to observe the bidding, and the presentation.

Her legs were crossed in a long, elegant line. Her back convent-school straight. She wore a black pin-striped suit, tailored and Italian, that managed to look both businesslike and utterly feminine.

It was exactly the way Sophia thought of herself.

Her face was sharp, a triangle of pale gold dominated by large, deep-set brown eyes and a wide, mobile mouth. Her cheekbones were ice-pick keen, her chin a diamond point, sculpting a look that was part pixie, part warrior. She had, deliberately, ruthlessly, used her face as a weapon when it seemed most expedient.

Tools, she believed, were meant to be used, and used well.

A year before, she'd had her waist-length hair cut into a short black cap with a spiky fringe over her forehead.

It suited her. Sophia knew exactly what suited her.

She wore the single strand of antique pearls her grandmother had given her for her twenty-first birthday, and an expression of polite interest. She thought of it as her father's boardroom look.

Her eyes brightened, and the corners of her wide mouth curved slightly as the next item was showcased.

It was a bottle of Barolo, '34, from the cask Cezare had named Di Tereza in honor of her grandmother's birth. This private reserve carried a picture of Tereza at ten on the label, the year the wine had been deemed sufficiently aged in oak, and bottled.

Now, at sixty-seven, Tereza Giambelli was a legend, whose renown as a vintner had overshadowed even her grandfather's.

This was the first bottle of this label ever offered for sale, or passed outside the family. As Sophia expected, bidding was brisk and spirited.

The man sitting beside Sophia tapped his catalogue where the photograph of the bottle was displayed. "You have the look of her."

Sophia shifted slightly, smiled first at him—a distinguished man hovering comfortably somewhere near sixty—then at the picture of the young girl staring seriously out from a bottle of red in his catalogue. "Thank you."

Marshall Evans, she recalled. Real estate, second generation Fortune 500. She made it her business to know the names and vital statistics of wine buffs and collectors with deep pockets and sterling taste.

"I'd hoped *La Signora* would attend today's auction. She's well?"

"Very. But otherwise occupied."

The beeper in her jacket pocket vibrated. Vaguely annoyed with the in-

terruption, Sophia ignored it to watch the bidding. Her eyes scanned the room, noting the signals. The casual lift of a finger from the third row brought the price up another five hundred. A subtle nod from the fifth topped it.

In the end, the Barolo outdistanced the Cabernet Sauvignon by fifteen thousand, and she turned to extend her hand to the man beside her.

"Congratulations, Mr. Evans. Your contribution to the International Red Cross will be put to good use. On behalf of Giambelli, family and company, I hope you enjoy your prize."

"There's no doubt of it." He took her hand, lifted it to his lips. "I had the pleasure of meeting *La Signora* many years ago. She's an extraordinary woman."

"Yes, she is."

"Perhaps her granddaughter would join me for dinner this evening?"

He was old enough to be her father, but Sophia was too European to find that a deterrent. Another time, she'd have agreed, and no doubt enjoyed his company. "I'm sorry, but I have an appointment. Perhaps on my next trip east, if you're free."

"I'll make sure I am."

Putting some warmth into her smile, she rose. "If you'll excuse me."

She slipped out of the room, plucking the beeper from her pocket to check the number. She detoured to the ladies' lounge, glancing at her watch and pulling the phone from her bag. With the number punched in, she settled on one of the sofas and laid her notebook and her electronic organizer on her lap.

After a long and demanding week in New York, she was still revved and, glancing through her appointments, pleased to have time to squeeze in a little shopping before she needed to change for her dinner date.

Jeremy DeMorney, she mused. That meant an elegant, sophisticated evening. French restaurant, discussion of food, travel and theater. And, of course, of wine. As he was descended from the La Coeur winery DeMorneys, and a top account exec there, and she sprang from Giambelli stock, there would be some playful attempts to pry corporate secrets from each other.

And there would be champagne. Good, she was in the mood for it.

All followed by an outrageously romantic attempt to lure her into bed. She wondered if she'd be in the mood for that as well.

He was attractive, she considered, and could be amusing. Perhaps if they both hadn't been aware that her father had once slept with his wife, the idea of a little romance between them wouldn't seem so awkward, and somehow incestuous.

Still, several years had passed. . . .

"Maria." Sophia neatly tucked Jerry and the evening to come away, when the Giambelli housekeeper answered. "I've a call from my mother's line. Is she available?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Sophia. She hoped you would call. Just one moment."

Sophia imagined the woman hurrying through the wing, scanning the rooms for something to tidy when Pilar Giambelli Avano would have already tidied everything herself.

Mama, Sophia thought, would have been content in a little rose-covered cottage where she could bake bread, do her needlework and tend her garden. She should have had a half dozen children, Sophia thought with a sigh. And had to settle for me.

"Sophie, I was just heading out to the greenhouse. Wait. Catch my breath. I didn't expect you to get back to me so quickly. I thought you'd be in the middle of the auction."

"End of it. And I think we can say it's been an unqualified success. I'll fax a memo of the particulars this evening, or first thing in the morning. Now, I really should go back and tie up the loose ends. Is everything all right there?"

"More or less. Your grandmother's ordered a summit meeting."

"Oh, Mama, she's not dying again. We went through that six months ago."

"Eight," Pilar corrected. "But who's counting? I'm sorry, baby, but she insists. I don't think she plans to die this time, but she's planning something. She's called the lawyers for another revamp of the will. And she gave me her mother's cameo brooch, which means she's thinking ahead."

"I thought she gave you that last time."

"No, it was the amber beads last time. She's sending for everyone. You need to come back."

"All right, all right." Sophia glanced down at her organizer and blew a mental kiss goodbye to Jerry DeMorney. "I'll finish up here and be on my way. But really, Mama, this new habit of hers of dying or revamping every few months is very inconvenient."

"You're a good girl, Sophie. I'm going to leave you my amber beads."

"Thanks a bunch." With a laugh, Sophia disconnected.

Two hours later, she was flying west and speculating whether in another forty years she would have the power to crook her finger and have everyone scrambling.

Just the idea of it made her smile as she settled back with a glass of champagne and Verdi playing on the headphones.

Not everyone scrambled. Tyler MacMillan might have been minutes away from Villa Giambelli rather than hours, but he considered the vines a great deal more urgent than a summons from *La Signora*.

And he said so.

"Now, Ty. You can take a few hours."

"Not now." Ty paced his office, anxious to get back into the fields. "I'm sorry, Granddad. You know how vital the winter pruning is, and so does Tereza." He shifted the portable phone to his other ear. He hated the portables. He was always losing them. "MacMillan's vines need every bit as much care as Giambelli's."

"Ty—"

"You put me in charge here. I'm doing my job."

"Ty," Eli repeated. With his grandson, he knew, matters must be put on a very basic level. "Tereza and I are as dedicated to MacMillan wines as we are to those under the Giambelli label, and have been for twenty years. You were put in charge because you're an exceptional vintner. Tereza has plans. Those plans involve you."

"Next week."

"Tomorrow." Eli didn't put his foot down often; it wasn't the way he worked. But when necessary, he did so ruthlessly. "One o'clock. Lunch. Dress appropriately."

Tyler scowled down at his ancient boots and the frayed hems of his thick trousers. "That's the middle of the damn day."

"Are you the only one at MacMillan capable of pruning vines, Tyler? Apparently you've lost a number of employees over the last season."

"I'll be there. But tell me one thing."

"Of course."

"Is this the last time she's going to die for a while?"

“One o’clock,” Eli responded. “Try to be on time.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Tyler muttered, but only after he clicked the phone off.

He adored his grandfather. He even adored Tereza, perhaps because she was so ornery and annoying. When his grandfather had married the Giambelli heiress, Tyler had been eleven years old. He’d fallen in love with the vineyards, the rise of the hills, the shadows of the caves, the great caverns of the cellars.

And in a very real sense he’d fallen in love with Tereza Louisa Elana Giambelli, that whip-thin, ramrod-straight, somewhat terrifying figure he’d first seen dressed in boots and trousers not so different from his own, striding through the mustard plants between the rising rows of grapes.

She’d taken one look at him, lifted a razor-sharp black eyebrow and deemed him soft and citified. If he was to be her grandson, she’d told him, he would have to be toughened up.

She’d ordered him to stay at the villa for the summer. No one had considered arguing the point. Certainly not his parents, who’d been more than happy to dump him for an extended period so they could fly off to parties and lovers. So he had stayed, Tyler thought now as he wandered to the window. Summer after summer until the vineyards were more home to him than the house in San Francisco, until she and his grandfather were more parents to him than his mother and father.

She’d made him. Pruned him back at the age of eleven and trained him to grow into what he was.

But she didn’t own him. It was ironic, he supposed, that all her work should have formed him into the one person under her aegis most likely to ignore her demands.

Harder, of course, to ignore the demands when she and his grandfather unified. With a shrug, Tyler started out of the office. He could spare a few hours, and they knew it as well as he. The MacMillan vineyards employed the best, and he could easily have absented himself for most of a season with confidence in those left in charge.

The simple fact was he hated the big, sprawling events the Giambellis generated. They were invariably like a circus, with all three rings packed with colorful acts. You couldn’t keep track, and it was always possible one of the tigers would leap the cage and go for your throat.

All those people, all those issues, all those pretenses and smoky undercurrents. He was happier walking the vineyards or checking the casks or

plunking down with one of his winemakers and discussing the qualities of that year's Chardonnay.

Social duties were simply that. Duties.

He detoured through the charming ramble of the house that had been his grandfather's into the kitchen to refill his thermos with coffee. Absently he set the portable phone he still carried on the counter and began rearranging his schedule in his head to accommodate *La Signora*.

He was no longer citified, or soft. He was just over six feet with a body sculpted by fieldwork and a preference for the outdoors. His hands were wide, and tough with calluses, with long fingers that knew how to dip delicately under leaves to the grape. His hair tended to curl if he forgot to have it trimmed, which he often did, and was a deep brown that showed hints of red, like an aged burgundy in the sunlight. His rawboned face was more rugged than handsome, with lines beginning to fan out from eyes of clear and calm blue that could harden to steel.

The scar along his jaw, which he'd earned with a tumble off a stand of rocks at age thirteen, only annoyed him when he remembered to shave.

Which he reminded himself he would have to do before lunch the following day.

Those who worked for him considered him a fair man, if often a single-minded one. Tyler would have appreciated the analysis. They also considered him an artist, and that would have baffled him.

To Tyler MacMillan, the artist was the grape.

He stepped outside into the brisk winter air. He had two hours before sunset, and vines to tend.

Donato Giambelli had a headache of outrageous proportions. Her name was Gina, and she was his wife. When the summons from *La Signora* had come, he had been happily engaged in eye-crossing sex with his current mistress, a multitalented aspiring actress with thighs strong enough to crack walnuts. Unlike his wife, all the mistress required was the occasional bauble and a sweaty romp three times a week. She did not require conversation.

There were times he thought Gina required nothing else.

She babbled at him. Babbled at each of their three children. Babbled at his mother until the air in the company jet vibrated with the endless stream of words.

Between her, the baby's screaming, little Cezare's banging and Tereza Maria's bouncing, Don gave serious thought to opening the hatch and shoving his entire family off the plane and into oblivion.

Only his mother was quiet, and only because she'd taken a sleeping pill, an air-sickness pill, an allergy pill and God knew what else, washed them all down with two glasses of Merlot before putting her eye mask in place and passing out.

She'd spent most of her life, at least the portion he knew of it, medicated and oblivious. At the moment, he considered that superior wisdom.

He could only sit, his temples throbbing, and damn his aunt Tereza to hell and beyond for insisting his entire family make the trip.

He was executive vice president of Giambelli, Venice, was he not? Any business that needed to be conducted required him, not his family.

Why had God plagued him with such a family?

Not that he didn't love them. Of course he loved them. But the baby was as fat as a turkey, and there was Gina pulling out a breast for its greedy mouth.

Once, that breast had been a work of art, he thought. Gold and firm and tasting of peaches. Now it was stretched like an overfilled balloon, and, had he been inclined to taste, flavored with baby drool.

And the woman was already making noises about yet another one.

The woman he'd married had been ripe, lush, sexually charged and empty of head. She had been perfection. In five short years she had become fat, sloppy and her head was full of babies.

Was it any wonder he sought his comfort elsewhere?

"Donny, I think *Zia* Tereza will give you a *big* promotion, and we'll all move into the *castello*." She lusted for the great house of Giambelli—all those lovely rooms, all the servants. Her children would be raised in luxury, with privilege.

Fine clothes, the best schools and, one day, the Giambelli fortune at their feet.

She was the only one giving *La Signora* babies, wasn't she? That would count for quite a bit.

"Cezare," she said to her son as he tore the head off his sister's doll. "Stop that! Now you made your sister cry. Here now, here, give me the doll. Mama will fix."

Little Cezare, eyes glinting, tossed the head gleefully over his shoulder and began to taunt his sister.

“English, Cezare!” She shook a finger at him. “We’re going to America. You’ll speak English to your *zia* Tereza and show her what a smart boy you are. Come, come.”

Tereza Maria, screaming over the death of her doll, retrieved the severed head and raced up and down the cabin in a flurry of grief and rage.

“Cezare! Do as Mama says.”

In response, the boy flung himself to the floor, arms and legs hammering.

Don lurched up, stumbled away and locked himself in the sanctuary of his in-flight office.

Anthony Avano enjoyed the finer things. He’d chosen his two-story penthouse in San Francisco’s Back Bay with care and deliberation, then had hired the top decorator in the city to outfit it for him. Status and style were high priorities. Having them without having to make any real effort was another.

He failed to see how a man could be comfortable without those basic elements.

His rooms reflected what he thought of as classic taste—from the silk moiré walls, the Oriental carpets, to the gleaming oak furniture. He’d chosen, or his decorator had, rich fabrics in neutral tones with a few splashes of bold colors artfully arranged.

The modern art, which meant absolutely nothing to him, was, he’d been told, a striking counterpoint to the quiet elegance.

He relied heavily on the services of decorators, tailors, brokers, jewelers and dealers to guide him into surrounding himself with the best.

Some of his detractors had been known to say Tony Avano was born with taste. And all of it in his mouth. He wouldn’t have argued the point. But money, as Tony saw it, bought all the taste a man required.

He knew one thing. And that was wine.

His cellars were arguably among the best in California. Every bottle had been personally selected. While he couldn’t distinguish a Sangiovese from a Semillon on the vine, and had no interest in the growing of the grape, he had a superior nose. And that nose had steadily climbed the corporate ladder at Giambelli, California. Thirty years before, it had married Pilar Giambelli.

It had taken that nose less than two years to begin sniffing at other women.

Tony was the first to admit that women were his weakness. There were so many of them, after all. He had loved Pilar as deeply as he was capable of loving another human being. He had certainly loved his position of privilege in the Giambelli organization as the husband of *La Signora's* daughter and as the father of her granddaughter.

For those reasons he had, for many years, attempted to be very discreet about his particular weakness. He had even tried, a number of times, to reform.

But then there would be another woman, soft and fragrant or sultry and seductive. What was a man to do?

The weakness had eventually cost him his marriage, in a technical if not a legal sense. He and Pilar had been separated for seven years. Neither of them had made the move toward divorce. She, he knew, because she loved him. And he because it seemed like a great deal of trouble and would have seriously displeased Tereza.

In any case, as far as Tony was concerned, the current situation suited everyone nicely. Pilar preferred the countryside, he the city. They maintained a polite, even a reasonably friendly relationship. And he kept his position as president of sales, Giambelli, California.

Seven years they had walked that civilized line. Now, he was very afraid he was about to fall off the edge of it.

Rene was insisting on marriage. Like a silk-lined steamroller, Rene had a way of moving toward a goal and flattening all barriers in her path. Discussions with her left Tony limp and dizzy.

She was violently jealous, overbearing, demanding and prone to icy sulks.

He was crazy about her.

At thirty-two, she was twenty-seven years his junior, a fact that stroked his well-developed ego. Knowing she was every bit as interested in his money as the rest of him didn't trouble him. He respected her for it.

He worried that if he gave her what she wanted, he would lose what she wanted him for.

It was a hell of a fix. To resolve it, Tony did what he usually did regarding difficulties. He ignored it as long as humanly possible.

Studying his view of the bay, sipping a small vermouth, Tony waited for

Rene to finish dressing for their evening out. And worried that his time was up.

The doorbell had him glancing over, frowning slightly. They weren't expecting anyone. As it was his majordomo's evening off, he went to see who was there. The frown cleared as he opened the door to his daughter.

"Sophie, what a lovely surprise."

"Dad."

She rose slightly on her toes to kiss his cheek. Ridiculously handsome, as ever, she thought. Good genes and an excellent plastic surgeon served him well. She did her best to ignore the quick and instinctive tug of resentment, and tried to focus on the equally quick and instinctive tug of love.

It seemed she was forever pulled in opposing directions over her father.

"I'm just in from New York, and wanted to see you before I headed up to the villa."

She scanned his face—smooth, almost unlined and certainly untroubled. The dark hair wisped attractively with gray at the temples, the deep blue eyes were clear. He had a handsome, squared-off chin with a center dimple. She'd loved dipping her finger into it as a child and making him laugh.

The love for him swarmed through her and tangled messily with the resentment. It was always so.

"I see you're going out," she said, noting his tuxedo.

"Shortly." He took her hand to draw her inside. "But there's plenty of time. Sit down, princess, and tell me how you are. What can I get you?"

She tipped his glass toward her. Sniffed, approved. "What you're having's fine."

She scanned the room as he walked over to the liquor cabinet. An expensive pretext, she thought. All show and no substance. Just like her father.

"Are you going up tomorrow?"

"Going where?"

She tilted her head as he crossed back to her. "To the villa."

"No, why?"

She took the glass, considering as she sipped. "You didn't get a call?"

"About what?"

Loyalties tugged and tangled inside her. He'd cheated on her mother, had carelessly ignored his vows as long as Sophia could remember, and in the end had left them both with barely a backward glance. But he was still family, and the family was being called to the villa.

“*La Signora*. One of her summits with lawyers, I’m told. You might want to be there.”

“Ah, well, really, I was—”

He broke off as Rene walked in.

If there was a poster girl for the trophy mistress, Sophia thought as her temper sizzled, Rene Foxx was it. Tall, curvy and blonde on blonde. The Valentino gown showcased a body ruthlessly toned, and managed to look understated and elegant.

Her hair was swept up, slicked back to leave her lovely, pampered face with its full, sensuous mouth—collagen, Sophia thought cattily—and shrewd green eyes.

She’d chosen diamonds to marry the Valentino, and they flashed and shimmered against her polished skin.

Just how much, Sophia wondered, had those rocks set her father back?

“Hello.” Sophia sipped more vermouth to wash some of the bitterness off her tongue. “Rene, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and it has been for nearly two years. It’s still Sophia?”

“Yes, for twenty-six.”

Tony cleared his throat. Nothing, in his opinion, was more dangerous than two sniping females. The man between them always took the bullet.

“Rene, Sophia’s just in from New York.”

“Really?” Enjoying herself, Rene took Tony’s glass, sipped. “That explains why you’re looking a bit travel-frayed. We’re about to leave for a party. You’re welcome to join us,” she added, hooking her arm through Tony’s. “I must have something in my closet that would work on you.”

If she was going to go claw to claw with Rene, it wouldn’t be after a coast-to-coast flight and in her father’s apartment. Sophia would choose the time, and the place.

“That’s so considerate, but I’d feel awkward wearing something so obviously too large. And,” she added, coating her words with sugar, “I’m just on my way north. Family business.” She set her glass down. “Enjoy your evening.”

She walked to the door, where Tony caught up with her to give her shoulder a quick, placating pat. “Why don’t you come along, Sophie? You’re fine as you are. You’re beautiful.”

“No, thank you.” She turned, and their eyes met. His were full of sheep-

ish apology. It was an expression she was too accustomed to seeing for it to be effective. "I'm not feeling particularly festive."

He winced as she shut the door in his face.

"What did she want?" Rene demanded.

"She just dropped by, as I said."

"Your daughter never does anything without a reason."

He shrugged. "She may have thought we could drive up north together in the morning. Tereza's sent out a summons."

Rene's eyes narrowed. "You didn't tell me about that."

"I didn't get one." He dismissed the entire matter and thought of the party and just how he and Rene would look making their entrance. "You look fabulous, Rene. It's a shame to cover that dress, even with mink. Shall I get your wrap?"

"What do you mean you didn't get one?" Rene slapped the empty glass on a table. "Your position at Giambelli is certainly more important than your daughter's." And Rene meant to see it remained that way. "If the old woman's calling the family, you go. We'll drive up tomorrow."

"We? But—"

"It's the perfect opportunity to take your stand, Tony, and to tell Pilar you want a divorce. We'll make it an early night, so we'll both be clear-headed." She crossed to him, slid her fingers down his cheek.

With Tony, she knew, manipulation required firm demands and physical rewards, judiciously melded.

"And when we get back tonight, I'll show you just what you can expect from me when we're married. When we get back, Tony . . ." She leaned in, bit teasingly at his bottom lip. "You can do anything you want."

"Let's just skip the party."

She laughed, slipped away from his hands. "It's important. And it'll give you time to think of just what you want to do to me. Get my sable for me, won't you, darling?"

She felt like sable tonight, Rene thought as Tony went to comply.

She felt rich tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

The valley, and the hills that rose from it, wore a thin coat of snow. Vines, arrogant and often temperamental soldiers, climbed up the slopes, their naked branches spearing through the quiet mist that turned the circling mountains to soft shadows.

Under the pearly dawn, the vineyard shivered and slept.

This peaceful scene had helped spawn a fortune, a fortune that would be gambled again, season after season. With nature both partner and foe.

To Sophia, the making of wine was an art, a business, a science. But it was also the biggest game in town.

From a window of her grandmother's villa, she studied the playing field. It was pruning season, and she imagined while she'd been traveling vines had already been accessed, considered, and those first stages toward next year's harvest begun. She was glad she'd been called back so that she could see that part of it for herself.

When she was away, the business of the wine occupied all her energies. She rarely thought of the vineyard when she wore her corporate hat. And whenever she came back, like this, she thought of little else.

Still, she couldn't stay long. She had duties in San Francisco. A new advertising campaign to be polished. The Giambelli centennial was just getting off the ground. And with the success of the auction in New York, the next stages would require her attention.

An old wine for a new millennium, she thought. Villa Giambelli: The next century of excellence begins.

But they needed something fresh, something savvy for the younger mar-

ket. Those who bought their wine on the run—a quick impulse grab to take to a party.

Well, she'd think of it. It was her job to think of it.

And putting her mind to it would keep it off her father and the scheming Rene.

None of her business, Sophia reminded herself. None of her business at all if her father wanted to hook himself up with a former underwear model with a heart the size and texture of a raisin. He'd made a fool of himself before, and no doubt would again.

She wished she could hate him for it, for his pathetic weakness of character, and his benign neglect of his daughter. But the steady, abiding love just wouldn't shift aside. Which made her, she supposed, as foolish as her mother.

He didn't care for either of them as much as he did the cut of his suit. And didn't give them a thought two minutes after they were out of his sight. He was a bastard. Utterly selfish, sporadically affectionate and always careless.

And that, she supposed, was part of his charm.

She wished she hadn't stopped by the night before, wished she wasn't compelled to keep that connection between them no matter what he did or didn't do.

Better, she thought, to keep on the move as she had for the past several years. Traveling, working, filling her time and her life with professional and social obligations.

Two days, she decided. She would give her grandmother two days, spend time with her family, spend time in the vineyard and the winery. Then it was back to work with a vengeance.

The new campaign would be the best in the industry. She would make sure of it.

As she scanned the hills, she saw two figures walking through the mist. The tall gangly man with an old brown cap on his head. The ramrod-straight woman in mannish boots and trousers with hair as white as the snow they trod. A Border collie plodded along between them. Her grandparents, taking their morning walk with the aging and endlessly faithful Sally.

The sight of them lifted her mood. Whatever changed in her life, whatever adjustments had been made, this was a constant. *La Signora* and Eli MacMillan. And the vines.

She dashed from the window to grab her coat and join them.

At sixty-seven. Tereza Giambelli was sculpted, razor-sharp, body and mind. She had learned the art of the vine at her grandfather's knee. Had traveled with her father to California when she'd been only three to turn the land of the ripe valley to wine. She'd become bilingual and had traveled back and forth between California and Italy the way other young girls had traveled to the playground.

She'd learned to love the mountains, the thatch of forest, the rhythm of American voices.

It was not home, would never be home as the *castello* was. But she had made her place here, and was content with it.

She had married a man who had met with her family's approval, and had learned to love him as well. With him she had made a daughter, and to her lasting grief, birthed two stillborn sons.

She had buried her husband when she was only thirty. And had never taken his name or given it to her only child. She was Giambelli, and that heritage, that responsibility was more vital and more sacred even than marriage.

She had a brother she loved who was a priest and tended his flock in Venice. She had another who had died a soldier before he had really lived. She revered his memory, though it was dim.

And she had a sister she considered foolish at best, who had brought a daughter more foolish yet into the world.

It had been up to her to continue the family line, the family art. She had done so.

Her marriage to Eli MacMillan had been carefully considered, scrupulously planned. She had considered it a merger, as his vineyards were prime and nestled below hers in the valley. He was a good man and, more important in her calculations, a good vintner.

He had cared for her, but other men had cared for her. She enjoyed his company, but she had enjoyed the company of others. In the end, she'd thought of him as the Merlot, the softer mellowing juice blended to her stronger, and admittedly harsher, Cabernet Sauvignon.

The right combination could produce excellent results.

Her acceptance of his marriage proposal had been contingent on complex and detailed business arrangements. The arrangements had benefited both their companies, and had contented her.

But Tereza, who was rarely surprised, had been so, to find comfort, pleasure and simple satisfaction in a marriage now approaching its twentieth year.

He was a fine-looking man still. Tereza didn't discount such matters, as they spoke of genes. What made up a man was as important, to her mind, as what that man made of himself.

Though he was ten years her senior, she saw no sign of him bowing to age. He still rose at dawn every day, and would walk with her, regardless of the weather, every morning.

She trusted him as she had no man since her grandfather, and cared for him more than she had any man not of her blood.

He knew all of her plans, and most of her secrets.

"Sophia arrived late last night."

"Ah." Eli laid a hand on her shoulder as they walked between the rows. It was a simple gesture, and habitual for him. It had taken Tereza some time to grow used to this casual touching from a man, from a husband. A longer time still to come to depend on it. "Did you think she wouldn't come?"

"I knew she would come." Tereza was too used to being obeyed to doubt it. "If she'd come straight from New York, she would have been here sooner."

"So, she had a date. Or did some shopping."

Tereza's eyes narrowed. They were nearly black and still sharp in distance vision. Her voice was sharp as well, and carried the exotic music of her homeland. "Or stopped off to see her father."

"Or stopped off to see her father," Eli agreed in his slow, comfortable way. "Loyalty's a trait you've always admired, Tereza."

"When it's earned." There were times, much as she cared for him, when Eli's unending tolerance infuriated her. "Anthony Avano has earned nothing but disgust."

"A pitiful man, a poor husband and a mediocre father." Which made him, Eli mused, very like his own son. "Yet he continues to work for you."

"I let him into Giambelli too intimately in those early years." She'd trusted him, she thought, had seen potential in him. Had been deceived by him. That she would never forgive. "Still, he knows how to sell. I use whatever tools perform their task. Firing him long ago would have been a personal satisfaction and professionally unwise. What's best for Giambelli is what's best. But I don't like to see my granddaughter cater to the man. *Uh*."

She tossed aside thoughts of her son-in-law with an impatient wave of

the hand. "We'll see how he takes what I have to say today. Sophia will have told him I called her home. So, he'll come."

Eli stopped, turned. "And that's exactly as you wanted it. You knew she'd tell him."

Her dark eyes glinted, and her smile was cool. "And if I did?"

"You're a difficult woman, Tereza."

"Yes. Thank you."

He laughed and, shaking his head, began to walk with her again. "Your announcements today are going to cause trouble. Resentment."

"I should hope so." She stopped to examine some of the younger vines supported by trellis wires. Cane-pruning would be required here, she thought. Only the strongest of them would be permitted to grow and to be trained.

"Complacency becomes rot, Eli. Tradition must be respected, and change explored."

She scanned the land. The mist was raw and the air damp. The sun would not burn through it that day, she was certain.

Winters, she thought, grew longer with every year.

"Some of these vines I planted with my own hands," she continued. "Vines my father brought from Italy. As they grew old, the new was made from them. The new must always have room to sink their roots, Eli, and the mature are entitled to their respect. What I built here, what we've built in our time together, is ours. I'll do as I think best with it, and for it."

"You always have. In this case, as in most, I agree with you. It doesn't mean we'll have an easy season ahead of us."

"But a vintage one," she said. "This year . . ." She reached over to turn a naked vine in her fingers. "A fine and rare vintage. I know it."

She turned, watched her granddaughter run up the slope toward them. "She's so beautiful, Eli."

"Yes. And strong."

"She'll need to be," Tereza said and stepped forward to catch Sophia's hands in hers. "*Buon giorno, cara. Come va?*"

"*Bene. Bene.*" They kissed cheeks, hands tightly linked. "*Nonna.*" Sophia eased back, studied her grandmother's face. It was a handsome face, not soft and pretty as the girl on the label made so long ago, but strong, nearly fierce. Carved, Sophia always thought, as much by ambition as time. "You look wonderful. And you."

She shifted to throw her arms around Eli. Here, it was all very simple.

He was Eli, just Eli, the only grandfather she'd ever known. Safe, loving and uncomplicated.

He gave her a little lift with the hug, so her toes just left the ground. It made her laugh, and cling. "I saw you from my window." She stepped back as her feet hit the ground again, then lowered to pat and stroke the patient Sally. "You're a painting, the three of you. *The Vineyard*, I'd call it," she continued, straightening to button Eli's jacket at his throat against the chill. "What a morning."

She closed her eyes, tipping her head back and breathing deep. She could smell the damp, her grandmother's soap and the tobacco Eli must have se-creted in one of his pockets.

"Your trip was successful?" Tereza asked.

"I have memos. My memos have memos," she added, laughing again as she hooked her arms through theirs so they could walk together. "You'll be pleased, *Nonna*. And I have some brilliant ideas, she says with due modesty, on the promotion campaign."

Eli glanced over, and when he saw Tereza wasn't going to comment, patted Sophia's hand. The trouble, he thought, would start very quickly now.

"The pruning's begun." Sophia noted the fresh cuts on the vines. "At MacMillan as well?"

"Yes. It's time."

"It seems a long way till harvest. *Nonna*, will you tell me why you've brought us all here? You know I love to see you, and Eli, and Mama. But preparing the vines isn't the only work that's required for Giambelli."

"We'll talk later. Now we'll have breakfast before those monsters of Donato's are up and driving us all insane."

"*Nonna*."

"Later," Tereza said again. "We're not all yet here."

Villa Giambelli sat on a knoll above the center of the valley and beside a forest that had been left to grow wild. Its stones showed gold and red and umber when the light struck them, and its windows were many. The winery had been built to replicate the one in Italy, and though it had been expanded, and ruthlessly modernized, it was still in operation.

A large, attractively outfitted tasting room, where patrons could, by appointment, sample the products along with breads and cheeses, had been

added to it. Wine clubs were welcomed to lavish affairs four times a year, and tours could be arranged through the offices there or in San Francisco.

Wine, bought from the winery itself on those occasions, could be shipped anywhere in the world.

The caves, with their cool, damp air, that pocketed the hills were used for storage and the aging of the wine. The fields that had built Villa Giambelli and its facilities stretched for more than a hundred acres, and during harvest the very air smelled of the promise of wine.

The central courtyard of the villa was tiled in Chianti red and boasted a fountain where a grinning Bacchus forever hoisted his goblet. When the winter cold had passed, dozens and dozens of pots would be set out so that the space was alive with flower and scent.

It boasted twelve bedrooms and fifteen baths, a solarium, a ballroom and a formal dining room that could accommodate sixty. There were rooms dedicated to music, and rooms celebrating books. Rooms for work and for contemplation. Within its walls was a collection of Italian and American art and antiques that was second to none.

There were both indoor and outdoor pools, and a twenty-car garage. Its gardens were a fantasy.

Balconies and terraces laced the stone, and a series of steps afforded both family and guests private entrances and exits.

Despite its size, its scope and its priceless treasures, it was very much a home.

The first time Tyler had seen it, he'd thought of it as a castle, full of enormous rooms and complicated passages. At the moment, he thought of it as a prison, where he was sentenced to spend entirely too much time with entirely too many people.

He wanted to be outside in the raw air tending his vines and drinking strong coffee out of a thermos. Instead he was trapped in the family parlor sipping an excellent Chardonnay. A fire was snapping gaily in the hearth, and elegant little hors d'oeuvres were set around the room on platters of colorful Italian pottery.

He couldn't understand why people wasted the time and effort on bits of finger food when slapping a sandwich together was so much quicker and easier.

Why was it food had to be such a damn event? And he imagined if he uttered such heresy in a household of Italians, he'd be lynched on the spot.

He'd been forced to change out of his work clothes into slacks and a sweater—his idea of formal wear. At least he hadn't strapped himself into a suit like . . . what was the guy's name? Don. Don from Venice with the wife who wore too much makeup, too much jewelry and always seemed to have a shrieking baby attached to some part of her body.

She talked too much, and no one, particularly her husband, appeared to pay any attention.

Francesca Giambelli Russo said little to nothing. Such a contrast to *La Signora*, Ty mused. You'd never make them as sisters. She was thin and drifty, an insubstantial little woman who stayed glued in her chair and looked as though she'd jump out of her skin if anyone addressed her directly.

Ty was always careful not to do so.

The little boy, if you could call a demon from hell a boy, was sprawled on the rug smashing two trucks together. Eli's Border collie, Sally, was hiding under Sophia's legs.

Great legs, Ty noted absently.

She was looking as sleek and polished as ever, like something lifted off a movie screen and dropped down in three dimensions. She appeared to be fascinated by whatever Don was saying to her, and kept those big, dark chocolate eyes of hers on his face. But Ty watched as she discreetly slipped Sally hors d'oeuvres. The move was too slick and calculated for her to have had her full attention on the conversation.

"Here. The stuffed olives are excellent." Pilar stepped up beside him with a small plate.

"Thanks." Tyler shifted. Of all the Giambellis, Tyler was most comfortable with Pilar. She never expected him to make endless, empty conversation just for the sake of hearing her own voice. "Any idea when we're going to get this business rolling?"

"When Mama's ready, and not before. My sources tell me lunch is set for fourteen, but I can't pin down who we're waiting for. Whoever it is, and whatever this is about, Eli seems content. That's a good sign."

He started to grunt, remembered his manners. "Let's hope so."

"We haven't seen you around here in weeks—been busy," she said even as he uttered the words, then she laughed. "Naturally. What are you up to, other than business?"

"What else is there?"

With a shake of her head, she pressed the olives on him again. "You're

more like my mother than any of us. Weren't you seeing someone last summer? A pretty blonde? Pat, Patty?"

"Patsy. Not really seeing. Just sort of . . ." He made a vague gesture. "You know."

"Honey, you need to get out more. And not just for . . . you know."

It was such a mother thing to say, he had to smile. "I could say the same about you."

"Oh, I'm just an old stick-in-the-mud."

"Best-looking stick in the room," he countered and made her laugh again.

"You always were sweet when you put your mind to it." And the comment, even from a man she considered a kind of surrogate son, boosted the spirits that seemed to flag all too easily these days.

"Mama, you're hoarding the olives." Sophia dashed up, plucked one off the plate. Beside her lovely, composed mother, she was a fireball, crackling with electricity. The kind that was always giving you hot, unexpected jolts if you got too close.

Or so it always seemed to Ty.

For that single reason, he'd always tried to keep a safe and comfortable distance.

"Quick, talk to me. Were you just going to leave me trapped with Don the Dull forever?" Sophia muttered.

"Poor Sophie. Well, think of it this way. It's probably the first time in weeks he's been able to say five words at the same time without Gina interrupting him."

"Believe me, he made up for it." She rolled her dark, exotic eyes. "So, Ty, how are you?"

"Fine."

"Hard at work for MacMillan?"

"Sure."

"Know any words with more than one syllable?"

"Some. Thought you were in New York."

"Was," she said, mimicking his tone as her lips twitched. "Now I'm here." She glanced over her shoulder as her two young cousins began to shriek and sob. "Mama, if I was ever that obnoxious, how did you stop yourself from drowning me in the fountain?"

"You weren't obnoxious, sweetie. Demanding, arrogant, temperamental,

but never obnoxious. Excuse me.” She handed the plate to Sophia and went to do what she’d always done best. Make peace.

“I suppose I should have done that,” Sophia said with a sigh as she watched her mother scoop up the miserable young girl. “But I’ve never seen a pair of kids less appealing in my life.”

“Comes from being spoiled and neglected.”

“At the same time?” She considered, studied Don ignoring his screaming son, and Gina making foolish cooing noises to him. “Good call,” she decided. Then because they weren’t her problem—thank Jesus—she turned her attention back to Tyler.

He was such a . . . man, she decided. He looked like something carved out of the Vacas that guarded the valley. And he was certainly more pleasant to contemplate than the four-year-old temper tantrum behind her.

Now if she could just pry a reasonable conversation out of him, she could be nicely occupied until lunch was served.

“Any clues about the theme of our little gathering today?” Sophia asked “No.”

“Would you tell me if you knew?”

He shrugged a shoulder and watched Pilar murmur to little Tereza as she carried her to the side window. She looked natural, he thought. Madonna-like, he supposed was the suitable word. And because of it, the irritable, angry child took on an attractive, appealing look.

“Why do you suppose people have kids when they’re not going to pay any real attention to them?”

Sophia started to speak, then broke off as her father and Rene walked into the room. “That’s a good question,” she murmured and, taking the glass from his hand, finished off his wine. “Damn good question.”

At the window, Pilar tensed, and all the simple pleasure she’d gotten from distracting the unhappy little girl drained away.

She felt instantly frumpy, unattractive, old, fat, sour. Here was the man who had discarded her. And here was the latest in the long line of replacements. Younger, lovelier, smarter, sexier.

But because she knew her mother would not, Pilar set the child on the floor and walked over to greet them. Her smile was warm and easy and graced a face much more compelling than she thought. Her simple slacks and sweater were more elegant, more feminine than Rene’s slick power suit.

And her manner carried an innate class that held more true sparkle than diamonds.

“Tony, how good you could make it. Hello, Rene.”

“Pilar.” Rene smiled slowly and trailed a hand down Tony’s arm. The diamond on her finger caught the light. She waited a beat, to be certain Pilar saw it, registered the meaning. “You look . . . rested.”

“Thank you.” The backs of her knees dissolved. She could feel the support going out from under her as completely as if Rene had rammed the toe of her hot red pump into them. “Please, come in, sit. What can I get you to drink?”

“Don’t fuss, Pilar.” Tony waved her off, even as he leaned down to give her an absent peck on the cheek. “We’ll just go say hello to Tereza.”

“Go to your mom,” Ty said under his breath.

“What?”

“Go, make an excuse and get your mom out of here.”

She saw it then, the diamond glint on Rene’s finger, the blank shock in her mother’s eyes. She shoved the plate at Ty and strode across the room. “Mama, can you help me with something for a minute?”

“Yes . . . just let me . . .”

“It’ll only take a second,” Sophia continued, quickly pulling Pilar from the room. She just kept moving until they were well down the hall and into the two-level library. There, she pulled the pocket doors closed behind her, leaned back against them.

“Mama. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh.” Trying to laugh, Pilar ran an unsteady hand over her face. “So much for thinking I pulled that off.”

“You did beautifully.” Sophia hurried over as Pilar lowered to the arm of a chair. “But I know that face.” She cupped her mother’s in her hands. “Apparently so does Tyler. The ring’s ostentatious and obvious, just like she is.”

“Oh, baby.” Her laugh was strained, but she tried. “It’s stunning, gorgeous—just like she is. It’s all right.” But already she was turning the gold band she continued to wear round and round her finger. “Really, it’s all right.”

“The hell it is. I hate her. I hate both of them, and I’m going back in there and telling them right now.”

“You’re not.” Pilar got up, gripped Sophia’s arms. Did the pain she could see in her daughter’s eyes show as clearly in her own? And was that her fault?

Had this endless limbo she'd lived in dragged her daughter into the void? "It solves nothing, changes nothing. There's no point in hate, Sophie. It'll only damage you."

No, Sophia thought. No. It could forge you.

"Be angry!" she demanded. "Be furious and bitter and crazed." Be *anything*, she thought. Anything but hurt and defeated. I can't bear it.

"You do it, baby." She ran her hands soothingly up and down Sophia's arms. "So much better than I could."

"To walk in here this way. To just walk in and shove it in our faces. He had no right to do that to you, Mama, or to me."

"He has a right to do what he wants. But it was poorly done." Excuses, she admitted. She'd spent nearly thirty years making excuses for Anthony Avano. A hard habit to break.

"Don't let it hurt you. He's still your father. Whatever happens, he always will be."

"He was never a father to me."

Pilar paled. "Oh, Sophia."

"No. No." Furious with herself, Sophia held up a hand. "I am obnoxious. This isn't about me, but I just can't help making it about me. It's not even about him," she said, winding down. "He's oblivious. But she's not. She knew what she was doing. How she wanted to do it. And I hate her coming into our home and lording that over you—no, damn it, over us. All of us."

"You're ignoring one factor, baby. Rene may love him."

"Oh, please."

"So cynical. I loved him, why shouldn't she?"

Sophia whirled away. She wanted to kick something, to break something. And to take the jagged shards of it and swipe them over Rene's perfect California face. "She loves his money, his position and his goddamn expense account."

"Probably. But he's the kind of man who makes women love him—effortlessly."

Sophia caught the wistfulness in her mother's voice. She'd never loved a man, but she recognized the sound of a woman who had. Who did. And that, the hopelessness of that, emptied her of temper. "You haven't stopped loving him."

"If I haven't, I'd better. Promise me one thing? Don't cause a scene."

"I hate to give up the satisfaction, but I suppose chilly disinterest will have more impact. One way or the other, I want to knock that smug look off her face."

She walked back, kissed both her mother's cheeks, then hugged her. Here she could, and did, love without shadows and smudges. "Will you be all right, Mama?"

"Yes. My life doesn't change, does it?" Oh, and the thought of that was damning. "Nothing really changes. Let's go back."

"I'll tell you what we're going to do," Sophia began when they were in the hall again. "I'm going to juggle my schedule and clear a couple of days. Then you and I are going to the spa. We're going to sink up to our necks in mud, have facials, get our bodies scrubbed, rubbed and polished. We'll spend wads of money on overpriced beauty products we'll never use and lounge around in bathrobes all day."

The door of the powder room opened as they walked by, and a middle-aged brunette stepped out. "Now that sounds wonderfully appealing. When do we leave?"

"Helen." Pilar pressed a hand to her heart even as she leaned in to kiss her friend's cheek. "You scared the life out of me."

"Sorry. Had to make a dash for the john." She tugged at the skirt of her stone-gray suit over hips she was constantly trying to whittle, to make certain it was back in place. "All that coffee I drank on the way up. Sophia, aren't you gorgeous? So . . ." She shifted her briefcase, squared her shoulders. "The usual suspects in the parlor?"

"More or less. I didn't realize she meant you when Mama said the lawyers would be coming." And, Sophia thought, if her grandmother had called in Judge Helen Moore, it meant serious business.

"Because Pilar didn't know, either, nor did I until a few days ago. Your grandmother insisted I handle this business personally." Helen's shrewd gray eyes shifted toward the parlor.

She'd been involved, one way or another, with the Giambellis and their business for nearly forty years. They never failed to fascinate her. "She keeping all of you in the dark?"

"Apparently," Pilar murmured. "Helen, she's all right, isn't she? I took this latest business about changing her will and so on as part of this phase she's been in this past year, since *Signore* Baptista died."

“As far as I know, healthwise, *La Signora* is as hale as ever.” Helen adjusted her black-rimmed glasses, gave her oldest friend a bolstering smile. “As her attorney, I can’t tell you any more about her motivations, Pilar. Even if I completely understood them. It’s her show. Why don’t we see if she’s ready for the curtain?”

CHAPTER THREE

La Signora never rushed her cue. She had planned the menu personally, wanting to set the tone for the lavish, and the casual. The wines served were from the California vineyards, both Giambelli and MacMillan. That, too, was meticulously planned.

She would not discuss business at the meal. Nor would she, much to Gina's annoyance, allow three ill-mannered children at the table.

They had been sent to the nursery with a maid who would be given a bonus, and Tereza's considerable respect if she lasted an hour with them.

When she deigned to speak to Rene, it was with chilly formality. Because of it, she felt a grudging admiration for the woman's spine. There had been others, many others, who had withered visibly under that frost.

Along with family, and Helen, whom she considered one of her own, she had invited her most trusted winemaker and his wife. Paulo Borelli had been with Giambelli, California for thirty-eight years. Despite his age, he was still called Paulie. His wife, Consuelo, was a plump, cheerful woman with a big laugh who had once been a kitchen maid at the villa.

The final addition was Margaret Bowers, the head of sales for MacMillan. She was a divorced woman of thirty-six who was currently being bored senseless by Gina's chatter and wishing desperately for a cigarette.

Tyler caught her eye and gave her a sympathetic smile.

Margaret sometimes wished desperately for him, too.

When the food was cleared and the port passed, Tereza sat back.

"Castello di Giambelli celebrates its centennial in one year," she began. Immediately conversation stopped. "Villa Giambelli has been making wine

in the Napa Valley for sixty-four years. MacMillan has been doing so for ninety-two. That is two hundred and fifty-six years combined.”

She scanned the table. “Five generations have been vintners and wine merchants.”

“Six, *Zia* Tereza.” Gina fluttered. “My children give you six.”

“From what I’ve seen your children are more likely to be serial killers than vintners. Please, don’t interrupt.”

She lifted her port, nosing the wine, sipping slowly. “In those five generations we have earned a reputation, on two continents, for producing wine of quality. The name Giambelli *is* wine. We have established traditions and have blended them with new ways, new technology, without sacrificing that name or what it means. We will never sacrifice it. Twenty years ago, we established a partnership of sorts with another fine vintner. MacMillan of Napa Valley has run side by side with Giambelli, California. The partnership has aged well. It’s time for it to be decanted.”

She felt rather than saw Tyler tense. She gave him high marks for holding his tongue, and met his eyes now. “Changes are necessary, and for the good of both. The next hundred years begin today. Donato.”

He snapped to attention. “*Si*, yes,” he corrected, remembering she preferred English at her California table. “Yes, Aunt Tereza.”

“Giambelli Italy and California have been run exclusive of each other. Separate. This will no longer be the case. You will report to the chief operating officer of the newly formed Giambelli-MacMillan company, which will have bases in both California and Venice.”

“What does this mean? What does this mean?” Gina exploded in Italian, showing awkwardly from the table. “Donato is in charge. He is next in line. He carries the name. He is your heir.”

“My heir is who I say is my heir.”

“We give you children.” Gina slapped a hand on her belly, then waved an arm in disgust at the table. “Three children, and more will come. No one gives the family children but me and Donato. Who will carry on the name when you’re gone if not my babies?”

“Do you bargain with your womb?” Tereza said evenly.

“It’s fertile,” she snapped back even as her husband tried to pull her back into her chair. “More than yours, more than your daughter’s. One baby each, that’s all. I can have a dozen.”

“Then God help us all. You’ll keep your fine house, Gina, and your

pocket money. But you will not find yourself mistress of the *castello*. My *castello*," she added coolly. "Take what you're given, or lose a great deal more."

"Gina, *basta!* Enough," Don ordered and had his hand slapped for his trouble.

"You're an old woman," Gina said between her teeth. "One day you'll be dead and I will not. So we will see." She swept out of the room.

"*Zia Tereza, scusi,*" Donato began and was cut off by a sharp gesture.

"Your wife does you no credit, Donato, and your work falls short of my expectations. You have this year to correct those matters. You will remain in your position with Giambelli until the time of the next pruning. Then we will reassess. If I am pleased, you will be promoted, with a salary and the benefits that apply. If I am not, you will remain with the company on paper only. I will not see one of my blood removed, but you will not find your life so easy as you have. Is this understood?"

His tie was suddenly too tight, and the meal he'd just eaten threatened to revolt in his belly. "I've worked for Giambelli for eighteen years."

"You worked for twelve. You have put in appearances for the last six, and even those appearances have been inconsistent recently. Do you think I don't know what you do, or where you spend your time? Do you think I'm not aware of what your *business* is when you take trips to Paris, to Rome, to New York and California at Giambelli expense?"

She waited for this blow to land, saw the faint sheen of sweat skin his face. And was disappointed in him yet again. "Your wife is foolish, Donato, but I am not. Have a care."

"He's a good boy," Francesca said quietly.

"He might have been. Perhaps he'll be a good man yet. Margaret, you'll pardon the family histrionics. We're temperamental."

"Of course, *La Signora.*"

"You will, if you choose to accept, oversee and coordinate the heads of sales of Giambelli-MacMillan, California and Venice. This will require considerable travel and responsibility on your part, with the appropriate salary increase. You'll be needed in Venice in five days to establish your base there and familiarize yourself with the operation. You have until tomorrow to decide if you want to consider this arrangement, and if so we will discuss the details."

"I don't need time to decide, thank you." Margaret kept her voice brisk

and even, and her heart pounded like wild surf. "I'll be happy to discuss the details at your convenience. I'm grateful for the opportunity." She shifted to Eli, nodded. "Grateful to both of you for the opportunity."

"Well said. Tomorrow then. Paulie, we've already discussed our plans, and I appreciate your input and your discretion. You'll assist in coordinating the operation in the fields, the winery. You know the best men here, and at MacMillan. You'll serve as foreman."

"I have nothing but respect for Paulie." Ty's voice was calm, even if temper and frustration had twin grips on his throat. "His skills and his instincts. I have nothing but admiration for the operation here at the villa, and the people involved in it. And the same from what I know of Giambelli, Venice. But we have a top-flight operation, and people, at MacMillan. I won't see that operation or those people overshadowed by yours, *La Signora*. You're proud of what you and yours have accomplished, of the legacy you've inherited and intend to pass on. So am I of mine."

"Good. So listen. And think." She gestured to Eli.

"Ty, Tereza and I didn't come to this decision overnight, nor do we do it lightly. We've discussed this for a long time."

"You're not obliged to bring me into those discussions," Ty began.

"No." Eli interrupted before the heat he saw building in his grandson's eyes could flash. "We're not. We've worked out, with Helen, how the legalities and formalities should and must be met. We've strategized how to implement this true merger to the benefit of all involved—not just for this season, but for the season a hundred years from now."

He leaned forward. "Do you think I want any less for MacMillan than you? Any less for you than you want for yourself?"

"I don't know what you want. I thought I did."

"Then I'll make it clear, here and now. By doing this, we'll become not only one of the biggest winemakers in the world, but the best in the world. You'll continue to oversee MacMillan."

"Oversee?"

"With Paulie as foreman, and you as operator, as vintner. With some addendums."

"You know the fields, Ty," Tereza said. She understood his resentment. It pleased her. That hot, choking anger meant it mattered to him. It would have to matter a very great deal. "You know the vines, and the casks. But what you do, what you learn stops at the bottle. It's time to go on from

there. There's more to wine than the grape. Eli and I intend to see our grandchildren blended."

"Grandchildren?" Sophia interrupted.

"When is the last time you worked in the fields?" Tereza demanded of her. "When is the last time you tasted wine that wasn't uncorked from a pretty bottle taken from a cabinet or a chilled bucket? You've neglected your roots, Sophia."

"I've neglected nothing," Sophia shot back. "I'm not a winemaker. I'm a publicist."

"You'll be a winemaker. And you," she said, pointing at Ty, "you'll learn what it is to sell, to market, to ship. You'll teach each other."

"Oh, really, *Nonna*—"

"Quiet. You have the year. Pilar, Sophia won't have as much time to devote to her usual duties. You'll fill that gap."

"Mama." Pilar had to laugh. "I don't know anything about marketing or promotion."

"You have a good brain. It's time you used it again. To succeed we'll need all the family." Tereza shifted her gaze to Tony. "And others. You will remain in sales, and will, for now, keep your title and privileges there. But you will report, as does Donato and all department heads and managers, to the COO. From this time on we have a business relationship only. Do not come to my house or to my table again uninvited."

It was a downslide. His title was one matter. His salary, and long-term benefits, another. She had the power to strip him clean. He used the single shield he had. "I'm Sophia's father."

"I know what you are."

"I beg your pardon, *signora*." Rene spoke with meticulous politeness, underlined by steel. "If I may speak?"

"You are, invited or not, a guest under my roof. What do you wish to say?"

"I realize that my presence here isn't particularly welcome." Her tone never varied, her eyes never left Tereza's. "And that my relationship with Tony doesn't meet with your approval. But he is, and has been, an asset to your company. As I intend to be one to him, that can only benefit you."

"That remains to be seen. You'll excuse us." She scanned the table. "Helen, Eli and I must speak with Sophia and Tyler. Coffee will be served in the parlor. Please enjoy."

"You say it," Sophia began, trembling with anger as the rest filed out of the room, "and it's done. Have you gotten so used to that, *Nonna*, that you believe you can change lives with a few words?"

"Everyone has a choice."

"Where is the choice?" Unable to sit, she surged to her feet. "Donato? He's never worked outside the company. His life is absorbed by it. Tyler? He's given all his time and energy to MacMillan since he was a boy."

"I can speak for myself."

"Oh, shut up." She rounded on him. "Five words in succession tie your tongue in knots. And I'm supposed to teach you how to market wine."

He got to his feet and, to her shock, grabbed her hands, jerking her forward as he turned them palms up. "Like rose petals. Pampered and soft. I'm supposed to teach you how to work?"

"I work every bit as hard as you do. Just because I don't sweat and stomp around in muddy boots doesn't mean I don't give my best."

"You're off to a hell of a start, both of you." Eli sighed and poured more port. "You want to fight, fight. It'll be good for you. The problem is neither of you has ever had to do anything that didn't suit you down to the ground. Maybe you'll fail, maybe you'll both fall flat on your asses trying to do something else. Something more."

Sophia tossed up her chin. "I don't fail."

"You have a season to prove it. Would you care to know what you'll have at the end of it? Helen?"

"Well, this has been fun so far." Helen lifted her briefcase onto the table. "Dinner and a show, for one low price." She took out files, laid them down and set her briefcase back on the floor. Adjusted her glasses. "In the interest of brevity and comprehension, I'll keep this simple and in layman's terms. Eli and Tereza are merging their respective companies, streamlining them, which will cut some costs and incur others. I believe it's a very wise business decision. Each of you will carry the title of vice president, operations. Each of you will have varied tasks and responsibilities, which are set down in the contracts I have with me. The contract term is one year. If at the end of that year your performances are unacceptable, you will be shifted back to a lesser position. Those terms will be negotiable at that time and in that eventuality."

As she spoke she slid two thick contracts from the files. "Ty, you will remain in residence at MacMillan, the house and its contents will continue to be available for your use. Sophia, you will be required to move here. Your

apartment in San Francisco will be maintained by Giambelli during this year, for your use when you're required to do business in the city. Ty, when you're required to do business there, accommodations will be provided. Travel to other destinations for the company will, of course, be arranged and paid for by the company. The *castello* in Italy is available to either of you, whether your travel there is business, pleasure or a combination of both."

She glanced up, smiled. "So far, not so bad, right? Now the carrot. If at the end of this contract year, Sophia, your performance is acceptable, you will receive twenty percent of the company, one-half interest in the *castello* and the title of co-president. Reciprocally, Tyler, should your performance be acceptable, you will receive a like twenty percent, full interest of the house where you now reside and the title of co-president. You will both be offered ten acres of vineyards, to develop your own label if you wish, or the market value thereof should you prefer."

She paused, and added the final weight. "Pilar receives twenty percent as well, if she agrees with her own contract terms. This gives like shares to everyone. In the event of Eli's or Tereza's death, their respective share passes, spouse to spouse. On that unhappy day when neither of them are with us, their forty-percent share will be disbursed as follows: Fifteen percent to each of you, and ten percent to Pilar. This will give each of you, in time, thirty-five percent of one of the biggest wine companies in the world. All you have to do to earn it is adhere to the contract stipulations during this year."

Sophia waited until she was certain she could speak, and kept her hands tightly gripped together in her lap. She was being offered more than she'd ever imagined or would have asked for. And was being slapped down like a child at the same time. "Who decides on the acceptability of our performances?"

"In the interest of fairness," Tereza said, "you will rate each other on a monthly basis. Eli and I will also give you performance evaluations, and these will be added to the evaluations generated by the COO."

"Who the hell is COO?" Tyler demanded.

"His name is David Cutter. Recently of Le Coeur, and based in New York. He'll be here tomorrow." Tereza got to her feet. "We'll leave you to read your contracts, to discuss, to consider." She smiled warmly. "Helen? Coffee?"

Rene refused to budge. There was one thing she'd learned in her modeling career, during her brief stint as an actress and in her lifelong social climb. The only right direction to move is up.

She'd tolerate the old woman's insults, the estranged wife's distress and the daughter's killing glares as long as it meant winning.

Despising them didn't stop her from tolerating them, as long as it was necessary.

She had the diamond on her finger, one she'd selected personally, and intended the wedding band to follow quickly. Tony was her entrée into the world of the ridiculously rich, and she was sincerely fond of him. Nearly as fond as she was of the idea of the Giambelli fortune.

She'd make certain he did whatever was necessary in the next year to solidify his position with Giambelli, and she intended to do so as his wife.

"Tell her now," she ordered and picked up her coffee cup.

"Rene, darling." Tony moved his shoulders. He could already feel the weight of the shackles. "This is a very awkward time."

"You've had seven years to deal with this, Tony. Get it done, and get it done now." She sent a significant look toward Pilar. "Or I will."

"All right, all right." He patted her hand. He preferred awkward to ugly. With a pleasant smile on his face, he got to his feet and crossed over to where Pilar sat trying to calm a mildly distressed and obviously confused Francesca.

"Pilar, could I have a word with you? A private word."

A dozen excuses ran through her head. She was, in her mother's absence, hostess. The room was full of guests. Her aunt needed her attention. She should order more coffee.

But they were only that, excuses, and would do nothing but postpone what had to be faced.

"Of course." She murmured soothing words in Italian to her aunt, then turned toward Tony.

"Shall we use the library?" At least, Pilar thought, he wasn't bringing Rene with him. Even as they passed, Rene shot her one look, hard and bright as the stone on her finger.

A victor's look, Pilar thought. How ridiculous. There'd be no contest to win, and nothing to lose.

"I'm sorry Mama chose to make this announcement, and have this discussion, with so many people in attendance," Pilar began. "If she'd told me beforehand, I'd have urged her to talk to you privately."

"Doesn't matter. Her personal feelings for me are very clear." As his feathers were rarely ruffled, those feelings had rolled off him for years. "Professionally, well, I might have expected better. But we'll smooth it over." Smoothing things over was what he did second best. Ignoring them was his strong point.

He stepped into the room, sat in one of the deep leather chairs. Once he'd thought he would live in this house, or at least maintain a base there. Fortunately, as things had turned out, he preferred the city. There was little to do in Napa but watch the grapes grow.

"Well, Pilar." His smile was easy, charming as always. "How are you?"

"How am I, Tony?" Hysterical laughter wanted to bubble into her throat. She suppressed it. That was one of her strongest points. "Well enough. And you?"

"I'm good. Busy, of course. Tell me, what do you intend to do about *La Signora's* suggestion you take a more active part in the company?"

"It wasn't a suggestion, and I don't know what I intend to do about it." The idea of it was still buzzing through her head like a swarm of hornets. "I haven't had time to think it through."

"I'm sure you'll be fine." He leaned forward, his face earnest.

That, she thought with a rare flare of bitterness, was part of his skill and his deception. This pretense of caring. This veneer of interest.

"You're a lovely woman, and certainly an asset to the company in any capacity. It'll be good for you to get out and about more, to be occupied. You may even find you have a talent for it. A career might be just what you need."

She had wanted a family. Husband, children. Never a career. "Are we here to talk about my needs, Tony, or yours?"

"They're not exclusive of each other. Not really. Pilar, I think we should look at this new direction Tereza has plotted out as an opportunity for both of us to start fresh."

He took her hand in the easy way he had with women, cupping it protectively and provocatively in his. "Perhaps we needed this push. I realize that the idea of divorce has been difficult for you."

"Do you?"

"Of course." She was going to make it sticky, he thought. What a bore. "The fact is, Pilar, we've led separate lives for a number of years now."

Slowly, deliberately, she pulled her hand from his. “Are you speaking of the lives we’ve led since you moved to San Francisco, or the lives we led while we continued to maintain the pretense of a marriage?”

Very sticky, he thought. And sighed. “Pilar, our marriage failed. It’s hardly constructive to rehash the whys, the blames, the reasons after all this time.”

“I don’t believe we ever actually *hashed* them, Tony. But maybe the time’s past where doing so would make any difference.”

“The fact is by not ending things legally I’ve been unfair to you. You’ve been clearly unable to start a new life.”

“Which hasn’t been a problem for you, has it?” She rose, walked over to stare into the fire. Why was she fighting this? Why did it matter? “Let’s at least be honest here. You came here today to ask me for a divorce, and it had nothing to do with my mother’s decisions. Decisions you knew nothing about when you put that ring on Rene’s finger.”

“Be that as it may, it’s foolish for either of us to pretend this wasn’t long overdue. I put off the divorce for your sake, Pilar.” Saying it, he believed it. Absolutely believed it, which made his tone utterly sincere. “Just as I’m asking for it now, for your sake. It’s time you moved on.”

“No,” she murmured. She didn’t turn yet, not yet, to look at him. Somehow when you looked at him, into those quietly sincere eyes, you ended up believing the lie. “We can’t even be honest here. If you want a divorce, I won’t stop you. I doubt I could in any case. She won’t be as easily handled as I was,” she added, turning back. “Maybe that’s good for you. Maybe she’s right for you. I certainly wasn’t.”

All he heard was that he would get what he wanted without trouble. “I’ll handle the details. Quietly, of course. After all this time, it won’t interest the press. Actually, it’s hardly more than signing a few papers at this point. In fact, I’m sure all but our most intimate friends think we’re already divorced.”

When she said nothing, he got to his feet. “We’ll all be happier once this is behind us. You’ll see. Meanwhile, I think you should speak with Sophia. It’s best coming from you—woman to woman. No doubt that when she sees you’re agreeable, she’ll feel more friendly toward Rene.”

“Do you underestimate everyone, Tony?”

He held up his hands. “I simply feel that we’ll all be more comfortable if we can keep this friendly. Rene will be my wife, and as such will be part of

my professional and social life. We'll all see each other now and then. I expect Sophia to be polite."

"I expected you to be faithful. We all live with our disappointments. You got what you came for, Tony. I'd suggest you take Rene and leave before Mama finishes her port. I think there's been enough unpleasantness in this house for one day."

"Agreed." He started for the door, hesitated. "I do wish you the best, Pilar."

"Yes, I believe you. For some reason, I wish you the same. Goodbye, Tony."

When he closed the doors behind him, she walked carefully to a chair, sat slowly as if her bones might shatter at too sharp a move.

She remembered what it was like to be eighteen and wildly in love, full of plans and dreams and brilliance.

She remembered what it was like to be twenty-three and sliced through the heart by the stab of betrayal and the true loss of innocence. And thirty, fighting to cling to the shreds of a disintegrating marriage, to raise a child and hold a husband who was too careless to pretend to love you.

She remembered what it was like to be forty and resigned to the loss, empty of those dreams, those plans with the brilliance dulled dark.

Now, she thought, she knew what it was to be forty-eight, alone, with no illusions left. Replaced, legally, by the new, improved model, as she'd been replaced covertly so often.

She lifted her hand, slid her wedding ring up to the first knuckle. She'd worn that simple band for thirty years. Now she was being told to discard it, and the promises she'd made before God, before family, before friends.

Tears burned at her eyes as she slipped it from her finger. What was it, after all, she thought, but an empty circle. The perfect symbol for her marriage.

She had never been loved. Pilar let her head fall back. How lowering, how sad, to sit here now and accept, admit what she had refused to accept and admit for so long. No man, not even her husband, had ever loved her.

When the doors opened, she closed her fingers around the ring, willed the tears to wait.

"Pilar." Helen took one look. Her lips tightened. "Okay, let's forget the coffee section of today's entertainment."

At home, she crossed to a painted cabinet, opened it and selected a decanter of brandy. She poured two snifters, then walked over to sit on the footstool in front of Pilar's chair.

“Drink up, honey. You look pale.”

Saying nothing, Pilar opened her hand. The ring glinted once in the firelight.

“Yeah, I figured that when the slut kept flashing the rock of ages on her finger. They deserve each other. He never deserved you.”

“Stupid, stupid to be shaken like this. We haven’t been married for years, not in any real sense. But thirty years, Helen.” She held up the ring and, looking through that empty circle, saw her life. Narrow and encapsulated. “Thirty goddamn years. She was in diapers when I met Tony.”

“That’s the big ouch. So she’s younger and got bigger breasts.” Helen shrugged. “God knows those reasons alone are enough to hate her fucking guts. I’m with you there, and so’s the crowd. But think of this. If she sticks with him, by the time she’s our age, she’ll be feeding him baby food and changing *his* diapers.”

Pilar let out a moaning laugh. “I hate where I am, and I don’t know how to get someplace else. I didn’t even fight back, Helen.”

“So you’re not a warrior.” Helen rose to sit on the arm of the chair, wrapped an arm around Pilar’s shoulder. “You’re a beautiful, intelligent, kind woman who got a raw deal. And damn, honey, if this door finally closing isn’t the best thing for you.”

“God, now you sound like Tony.”

“No need to be insulting. Besides, he didn’t mean that, and I do.”

“Maybe, maybe. I can’t see clearly now. I can’t see through the next hour much less the next year. God, I didn’t even make him pay. Didn’t have the guts to make him pay.”

“Don’t worry, she will.” Helen leaned over, kissed the top of Pilar’s head. No man like Tony should slip through life without paying, she thought.

“And if you want to scald him a bit, I’ll help you outline a divorce settlement that will leave him with permanent scars and one shriveled testicle.”

Pilar smiled a little. She could always count on Helen. “As entertaining as that might be, it’d just drag things out, and make it more difficult for Sophie. Helen, what the hell am I going to do with the new life that’s been dumped in my lap?”

“We’ll think of something.”

Sophia was doing a lot of thinking herself. She was already getting a headache from reading the pages of the contract. She got the gist of it, even mired in the legalese. And the gist was *La Signora* maintained control as she always had. Over the next year Sophia would be expected to prove herself, which she'd thought she had. If she did, to her grandmother's satisfaction, some of that much-desired control would be passed to her hands.

Well, she wanted it. She didn't much care for the way she'd have to go about getting it. But she could see the reasoning.

The hardest part was in nearly always being able to see her grandmother's reasoning. Perhaps because, under it all, they thought so much alike.

She had not taken a deep and intimate interest in the making of wine. Loving the vineyards for their beauty, knowing the basics wasn't the same as investing time, emotion and effort into them. And if she would one day step into her grandmother's place, she needed to do so.

Maybe she preferred boardrooms to fermenting tanks, but . . .

She glanced over at Tyler, who was scowling down at his own contract.

This one took the tanks over the boardroom. That would make them a good business match, or contrast, she supposed. And he had every bit as much at stake as she did.

Yes, *La Signora* had, once again, been as brilliant as she'd been ruthless. Now that her temper had cleared away to allow for cool common sense, she could see not only that it could work, but that it would.

Unless Ty mucked things up.

"You don't like it," she said.

"What the hell's to like about it? It was a goddamn ambush."

"Agreed. That's *Nonna's* style. Troops fall in line more quickly and in a more organized fashion when you order them to right before the battle. Give them too much time to think, they might desert the field. Are you thinking of deserting the field, Ty?"

His gaze lifted, and she saw the steel in his eyes. Hard and cold. "I've run MacMillan for eight years. I'm not walking away from it."

No, he wouldn't muck it up. "Okay. Let's start from there. You want what you want, I want what I want. How do we get it?" She pushed to her feet, paced. "Easier for you."

"Why is that?"

"I essentially give up my apartment and move back home. You get to

stay right where you are. I have to take a crash course in winemaking, and all you have to do is socialize and go to a few meetings now and then.”

“You think that’s easier? Socializing involves people. I don’t like people. And while I’m going to meetings about things I don’t give a rat’s ass about, some guy I don’t even know is going to be looking over my shoulder.”

“Mine, too,” she snapped back. “Who the hell is this David Cutter?”

“A suit,” Ty said in disgust.

“More than that,” Sophia murmured. If she’d believed that, she wouldn’t have been concerned. She knew how to handle suits. “We’ll just have to find out how much more.” That was something she could take care of very shortly, and very thoroughly. “And we’re going to have to find a way to work with him, and each other. The last part shouldn’t be that hard. We’ve known each other for years.”

She was moving fast where he preferred to pace himself. But damned if he wasn’t going to keep up. “No, we haven’t. I don’t know you, or what you do or why you do it.”

She put her palms on the table, leaned forward. Her magnificent face moved close to his. “Sophia Tereza Maria Giambelli. I market wine. And I do it because I’m good at it. And in one year, I’m going to own twenty percent of one of the biggest, most successful and important wine companies in the world.”

He rose slowly, mimicked her pose. “You’re going to have to be good at it, and a lot more for that. You’re going to have to get your hands dirty, and get mud on your designer boots and ruin your pretty manicure.”

“Do you think I don’t know how to work, MacMillan?”

“I think you know how to sit behind a desk or on a first-class seat on a plane. That superior ass of yours isn’t going to find life so cozy for the next year. Giambelli.”

She saw the red haze at the edges of her vision, a sure sign temper was taking over and she was about to do something foolish. “Side bet. Five thousand dollars says I’m a better winemaker than you are executive at the end of the season.”

“Who decides?”

“Neutral party. David Cutter.”

“Done.” He reached over and gripped her slim hand in his big, hard one. “Buy yourself some rough clothes and some boots that were made for work instead of fashion. Be ready to start your first lesson tomorrow, seven A.M.”

“Fine.” She set her teeth. “We’ll break at noon, head down to the city for your first lesson. You can take an hour out to buy some decent suits that have been tailored in the last decade.”

“You’re supposed to move here. Why do we have to go to the city?”

“Because I need a number of things in my office, and you need to be familiarized with the routine there. I also need things from my apartment. You’ve got a strong back and your ass isn’t bad, either,” she added, smiling thinly. “You can help me move.”

“I’ve got something to say.”

“Well, goodness. Let me prepare myself.”

“I don’t like your mouth. Never did.” He jammed his hands in his pockets because when she smirked, as she was doing now, he really just wanted to pop her one. “But I’ve got nothing against you.”

“Oh, Ty. That’s so . . . touching.”

“Look, just shut up.” He dragged a hand through his hair, jammed it back in his pocket. “You do what you do because you’re good at it. I do what I do because I love it. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. I got nothing against you, Sophia, but if it looks like you’re going to cost me my vines, I’ll cut you out.”

Intrigued, and challenged, she studied him from a new angle. Who’d have thought the boy next door could be ruthless? “All right, so warned. And same goes, Ty. Whatever I have to do, I protect what’s mine.”

Blowing out a breath, she looked down at the contracts, then lifted her gaze back to his. “I guess we’re on the same page here.”

“Looks that way.”

“Got a pen?”

“No.”

She walked to a server, found two in a drawer. She offered him one, flipped through her contract to the signature page. “I guess we can witness each other’s.” She drew a deep breath, held it. “On three?”

“One, two. Three.”

In silence, they signed, slid contracts across the table, witnessed.

Because her stomach was churning, Sophia topped off their glasses, waited for Tyler to lift his. “To the new generation,” she said.

“To a good season.”

“We won’t have one without the other.” With her eyes on his, she clinked glasses. “*Salute.*”

CHAPTER FOUR

The rain was razor-thin and mean with cold, a miserable drizzle that sliced through the bones and into the spirit. It turned the light blanket of snow into a mire of mud and the dawn light into a gloomy smear on the sky.

It was the sort of morning when a reasonable person snuggled in bed. Or at the very least lingered over a second cup of coffee.

Tyler MacMillan, Sophia discovered, was not a reasonable person.

The phone woke her, had her sliding a hand reluctantly out of the covers, groping for the receiver, then dragging it under the warmth with her. "What?"

"You're late."

"Huh? I am not. It's still dark."

"It's not dark, it's raining. Get up, get dressed, get out and get over here. You're on my time now."

"But . . ." The drone of the dial tone made her scowl. "Bastard," she muttered, but she couldn't drum up enough energy to put any punch into it.

She lay still, listening to the hiss of rain on the windows. It sounded as if it had ice around the edges. And wouldn't that be pleasant?

Yawning, she tossed back the covers and got out of bed. She might have been on his time now, she thought, but before long he'd be on hers.

The rain dripped off the bill of Ty's cap and occasionally snuck under his collar to slide down his back. Still, it wasn't heavy enough to stop the work.

And a rainy winter was a blessing. A cool, wet winter was the first crucial step toward a rare vintage.

He would control what he could control—the work, the decisions, the precautions and the gambles. And he would pray that nature got on board with the team.

The team, he thought, hooking his thumbs in his pockets and watching Sophia trudge through the mud in her five-hundred-dollar boots, that had increased by one.

"I told you to wear rough clothes."

She puffed out a breath, watched the rain dissolve it. "These are my rough clothes."

He studied her sleek leather jacket, the tailored trousers, the stylish Italian boots. "Well, they will be before it's over."

"I was under the impression rain delayed pruning."

"It's not raining."

"Oh?" Sophia held out a hand, palm up, and let the rain patter into it. "Isn't that strange, I've always defined this wet substance falling out of the sky as rain."

"It's drizzling. Where's your hat?"

"I didn't wear one."

"Jesus." Annoyed, he pulled his own cap off, tugged it over her head. Even its wet, battered ugliness couldn't detract from her style. He imagined it was bred into her, like bones.

"There are two primary reasons for pruning," he began.

"Ty, I'm aware there are reasons for pruning."

"Fine. Explain them to me."

"To train the vine," she said between her teeth. "And if we're going to have an oral lesson, why can't we do it inside where we'd be warm and dry?"

"Because the vines are outside." And because, he thought, here he ran the show. "We prune to train the vines to facilitate their shape for easier cultivation and harvesting, and to control disease."

"Ty—"

"Quiet. A lot of vineyards use trellising techniques instead of hand pruning. Here, because farming's an unending experiment, we use both. Vertical

trellising, the Geneva T-support and other types. But we still use the traditional hand-pruning method. The second purpose is to distribute the bearing wood over the vine to increase its production, while keeping it consistent with the ability to produce top-quality fruit.”

When he told her to be quiet, he did so like a patient parent might to a small, irritable child. She imagined he knew it and fluttered her lashes. “Is there going to be a quiz, Professor?”

“You don’t prune my vines, or learn trellising, until you know why you’re doing it.”

“We prune and trellis to grow grapes. We grow grapes to make wine.”

Her hands moved as she spoke. It was like a ballet, he’d always thought. Graceful and full of meaning.

“And,” she continued, “I sell the wine through clever, innovative promotion and marketing techniques. Which, I’ll remind you, are as essential to this vineyard as your pruning shears.”

“Fine, but we’re in the vineyard, not in your office. You don’t take an action here without being aware of the cause and the consequence.”

“I’ve always thought it more being aware of the odds. It’s a gamble,” she said, gesturing widely. “A high-stakes game, but a game at the core.”

“You play games for fun.”

She smiled now and reminded him of her grandmother. “Not the way I play them, sweetheart. These are older vines here.” She studied the rows on either side of them. The rain was dampening his hair, teasing out those reddish highlights, the color of a good aged Cabernet. “Head pruning here, then.”

“Why?”

She adjusted the bill of the cap. “Because.”

“Because,” he continued, taking his pruners out of their sheath on his belt, “we want the bearing spurs distributed evenly on the head of the vine.”

He turned her, slapped the tool in her hands. He pushed a cane aside, exposing another, then guided her hands toward it and made the cut with her. “We want the center, the top, left open. It needs room to get enough sun.”

“What about mechanical pruning?”

“We do that, too. You don’t.” He shifted her to the next cane. She smelled female, he decided. An exotic counterpoint to the simple perfume of rain and damp earth.

Why the hell did she have to splash on perfume to work in the fields? He

nearly asked her, realized he wouldn't like or understand her reasons, and let it go.

"You work by hand," he told her, and did his level best not to breathe her in. "Cane by cane. Plant by plant. Row by row."

She scanned the endless stream of them, the countless vines being tended by laborers, or waiting to be tended. The pruning, she knew, would run through January, into February. She imagined herself bored senseless with the process before Christmas.

"We break at noon," she reminded him.

"One. You were late."

"Not that late." She turned her head, and her body angled into his. He was leaning over her, his arms around her so that his hands could cover hers on cane and tool. The slight shift was uncalculated. And potent.

Their eyes met, irritation in his, consideration in hers. She felt his body tense, and the tingle of response inside her own. A slightly quickened pulse, a kind of instinctive scenting of the air, and the resulting stir of juices.

"Well, well." She all but purred it, and let her gaze skim down to his mouth, then back again. "Who'd have thought it?"

"Cut it out." He straightened up, took a step back as a man would on finding himself unexpectedly at the edge of a very long drop. But she simply continued her turn so that their bodies brushed again. And a second step back would have marked him a coward. Or a fool.

"Don't worry, MacMillan, you're not my type." Big, rough, elemental. "Usually."

"You're not mine." Sharp, slick, dangerous. "Ever."

If he'd known her better, he'd have realized such a statement wasn't an insult to her. But a challenge. Her mild, and purely elemental, interest climbed up another level. "Really? What is?"

"I don't like cocky, aggressive women with fancy edges."

She grinned. "You will." She turned back to the canes. "We'll break at twelve-thirty." Once again she looked over her shoulder at him. "Compromise. We're going to have to do a lot of it to get through this season."

"Twelve-thirty." He pulled off his gloves, held them out to her. "Wear these. You'll get blisters on those city-girl hands."

"Thanks. They're too big."

"Make do. Tomorrow you bring your own, and you wear a hat. No, not there," he said as she started to clip another cane.

He moved in behind her again, put his hands over hers and angled the tool correctly.

And didn't see her slow, satisfied smile.

Despite the gloves, she got the blisters. They were more annoying than painful as she did a quick change for the afternoon in the city. Dressed and polished, she grabbed her briefcase and called out a goodbye as she dashed out the door. During the short drive to MacMillan she ran over her needs and obligations for the rest of the day. She was going to have to pack quite a bit into a very short amount of time.

She zipped up to the front entrance of the sprawling cedar-and-fieldstone house, gave two quick toots of the horn. He didn't keep her waiting, which pleased her. And he had changed, she noted, so that counted for something. Though the denim shirt and comfortably faded jeans were a long level down from what she considered casual office wear, she decided to tackle his wardrobe later.

He opened the door of her BMW convertible, scowled at her and the ragtop. "You expect me to fold myself into this little toy?"

"It's roomier than it looks. Come on, you're on my time now."

"Couldn't you have driven one of the four-wheels?" he complained as he levered himself into the passenger seat.

He looked, she thought, like a big, cranky Jack in a very small, spiffy box. "Yes, but I didn't. Besides, I like driving my own car." She proved it, the minute his seat belt was secured, by punching the gas and flying down the drive.

She liked the glimpses of mountain through the rain. Like shadows behind a silver curtain. And the row upon row of naked vines, waiting, just waiting for sun and warmth to lure them into life again.

She sped past the MacMillan winery, its faded brick upholstered with vines, its gables proud and stern. It was, to her, a romantic and lovely entrance to the mysteries of the caves it guarded. Inside, as inside the winery at Giambelli, workers would be lifting, twisting the aging bottles of champagne or readying the tasting room if there was a tour or wine club scheduled for the day. Others might be transferring wine from vat to vat as it cleared and clarified.

There was work, she knew, in the buildings, in the caves, in the plants, even as the vines slept.

And, she thought, there was work for her in San Francisco.

She was racing out of the valley like a woman breaking out of jail. Ty wondered if she felt that way.

“Why is my seat warm?”

“Your what? Oh.” She glanced over, laughing. “Just my little way of warming your ass up, darling. Don’t like it?” She clicked the button, turned off the heated seat. “Our top priority,” she began, “is the centennial campaign. There are a lot of stages, some of which, like the auction earlier this week, are already implemented. Others are still on the drawing board. We’re looking for something fresh but that also honors tradition. Something classy and discreet that appeals to our high-end and/or more mature accounts, and something kinky that catches the interest of the younger and/or less affluent market.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Ty, this is something you have to understand the causes and consequences of as well. Selling the wine is every bit as essential as what you do. Otherwise, you’re just making it for yourself, aren’t you?”

He shifted, tried to find room for his legs. “Sure would be easier that way.”

“Look, you make different levels of wine. The superior grade that costs more to produce, more to bottle, more to store and so on, and your middle of the line right down to the jug wine. More goes in the process than the wine.”

“Without the wine, nothing else matters.”

“Be that as it may,” she said with what she considered heroic patience, “it’s part of my job, and now yours, to help sell those grades to the consumer. The individual consumer and the big accounts. Hotels, restaurants. To pull in the wine merchants, the brokers, and make them see they must have Giambelli, or what will now be Giambelli-MacMillan, on their list. To do that, I have to sell the package as well as what’s inside the bottle.”

“The packaging’s fluff,” he said, eyeing her deliberately. “It’s what’s inside that tips the scales.”

“That’s a very clever, and subtle, insult. You get a point. However, packaging, marketing, promotion are what up the product on the scale to begin with. With people, and with wine. Let’s stick with wine for the moment, shall we?”

His lips twitched. Her tone had gone frigid and keen, a sure sign he’d indeed scored a point. “Sure.”

"I have to make the *idea* of the product intriguing, exclusive, accessible, substantial, fun, sexy. So I have to know the product and there we're on even ground. But I also have to know the account, and the market I'm targeting. That's what you have to learn."

"Surveys, statistics, parties, polls, meetings."

She reached over and patted his hand. "You'll live through it." She paused, slowed down slightly. "Do you recognize that van?"

He frowned, squinting through the windshield as a dark, late-model minivan turned on the road up ahead into the entrance to Villa Giambelli. "No."

"Cutter," Sophia muttered. "I just bet it's Cutter."

"We could put off the trip to San Francisco and find out."

It was tempting, and the hope in Ty's voice amused her. Still, she shook her head and kept on driving. "No, that would make him too important. Besides, I'll grill my mother when I get home."

"I want in that loop."

"For better or worse, Ty, you and I are in this together. I'll keep you in my loop, you keep me in yours."

It was a long way from coast to coast. It was, in some ways, another world, a world where everyone was a stranger. He'd ripped out the roots he'd managed to sink into New York concrete with the hope he could plant them here, in the hills and valleys of northern California.

If it had been that, only that, David wouldn't have been worried. He'd have found it an adventure, a thrill, the kind of freewheeling gamble he'd have jumped at in his youth. But when a man was forty-three and had two teenagers depending on him, there was a great deal at stake.

If he'd been certain remaining with La Coeur in New York was what was best for his kids, he'd have stayed there. He'd have stifled there, trapped in the glass and steel of his office. But he'd stopped being sure when his sixteen-year-old son had been picked up for shoplifting, and his fourteen-year-old daughter had started painting her toenails black.

He'd been losing touch with his kids, and in losing touch, losing control. When the offer from Giambelli-MacMillan had fallen in his lap, it had seemed like a sign.

Take a chance. Start fresh.

God knew it wouldn't be the first time he'd done both. But this time he did so with his kids' happiness tossed into the ante.

"This place is in the middle of nowhere."

David glanced in the rearview mirror at his son. Maddy had won the toss in San Francisco and sat, desperately trying to look bored, in the front seat. "How," David asked, "can nowhere have a middle? I've always wondered that."

He had the pleasure of seeing Theo smirk, the closest he came to a genuine smile these days.

He looks like his mother, David thought. A young male version of Sylvia. Which, David knew, neither Theo nor Sylvia would appreciate. They had that in common as well, both of them bound and determined to be seen as individuals.

For Sylvia, that had meant stepping out of marriage and away from motherhood. For Theo . . . time, David supposed, would tell.

"Why does it have to be raining?" Maddy slumped in her seat and tried not to let her eyes gleam with excitement as she studied the huge stone mansion in front of the car.

"Well, it has something to do with moisture gathering in the atmosphere, then—"

"Dad." She giggled, and to David it was music.

He was going to get his children back here, whatever it took. "Let's go meet *La Signora*."

"Do we have to call her that?" Maddy rolled her eyes. "It's so medieval."

"Let's start out with Ms. Giambelli and work from there. And let's try to look normal."

"Mad can't. Geeks never look normal."

"Neither do freaks." Maddy clumped out of the car on her ugly black boots with their two-inch platforms. She stood in the rain, looking to her father like some sort of eccentric princess with her long pale hair, pouty lips and long-lashed blue eyes. Her little body—she was still such a little thing—was draped and swathed in layers of black. There were three silver chains dangling from her right ear—a compromise, as David had been terrified when she'd started campaigning to have her nose, or somewhere even more unsanitary, pierced.

Theo was a dark contrast. Tall, gangly, with his deep brown hair a curling, unkempt mass around his pretty face, straggling toward his still bony

shoulders. His eyes were a softer blue, and too often for his father's taste, clouded and unhappy.

He slouched now in jeans that were too baggy, shoes nearly as ugly as his sister's and a jacket that sagged past his hips.

Just clothes, David reminded himself. Clothes and hair, nothing permanent. Hadn't his own parents nagged him into rebellion about his personal style when he'd been a teenager? And hadn't he promised himself he wouldn't do the same with his kids?

But God, he wished they'd at least wear clothes that fit.

He walked up the wide fan of steps, then stood in front of the deeply carved front door of the villa and dragged a hand through his own thick, dark blond hair.

"What's the matter, Dad? Nervous?"

There was a smirk in his son's voice, just enough of one to strain the wire holding David's composure together. "Give me a break, okay?"

Theo opened his mouth, a sarcastic retort on the tip of his tongue. But he caught the warning look his sister gave him and saw his father's strained expression. "Hey, you can handle her."

"Sure." Maddy shrugged. "She's just an old Italian woman, right?"

With a half-laugh, David punched his finger to the buzzer. "Right."

"Wait, I gotta get my normal face on." Theo put his hands on his face, shoving, pulling at the skin, drawing his eyes down, twisting his mouth. "I can't find it."

David hooked an arm around his neck, and the other around Maddy's. They were going to be all right, he thought, and held on. They were going to be fine.

"I'll get it, Maria!" Pilar dashed down the foyer, a spray of white roses in her arms.

When she opened the door she saw a tall man holding two children in headlocks. All three of them were grinning.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

Not an old Italian woman, David thought as he hastily released his children. Just a beautiful woman, with surprise in her eyes and roses lying in the crook of her arm. "I'm here to see Ms. Giambelli."

Pilar smiled, scanned the faces of the boy and girl to include them. "There are so many of us."

"Tereza Giambelli. I'm David Cutter."

“Oh. Mr. Cutter. I’m sorry.” She held out a hand for his. “I didn’t realize you were expected today.” Or that you had a family, she thought. Her mother hadn’t been forthcoming with details. “Please come in. I’m Pilar. Pilar Giambelli . . .” She nearly added her married name, a force of habit. Then determinedly let it go. “*La Signora’s* daughter.”

“Do you call her that?” Maddy asked.

“Sometimes. When you meet her, you’ll see why.”

“Madeline, my daughter. My son, Theodore.”

“Theo,” Theo mumbled.

“I’m delighted to meet you. Theo. And Madeline.”

“Maddy, okay?”

“Maddy. Come into the parlor. There’s a nice fire. I’ll arrange for some refreshments if that suits you. Such a nasty day. I hope it wasn’t a terrible trip.”

“Not so bad.”

“Endless,” Maddy corrected. “Awful.” But she stared at the room when they entered. It was like a palace, she thought. Like a picture in a book, where everything was in rich colors and looked old and precious.

“I bet it was. Let me have your coats.”

“They’re wet,” David began, but she simply plucked them out of his hand and draped them over her free arm.

“I’ll take care of them. Please, sit, make yourselves at home. I’ll let my mother know you’re here and see about something hot to drink. Would you like coffee, Mr. Cutter?”

“I absolutely would, Ms. Giambelli.”

“So would I.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” he said to Maddy and had her sulking again.

“A latte, perhaps?”

“That’s cool. I mean,” she corrected when her father’s elbow reminded her of her manners, “yes, thank you.”

“And, Theo?”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you.”

“It’ll just take a minute.”

“Man.” Theo waited until Pilar was safely out of the room, then plopped into a chair. “They must be mega-rich. This place looks like a museum or something.”

“Don’t put your boots up on that,” David ordered.

“It’s a footstool,” Theo pointed out.

“Once you put feet into those boots they cease to be feet.”

“Chill, Dad.” Maddy gave him a bracing, and distressingly adult, pat on the back. “You’re like COO and everything.”

“Right.” From executive vice president, operations, to chief operating officer, in one three-thousand-mile leap. “Bullets bounce off me,” he murmured, then turned toward the doorway when he heard footsteps.

He started to tell his kids to stand up, but he didn’t have to bother. When Tereza Giambelli walked into a room, people got to their feet.

He’d forgotten she was so petite. They’d had two meetings in New York, face-to-face. Two long, involved meetings. And still he’d walked away from them with the image of a statuesque Amazon rather than the fine-boned, slim woman who walked toward him now. The hand she offered him was small and strong.

“Mr. Cutter. Welcome to Villa Giambelli.”

“Thank you, *signora*. You have a beautiful home in a magnificent setting. My family and I are grateful for your hospitality.”

Pilar stepped into the room in time to hear the smooth speech and see the practiced formality with which it was delivered. It was not, she thought, what she’d expected from the man holding two travel-rumpled teenagers in playful headlocks. Not, she decided, noting the sidelong glances from his children, what they were used to from him.

“I hope the trip wasn’t tedious,” Tereza continued, shifting her attention to the children.

“Not at all. We enjoyed it. *Signora* Giambelli, I’d like to introduce you to my children. My son, Theodore, and my daughter, Madeline.”

“Welcome to California.” She offered her hand to Theo, and though he felt foolish, he shook it and resisted sticking his own in his pocket.

“Thanks.”

Maddy accepted the hand. “It’s nice to be here.”

“You hope it will be,” Tereza said with a hint of a smile. “That’s enough for now. Please, sit. Be comfortable. Pilar, you’ll join us.”

“Of course.”

“You must be proud of your father,” Tereza began as she took a seat. “And all he’s accomplished.”

“Ah . . . sure.” Theo sat, remembered not to slouch. He didn’t know much about his father’s work. In his world, his dad went to the office, then came home. He nagged about schoolwork, burned dinner, sent for takeout.

Or, mostly during the last year, had called home and said he'd be late and Theo or Maddy should call for takeout.

"Theo's more interested in music than wine, or the business of wine," David commented.

"Ah. And you play?"

This was his father's deal, Theo thought. How come he had to answer so many questions? Adults didn't get it anyway. "Guitar. And piano."

"You must play for me sometime. I enjoy music. What sort do you prefer?"

"There's just rock. I go for techno, and alternative."

"Theo writes music," David put in, and surprised a blink out of his son. "It's interesting material."

"I'd like to hear it once everyone's settled. And you," Tereza said to Maddy. "Do you play?"

"I had piano lessons." She shrugged a shoulder. "I'm not really into it. I want to be a scientist." Her brother's snort had her temper rising.

"Maddy's interested in everything." David spoke quickly before blood could be shed. "The high school here, from what I've been told, should speak to both her and Theo's specific interests very well."

"Arts and science." Tereza leaned back. "They take after their father then, as wine is both. I assume you'll want a few days to settle in," she continued as a cart was wheeled in. "A new position, a new location, new people. And, of course, a new school and routine for your family."

"Dad says it's an adventure," Maddy said and earned a stately nod from Tereza.

"And we'll try to make it so."

"I'm at your disposal, *signora*," David said, and watched Pilar as she rose to serve coffees and cakes. "I appreciate, again, the use of your guest house. I'm sure settling in will be a pleasure."

Because he was watching her, he caught the quick widening of Pilar's eyes. So, he thought, that one comes as a surprise to you. I wonder why. "Thanks."

"Enjoy," Pilar murmured.

When the coffee was served, they fell into light conversation. David followed Tereza's lead and left business out of it. Time enough, he concluded, to get to the meat.

In precisely twenty minutes, Tereza got to her feet. "I regret my husband

was unavailable to see you today, and meet your charming children. Would it be convenient for you to meet with us tomorrow?"

"At your convenience, *signora*." David rose.

"At eleven then. Pilar, will you show the Cutters the guest house, and see they have all they need?"

"Certainly. I'll just get our coats."

What the hell was this? Pilar wondered as she retrieved jackets. Normally she had her finger on the pulse of the household. Yet her mother had managed to slip an entire family in on her without sending up a single alarm.

So many changes, and practically overnight. It was time she paid more attention, she decided. She didn't care for the order of things to change when she wasn't prepared for it.

Still, she conversed easily when she returned and geared herself up to play gracious hostess. "It's a short drive. An easy walk really, in good weather."

"Winter rain's good for the grapes." David took her jacket, helped her into it.

"Yes. So I'm reminded whenever I complain about the wet." She stepped outside. "There's a direct line from house to house, so you've only to call if you need anything or have a question. Our housekeeper's Maria, and there's nothing she can't do. Thank you," she added when David opened the side door of the van for her.

"You'll have wonderful views," she added, shifting around to speak to the children when they climbed in the back. "From whichever bedrooms you choose. And there's a pool. Of course, you won't be able to enjoy that just now, but you're welcome to use the indoor pool here at the main house whenever you like."

"An indoor pool?" Theo's mood brightened. "Cool."

"That doesn't mean you drop in wearing your bathing trunks whenever you feel like it," his father warned. "You don't want to give them the run of the house, Ms. Giambelli. You'll be in therapy in a week."

"Hasn't worked for you," Theo shot back.

"We'll enjoy having young people around. And it's Pilar, please."

"David."

Behind their backs, Maddy turned to her brother and fluttered her lashes wildly.

“David. Just take the left fork. You can see the house there. It’s a pretty place, and the rain gives it a bit of a fairy-tale aspect.”

“Is that it?” Suddenly interested, Theo leaned up. “It’s pretty big.”

“Four bedrooms. Five baths. There’s a lovely living room, but the kitchen/great room is friendlier, I think. Anybody cook?”

“Dad pretends to,” Maddy said. “And we pretend to eat it.”

“Smart-ass. Do you?” David asked Pilar. “Cook?”

“Yes, and very well, but rarely. Well, perhaps your wife will enjoy the kitchen when she joins you.”

The instant and absolute silence had Pilar cringing inside.

“I’m divorced.” David pulled up in front of the house. “It’s just the three of us. Let’s check it out. We’ll get the stuff later.”

“I’m very sorry,” Pilar murmured when the kids bolted from the van. “I shouldn’t have assumed—”

“Natural assumption. A man, a couple of kids. You expect the full family complement. Don’t worry about it.” He patted her hand casually, then reached across to open her door. “You know, they’re going to have to fight over the bedrooms. I hope you don’t mind screaming scenes.”

“I’m Italian,” was all she said and stepped out into the rain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Italian. David thought later. And gorgeous. Aloof and gracious at the same time. Not an easy trick. In that area, she was her mother's daughter.

He knew how to read people, an invaluable trick of the trade in the climb up the slippery executive ladder in any major corporation. His read of Pilar Giambelli was that she was as accustomed to giving orders as she was to taking them.

He knew she was married, and to whom, but since she hadn't been wearing a ring he assumed the marriage to the infamous Tony Avano was over, or in serious trouble. He'd have to find out which before he let himself consider her on a more personal level.

There was a daughter. Anyone in the business had heard of Sophia Giambelli. A firecracker by reputation who had style and ambition in spades. He'd be meeting her along the way, and wondered just how she'd taken to his induction as COO. Might have to play some politics there, he mused, and reached for the cigarettes in his pocket. Only to remember they weren't there because he'd quit three weeks and five days earlier.

And it was killing him.

Think about something else, he ordered himself, and tuned in to the music played at a brutal volume in his son's new room. Thank God it was at the other end of the hall.

There'd been the expected combat over bedrooms. Still, his kids had been fairly restrained all in all. He put that down to reluctant manners in

front of a stranger. In any case the squabble had been out of habit and without real heat as every room in the house was appealing.

Damn near perfect, he thought, with its gleaming wood and tile, silky walls and lush furnishings.

The perfection, the casually elegant style, the absolute order of things gave him the willies. But he expected the kids would soon put that to rights. Tidy they weren't. So however polished the box, the contents would soon be jumbled and they'd all feel more at home.

Already weary of unpacking, he wandered to one of the windows and stared out over the fields. Pilar was right. The view was stunning. This was part of his turf now. He intended to leave his mark.

Down the hall Maddy wandered out of her room. She'd tried to act casual about it after arguing with Theo over who got what. The fact was she was thrilled. For the first time in her life she didn't have to share a bathroom with her idiot brother. And hers was done in this cool pattern of dark blues and deep reds. Big splashy flowers, so she imagined taking a bath there would be like swimming in some weird garden.

Plus she had a huge four-poster bed. She'd locked the door so she could roll all over it in privacy.

Then she'd remembered that she wouldn't see New York when she looked out the windows, or be able to call one of her friends and hang out. She wouldn't be able to walk to the movies whenever she felt like it. She wouldn't be able to do anything she was used to doing.

Homesickness had settled so hot and heavy in her belly it ached. The only person she could talk to was Theo. It was the poorest of choices, in her opinion, but the only one left.

She pushed open his door to a blast of the Chemical Brothers. He was lying on his bed, his guitar across his chest as he tried to match the guitar riff blasting on his stereo. The room was already in chaos, as she imagined it would stay until he moved out to go to college.

He was such a pig.

"You're supposed to be unpacking."

"You're supposed to mind your own business."

She flopped, stomach down, on the foot of his bed. "There's nothing to do here."

"You just figuring that out?"

"Maybe Dad'll hate it, and we'll go home."

“No chance. Did you see how he slicked up for the old lady?” Because he felt homesick, too, he set his guitar aside and opted to speak to the bane of his existence. “What’s up with that?”

“He sounded like something out of a movie. You know how he looks when he puts on one of his suits for a meeting?” She rolled over on her back. “He sounded like he looks then. Nothing’s going to be the same now. He was looking at that woman.”

“Huh?”

“The Pilar woman. What kind of a name is that?”

“I guess it’s Italian or something. What do you mean looking at her?”

“You know. Scoping her out.”

“Get out.”

“Man, guys don’t notice anything.” Feeling superior, she sat up, tossed back her hair. “He was checking her out.”

“So what?” Theo gave a little jerk of the body, a horizontal shrug. “He’s checked out women before. Hey, I bet he’s even had sex with some of them.”

“Gee, you think?” While the sarcasm dripped, she pushed off the bed to pace to the window. Rain and vines, vines and rain. “Maybe if he has sex with his boss’s daughter, he’ll get caught, he’ll get fired, and we’ll go back home.”

“Home where? He loses his job, we’ve got no place to go. Grow up, Maddy.”

She hunched her shoulders. “This sucks.”

“Tell me about it.”

Ty was thinking the same thing about life in general as Sophia whipped him into a meeting—a brainstorming session, she called it. She’d rattled off names at him as she’d zipped through the advertising section. Gesturing, calling out orders and greetings, snatching up messages as she went.

He remembered none of the names, of course, and the faces had all been a blur as he’d kept pace with Sophia. The woman moved like a linebacker with an intercepted ball in her hand. Fast and slick.

There were three other people in the room now, all what he thought of as Urban Warriors with their trendy clothes and trendy hair and little wire-rim

glasses and electronic palm books. Two were female, one was male. All were young and handsome. He couldn't for the life of him remember who was who, as they'd all had androgynous names.

He had some kind of fancy coffee in his hand he hadn't wanted and everyone was talking at once and munching on biscotti.

He was getting a killer headache.

"No, Kris, what I'm looking for is subtle but powerful. A strong image with an emotional message. Trace, quick sketch: couple—young, casual, late twenties. Relaxing on a porch. Sexual, but keep it casual."

Since the man with the blond choppy hair picked up the pencil and sketch pad, Ty assumed he was Trace.

"It's sunset," Sophia continued, rising from her desk to wander the room. "End of day. This is a working couple, no kids, upwardly mobile, but settled."

"Porch swing," the perky black woman in a red vest suggested.

"Too settled. Too country. Wicker love seat, maybe," Sophia said. "Strong color in the cushions. Candles on the table. Fat ones, not tapers."

She leaned over Trace's shoulder, made humming noises. "Good, good, but do it this way. Have them looking at each other, maybe have her leg swung over his knees. Friendly intimacy. Roll up his sleeves, put her in jeans, no, in khakis."

She sat on the edge of her desk, lips pursed as she pondered. "I want them to be having a conversation. Relaxed, having a moment. Enjoying each other's company after a busy day."

"What if one of them's pouring the wine. Holding the bottle."

"We'll try that. You want to sketch that one out, P.J.?"

With a nod perky P.J., as Ty now thought of her, picked up her pad.

"You should have water." The second woman, a redhead who looked bored and annoyed, stifled a yawn.

"I see we've interrupted Kris's nap," Sophia said sweetly, and Ty caught the quick, simmering glare under the redhead's lowered lashes.

"Suburban scenes bore me. At least water adds an element, and subliminal sexuality."

"Kris wants water." Sophia nodded, pushed to her feet to wander the room while she considered. "Water's good. A pond, a lake. We can get good light from that. Reflections. Take a look, Ty. What do you think?"

He did his best to tune back in and look intelligent as Trace turned his sketch around. "I don't know anything about advertising. It's a nice sketch."

"You look at ads," Sophia reminded him. "All the time, whether you consciously take in the message or not. What does this say to you?"

"It says they're sitting on the porch drinking wine. Why can't they have kids?"

"Why should they?"

"You got a couple, on a porch. Porch usually means house. Why can't they have kids?"

"Because we don't want young kids in an ad for an alcoholic beverage," Kris said, with a hint of a sneer in her voice. "Advertising 101."

"Evidence of kids then. You know, some toys on the porch. Then it says these people have a family, have been together awhile and are still happy to sit on the porch together and have a glass of wine at the end of the day. That's sexy."

Kris started to open her mouth, then noted the gleam come into Sophia's eyes. And wisely closed it again.

"That's good. That's excellent," Sophia said. "Even better for this one. Toss toys on the porch, Trace. Keep the wine bottle on the table with the candles. Here's our cozy yet hip suburban couple.

"Celebrate the sunset," she murmured. "It's your moment. Relax with Giambelli. It's your wine."

"More cozy than hip," Kris muttered.

"We use an urban setting for hip. Two couples, friends getting together for an evening. Apartment scene. Keep them young, keep them slick. Show me the city out the window. Lights and silhouettes."

"Coffee table," PJ. put in, already sketching. "A couple of them sitting on the floor. The others lounging on the couch, everybody talking at once. You can almost hear music playing. Food scattered on the table. Takeout. This is where we pour the wine."

"Good, perfect. Celebrate Tuesday. Same tags."

"Why Tuesday?" Ty wanted to know in spite of himself.

"Because you never make big plans for Tuesday." Sophia slid onto the edge of the desk again, crossed her legs. "You make plans for the weekend. You fall into plans otherwise. Tuesday night with friends is spontaneous. We want people to pick up a bottle of our wine on the spur. Just because it's Tuesday. Your moment, your wine. That's the pitch."

"The wine's Giambelli-MacMillan."

She nodded. "Correct. We need to identify that as well within the cam-

paign. A wedding. Celebrate our marriage. Champagne, flowers, a gorgeous couple.”

“Honeymoon’s sexier,” Trace commented as he refined his other sketch. “Same elements, but in a snazzy hotel room. Wedding dress hanging on the door and our couple in a lip lock with champagne on ice.”

“If they’re in a lip lock, they’re not going to be thinking about drinking,” Ty said.

“Good point. Hold the kiss, but the rest is great. Show me . . .” Her hands began to move. “Anticipation. Silk, flowers, and put the flutes in their hands. Give me eye lock instead of lip lock. Go, my children, and create magic. See what you can get me in the next few hours. Think: Moments. The special and the ordinary.”

She recrossed her legs as her team headed out, talking over one another. “Not bad, MacMillan. Not bad at all.”

“Good. Can we go home now?”

“No. I’ve got a lot of stuff to deal with here, and more to pack up in order to set up an office at the villa. Can you draw?”

“Sure.”

“That’s a plus.” She scooted off the desk to cross over and dig a sketch pad from a wall of shelves.

There were a lot of things on the shelves, Ty noted. Not just business junk, but the knickknacks people, particularly female people, in his opinion, seemed to collect. Leading the pack of the dust catchers were frogs. Little green frogs, larger bronze frogs, dancing frogs, fashionably dressed frogs and what appeared to be mating frogs.

They didn’t seem to jibe with the sleekly dressed woman who bulleted down office corridors on high heels and smelled like a night in the forest.

“Looking for a prince?”

“Hmm?” She glanced back, following his gesture. “Oh. No, princes are too high-maintenance. I just like frogs. Here’s what I see. A kind of montage. The vineyards, the sweep of them in the sunlight. Vines pregnant with grapes. A solitary figure walking through the rows. Then close up, enormous baskets of grapes, just harvested.”

“We don’t use baskets.”

“Work with me here, Ty. Simplicity, accessibility, tradition. Gnarled hands holding the basket. Then on to the casks, rows and rows of wooden casks, dim light of the caves. The mystery, the romance. A couple of interesting-looking

guys in work clothes drawing out the free flow. We'll use red, a lovely spill of red wine out of a cask. Then different workers tasting, testing. Then finally a bottle. Maybe two glasses and a corkscrew beside it.

"From vine to table. A hundred years of excellence. No, from *our* vines to *your* table." Her brow furrowed as she pictured the ad in her mind. "We lead with the hundred years of excellence, then the montage, and below: From our vines to your table. The Giambelli-MacMillan tradition continues."

She turned back to him, looked over his shoulder, then let out a snort. He'd been sketching while she talked, and the result was circles and stick men and a lopsided column she supposed was a bottle of red.

"You said you could draw."

"I didn't say I could draw well."

"Okay, we're in some trouble here. Sketching isn't my strong suit, though compared to you, I'm da Vinci. I work better when I have some visual aides." She blew out a breath, paced. "We'll make do. I'll have the team fax me sketches as we go. We'll coordinate schedules so that we can hold a weekly session either here or at my office in the villa."

She dropped down on the arm of his chair, frowned into space. She was tuned in to her team, and had sensed the undercurrents. It was something she needed to deal with right away. "I need a half hour here. Why don't you head over to Armani, and I'll meet you there."

"Why am I going to Armani?"

"Because you need clothes."

"I have plenty of clothes."

"Honey, your clothes are like your drawing. They meet the basic definition, but they aren't going to win any prizes. I get to outfit you, then you can buy me the proper vintner attire." She gave his shoulder an idle pat, then rose.

He wanted to argue, but didn't want to waste time. The sooner they were finished and driving north, the happier he'd be.

"Where's Armani?"

She stared at him. The man had lived an hour out of San Francisco for years. How could he not know? "See my assistant. She'll point you in the right direction. I'll be right behind you."

"One suit," Ty warned as he walked to the door. "That's it."

"Mmm." They would see about that, she thought. It might be fun to dress him up a bit. Sort of like molding clay. But before the fun started, she

had work. She walked back to her desk and picked up the phone. “Kris, can I see you a minute? Yeah, now. My time’s pretty tight.”

With a roll of her shoulders, Sophia began gathering files and disks.

She’d worked with Kris for more than four years, and was very aware there had been considerable resentment when the fresh-out-of-college Sophia had taken over as head of the department. They’d come to terms, delicately, but she had no doubt that Kris’s nose was now seriously out of joint.

Couldn’t be helped, Sophia thought. Had to be dealt with.

There was a brisk knock, and Kris stepped in. “Sophia, I’ve got a pile of work.”

“I know. Five minutes. It’s going to be rough shuffling things around between here and Napa for the next several months. I’m in a pinch, Kris.”

“Really? You don’t look pinched.”

“You didn’t see me pruning vines at dawn. Look, my grandmother has reasons for what she does and how she does them. I don’t always understand them, and I very often don’t like them, but it’s her company. I just work here.”

“Right. Um-hmm.”

Sophia stopped packing up, laid her palms on her desk and met Kris’s eyes dead-on. “If you think I’m going to enjoy juggling my time between the work I love and mucking around the vineyards, you’re crazy. And if you think Tyler is gunning for a position here in these offices, think again.”

“Excuse me, but he now *has* a position in these offices.”

“And one you believe should be yours. I’m not going to disagree with you, but I’m telling you it’s temporary. I need you here. I’m not going to be able to drive down here every day, I’m not going to be able to take all the meetings or delegate every assignment. Essentially, Kris, you’ve just been promoted. You don’t get a new title, but I will do everything I can to see that you get the financial compensation for the extra responsibilities that are about to be dumped on you.”

“It’s not about the money.”

“But money never hurts,” Sophia finished. “Ty’s position here, and his title, are titular. He doesn’t know anything about promotion and marketing, Kris, and isn’t particularly interested in either.”

“Interested enough to make comments and suggestions this morning.”

“Just a minute.” She could be patient, Sophia thought, but she would not be pushed. “Do you expect him to sit here like a moron? He’s entitled to ex-

press an opinion, and it so happens he made very decent suggestions. He's been tossed off the cliff without a parachute, and he's coping. Take a lesson."

Kris set her teeth. She'd been with Giambelli nearly ten years and was sick to death of being passed over for their precious bloodline. "He has a parachute, and so do you. You were born with it. Either one of you screw up, you bounce. That doesn't go for the rest of us."

"I won't go into personal family business with you. I will say you're a valued member of the Giambelli, and now the Giambelli-MacMillan, organization. I'm sorry if you feel your skills and talents have been overlooked or undervalued. Whatever I can do to correct this, will be done. But these adjustments must be made, and over the next several months it would pay all of us to make sure we don't screw up. I have to be able to depend on you. If I can't, I need you to let me know so that I can make other arrangements."

"I'll do my job." Kris turned to the door, yanked it open. "And yours."

"Well," Sophia murmured when the door slammed smartly. "That was fun." On a sigh, she picked up her phone again. "P.J., I need a minute."

"No, we want classic. This very subtle chalk stripe to start."

"Fine, great. I'll take it. Let's go."

"Tyler." Sophia pursed her lips and patted his cheek. "Go try it on, like a good boy."

He snagged her wrist. "Mom?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Cut it out."

"If you'd done more than brood for the last thirty minutes on your own, we'd be practically out the door. This one," she said, handing him the rich brown with narrow stripes, "and this." She selected a classic black three-piece.

To cut off any complaints, she wandered away from him to ponder the shirts. "Shawn?" She gestured to one of the associates she knew by sight. "My friend Mr. MacMillan? He's going to need guidance."

"I'll take good care of him, Ms. Giambelli. By the way, your father and his fiancée were in just this morning."

"Really?"

"Yes, shopping for their honeymoon. If you're looking for something special for the wedding, we have a fabulous new evening jacket that would be smashing on you."

"I'm a little pressed for time today," she managed. "I'll come back and see it first chance I get."

"Just let me know. I'll be happy to send some selections to you for approval. I'll just check on Mr. MacMillan."

"Thanks." She picked up a dress shirt blindly, stared hard at the cream-on-cream pattern.

Not wasting a minute, she thought. Shopping for the honeymoon before the divorce is final. Spreading the word far and wide.

Maybe, maybe it was best she'd be out of her usual loop in the city for a while. She wouldn't be running into people chatting about her father's wedding every time she turned around.

Why was she letting it hurt her? And if it did, this much, how much worse was it on her mother?

No point in raging, she told herself, and started through the shirts like a woman panning for gold in a fast stream. No point in sulking.

No point in thinking.

She moved from shirts to ties and had a small mountain of choices when Ty came out of the dressing room.

He looked annoyed, faintly mortified and absolutely gorgeous.

Take the farmer out of the dell, she mused, and just look what you got. Big, broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs in a classic Italian suit.

"My, my." She angled her head, approving. "You do clean up well, MacMillan. Leave fashion to the Italians and you can't go wrong. Call the tailor, Shawn, and let's get this show on the road."

She walked over with two shirts, the cream-on-cream and a deep brown, held them up to the jacket.

"What's the matter?" Ty asked her.

"Nothing. Both of these will do very well."

He took her wrist again, holding it until she shifted her gaze to his. "What's wrong, Sophie?"

"Nothing," she repeated, troubled that he could see the worry brewing inside her. "Nothing important. You look good," she added, working up a smile. "All sturdy and sexy."

"They're just clothes."

She pressed a hand to her heart, staggered back a step. "MacMillan, if you can think that, we have a long way to go before we get close to middle

ground." She plucked up a tie, draped it over the shirt. "Yes, definitely. How do the pants fit?" she began and reached down to check the waistband.

"Do you mind?" Flustered, he batted her hand away.

"If I was going to grope, I'd start lower. Why don't you put on the black suit? The tailor can fuss with you."

He grumbled for form, but was relieved to escape to the privacy of the dressing room. Nobody was going to fuss with him for another minute or two.

He wasn't attracted to Sophia. Absolutely not. But the woman had been studying him, touching him. He was human, wasn't he? A male human. And he'd had a perfectly natural human male reaction.

Which he was not going to share with some tailor or a skinny clerk named Shawn.

What he would do was calm himself back down, let them measure whatever needed to be measured. He'd buy everything Sophia pushed on him and get the ordeal over with.

He wished he knew what had happened between the time he'd gone into the dressing area the first time and come out again. Whatever it was had put unhappiness into those big, dark eyes of hers. The kind of unhappiness that made him want to give her a shoulder to lean on.

That was a normal reaction, too, he assured himself as he stripped off the chalk-stripped and put on the black. He didn't like to see anything or anyone hurting.

Still, under the circumstances he was going to have to stifle any and all normal reactions to her.

He glanced at himself in the mirror, shook his head. Who the hell were either of them going to fool by dressing him up in some snappy three-piece suit? He was a damn farmer, and happy to be one.

Then he made the mistake of looking at the tag. He'd never realized a series of numbers could actually stop the heart.

He was still in shock, and no longer remotely aroused, when Shawn came chirpily into the dressing room with the tailor in tow.

"Consider it an investment," Sophia advised as she drove out of the city and north. "And darling, you did look fabulous."

"Shut up. I'm not talking to you."

God, he was cute, she thought. Who knew? “Didn’t I buy everything you told me to buy? Even that ugly flannel shirt?”

“Yeah, and what did it cost you? Shirts, some trousers, a hat and boots. Under five hundred bucks. My bill came to nearly twenty times that. I can’t believe I got hosed for ten thousand dollars.”

“You’ll look every inch the successful executive. You know, if I met you when you were wearing that black suit, I’d want you.”

“Is that so?” He tried to stretch out his legs in the little car, and failed. “I wasn’t wearing it this morning and you wanted me.”

“No. I had a momentary lust surge. Entirely different. But there’s something about a man in a well-cut three-piece suit that does it for me. What does it for you?”

“Naked women. I’m a simple man.”

She laughed and, pleased to be on the open road, punched the gas. “No, you’re not. I thought you were, but you’re not. You did well in the office today. You held your own.”

“Words and pictures.” He shrugged. “What’s the big deal?”

“Oh now, don’t spoil it. Ty, I didn’t say anything before we went in because I didn’t want your impressions to be colored with my opinions, or my experience, but I think I should give you a basic personality rundown of the people you’ll work most closely with on my end.”

“The guy goes along. He’s got a good brain for what he does and likes the work. Probably single so he doesn’t have someone pushing him in the ambition department. And he likes working around attractive women.”

“Close enough.” Impressed, she glanced over at him. “And a good thumbnail for someone who claims not to like people.”

“Not liking them much doesn’t mean I can’t read them. Perky P.J. now . . .” He trailed off as she glanced his way and laughed. “What?” he said.

“Perky P.J. That’s perfect.”

“Yeah, well, she’s got a lot of energy. You intimidate her, but she tries not to let it show. She wants to be you when she grows up but she’s young enough to change her mind about that.”

“She’s easy to work with. She’ll take whatever you toss at her and make it shine. She’s good at finding fresh angles, and she’s learned not to be afraid to squash an idea one of us lobs that doesn’t hit the mark with her. If you run into snags that I’m not around to untangle, you should go to her.”

“Because the redhead already hates my guts,” Ty finished. “And doesn’t

think much of yours, either. She doesn't want to be you when she grows up. She wants to be you now, and she wouldn't mind if you had a sudden, bloody accident that took you out so she could step into your shoes and run the show."

"You did get a lot out of your first day in school. Kris is good, really good with concepts, with campaigns and, when it's something she believes in, with details. She's not a good manager because she rubs people wrong and tends to be high-handed with other members of the staff. And you're right, at the moment she hates you just because you exist in what she considers her space. It's not personal."

"Yeah, it is. It's always personal. It doesn't worry me, but if I were you, I'd watch my back. She'd like to leave her heel marks all over your ass."

"She's tried, and she's failed." Idly, Sophia tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel. "I'm a great deal tougher than people think I am."

"I got that already."

Ty settled back as best he could. They'd see how tough she was after a few weeks in the field.

It was going to be a long, chilly winter.

CHAPTER SIX

Pilar was nearly asleep, finally, when the phone rang at two A.M. She shot up in bed, snatching at the phone as her heart slammed into her throat.

An accident? Death? Tragedy?

"Hello. Yes?"

"You ignorant bitch. Do you think you can scare me off?"

"What?" Her hand trembled as she raked it through her hair.

"I'm not going to tolerate you or your pitiful attempts at harassment."

"Who is this?" She groped for the light, then blinked in the sudden flash.

"You know damn well who it is. You got a fucking nerve calling me, spouting off your filth. Shut up, Tony. I'll say what I have to say."

"Rene?" Recognizing her husband's placating voice in the background, Pilar struggled to clear her head, to think over the wild drumming of her heart. "What is this? What's the matter?"

"Just cut the goddamn innocent act. It might work with Tony, but it doesn't with me. I know what you are. You're the whore, sweetheart, not me. You're the fucking liar, the fucking hypocrite. If you ever call here again—"

"I didn't call." Fighting for calm, Pilar dragged the covers up to her chin. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Either you or your bitch of a daughter, and it's all the same to me. Get this straight. You're out of the picture, and you have been for years. You're a frigid, dried-up excuse for a woman. Fifty-year-old virgin. Tony and I have

already seen the lawyers, and we're making legal what everyone's known for years. There isn't a man out there who wants you. Unless it's for your mother's money."

"Rene, Rene. Stop. Stop now. Pilar?"

Pilar heard Tony's voice through the rush of blood in her head. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm sorry. Someone called here, said perfectly vile things to Rene. She's very upset." He had to shout over the shrieks. "Of course, I told her you'd never do such a thing, but she . . . she's upset," he repeated, sounding frazzled. "I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"She's upset," Pilar whispered, and began to rock as the dial tone buzzed in her ear. "Of course she has to be soothed. What about me? What about me?"

She hung up the phone, tossed back the covers before she gave in to her first instinct and curled into a defensive ball under them.

She was trembling as she yanked on a robe, as she dug deep into her lingerie drawer for her secret emergency pack of cigarettes. Stuffing them in a pocket, she pushed through the French doors and rushed out into the night.

She needed air. She needed a cigarette. She needed, Pilar thought as she ran across her terrace and down the stone steps, peace.

Wasn't it enough that the only man she'd loved, the only man she'd ever given herself to hadn't cherished her? Hadn't respected her enough to keep his vows? Did she have to be plagued now by her latest replacement? Awakened in the middle of the night and screamed at, sworn at?

She strode away from the house, through the gardens, keeping to the shadows so that if anyone in the house was awake they wouldn't see her through the windows.

Pretenses, she thought, furious to find her cheeks were wet. We must maintain pretenses at all cost. Wouldn't do to have one of the servants see Ms. Giambelli smoking in the shrubbery in the middle of the night. Wouldn't do for anyone to see Ms. Giambelli doing her best to stave off a nervous breakdown with tobacco.

A dozen people might have called Rene, she thought bitterly. And she very likely deserved the abuse tossed out at her by each and every one. From the tone of Tony's voice, Pilar knew he had a pretty good idea just who'd made the call. Easier, she supposed bitterly, to let Rene believe it was the discarded wife rather than a more current lover.

Easier to let the long-suffering Pilar take the slaps and the insults.

"I'm not fifty," she muttered, fighting with her lighter. "Or a goddamn virgin."

"Me neither."

She whirled, dropping the lighter with a little crash of metal on stone. Temper warred with humiliation as David Cutter stepped from shadow to moonlight.

"I'm sorry I startled you." He bent down for her lighter. "But I thought I should let you know I was here before you continued your conversation."

He flicked the lighter on, studying her tear-stained cheeks and damp lashes in the flare. Her hands were shaking, so he steadied them.

"I couldn't sleep," he continued. "New place, new bed. Took a little walk. Want me to keep on walking?"

It was breeding, she supposed, that prevented her from a fast, undignified retreat. "I don't smoke. Officially."

"Neither do I." Still he took a deep, appreciative sniff of the smoke-stung air. "Quit. It's killing me."

"I've never smoked officially. So I, occasionally, sneak outside and sin."

"Your secret's safe with me. I'm very discreet. Sometimes venting to a stranger works wonders." When she only shook her head, he tucked his thumbs into the pockets of his jeans. "Well, it's a nice night after the rain. Want to walk?"

She wanted to run back inside, bury herself under the covers until this new mortification passed. She had plenty of reason to know embarrassments faded quicker when you stood up and moved on.

So she walked with him.

"Are you and your family settling in?" she asked as they fell into step together.

"We're fine. Period of adjustment. My son got into some trouble in New York. Kid stuff, but there was a pattern to it. I wanted to change the canvas."

"I hope they'll be happy here."

"So do I." He dug a handkerchief out of his jeans, silently passed it to her. "I'm looking forward to getting a good look at the vineyards tomorrow. They're spectacular now, with a bit of moon and a hint of frost."

"You're good at this," she murmured. "At pretending you didn't come across an hysterical woman in the middle of the night."

"You didn't look hysterical. You looked sad, and angry." And beautiful, he thought. White robe, black night. Like a stylized photograph.

"I had an upsetting phone call."

"Is someone hurt?"

"No one but me, and that's my own fault." She stopped, stooped to crush the cigarette and bury it under the mulch on the side of the path. Then she turned, took a long look at him.

It was a good face, she decided. A strong chin, clear eyes. Blue eyes, she remembered. Deep blue that looked nearly black in the night. The faintest smile on his lips now told her he knew she was examining, considering. And was patient and confident enough to let her.

And she remembered the way he'd been grinning when he'd had his arms around his children. A man who loved his children, understood them enough to point out their interests to strangers as he had to her mother, inspired Pilar's trust.

In any case, it was difficult to maintain pretenses when you were standing in your robe with that man in the middle of the night.

"Make up your mind?" he asked her.

"I suppose. In any case, you're all but living with the family, so you'll hear things. My husband and I have been separated for a number of years. He informed me recently, very recently, that we are getting divorced. His bride-to-be is very young. Beautiful, sharp-edged. And . . . very young," she said again with a half-laugh. "It's ridiculous, I suppose, how much that part bothers me. In any case, it's an awkward and difficult situation."

"It'll be more awkward and difficult for him if he ever takes a good look at what he let go."

It took her a moment to adjust to the compliment. "That's very kind of you."

"No, it's not. You're beautiful, elegant and interesting."

And not used to hearing it, he realized as she simply stared at him. That, too, was interesting. "That's a lot for a man to let go. Divorce is tough," he added. "A kind of death, especially if you took it seriously to begin with. Even when all you've got left of it is the illusion, it's a hell of a shock to watch it shatter."

"Yes." She felt comforted. "Yes, it is. I've just been informed that the lawyers will legalize the end of my marriage very shortly. So I suppose I'd better start picking up the pieces."

"Maybe you should just sweep a few of them out of the way." He touched her shoulder, leaving his fingers there, lightly, when he felt her tense and shift slightly away. "It's the middle of the night. Some of the daylight rules don't apply at three in the morning, so I'm going to tell you straight out. I'm very attracted to you."

She felt a little clutch in her belly. Whether it was pleasure or anxiety, she hadn't a clue. "That's very flattering."

"It's not flattery, it's fact. Flattery's what you get from a guy at a cocktail party who's thinking about making a move on you. I ought to know."

He grinned at her now, wide and easy, the way he'd been grinning when she'd first seen him. The clutch came again, harder and deeper this time. She realized, stupefied, that it was pure, animal attraction.

"I've scooped out plenty of flattery along the way. Just as I imagine you've deflected plenty. So I'm telling you straight." Now the grin faded, and his eyes, dark in the shadows, went quiet, serious. "The minute you opened the door today, it was like I was hit by a thunderbolt. I haven't felt that in a long time."

"David." She took another step back, then came up short when he reached for her hand.

"I'm not going to put any of those moves on you. But I thought about it." He continued to watch her, steady, intense while her pulse began to sprint. "Which is probably why I couldn't sleep."

"We barely know each other. And I'm . . ." *A fifty-year-old virgin.* No, she thought, she damn well wasn't. But close. Close enough.

"True enough. I didn't intend to bring this up quite so soon, but it seemed the moment. A beautiful woman in a white robe, a sprinkle of moonlight in a garden. You can't ask a man to resist everything. Besides, it gives you something to think about."

"Yes, it certainly does. I should go."

"Will you have dinner with me?" He brought her hand to his lips—it seemed like the moment for that, too. Enjoyed the light tremor of it, the subtle scent. "Soon?"

"I don't know." She tugged her hand from his and felt like a foolish and fumbling young girl. "I . . . good night."

She rushed back down the path and was breathless by the time she reached the steps. Her stomach was fluttering, her heart skipping in her

chest. They were sensations she hadn't experienced in so long, it was almost embarrassing.

But she no longer felt angry. And no longer felt sad.

It was just midnight in New York when Jeremy DeMorney took the call. He considered the person on the other end of the phone no more than a tool. One to be wielded as necessary.

"I'm ready. Ready to move to the next stage."

"Well." Smiling, Jerry poured himself a snifter of brandy. "It's taken you a considerable amount of time to make up your mind."

"I have a lot to lose."

"And more to gain. Giambelli's using you, and they'll toss you out without a flinch if it suits their purposes. You know it, I know it."

"My position is still secure. The reorganization hasn't changed that."

"For the moment. You'd hardly be calling me if you weren't concerned."

"I'm tired of it, that's all. I'm tired of not being appreciated for my efforts. I don't care to be watched over and evaluated by strangers."

"Naturally. Sophia Giambelli and Tyler MacMillan are being groomed to step into the traditional shoes, whether they earn it or not, they'll wear them. Now there's David Cutter. A smart individual. La Coeur is sorry to lose him. He'll be taking a serious look at all areas of the company. A serious look that could very well turn up certain . . . discrepancies."

"I've been careful."

"No one's ever careful enough. What do you intend to bring to the table now? It's going to have to be more than the ante we discussed previously."

"The centennial. If there's trouble during the merger, bleeding over to the next, banner year, it will eat at the foundation of the company. There are things I can do."

"Poisoning an old man, for instance?"

"That was an accident."

The panic, the hint of whine in the tone made Jerry smile. It was all so perfect. "Is that what you call it?"

"It was your idea. You said it would only make him ill."

"Oh, I have a lot of ideas." Idly, Jerry examined his nails. La Coeur paid

him for his ideas—his less radical ideas—as much as they did because his name was DeMorney. “You implemented it, friend. And bungled it.”

“How was I to know he had a weak heart?”

“As I said, no one’s ever careful enough. If you were going to kill someone, you should have gone for the old woman herself. With her gone, they couldn’t plug the holes in the dike as fast as we could drill them.”

“I’m not a murderer.”

“I beg to differ.” You’re exactly that, Jerry thought. And because of it you’ll do anything, everything, I want now. “I wonder if the Italian police would be interested enough to exhume Baptista’s body and run tests if they happened to get an informative and anonymous call. You’ve killed,” Jerry said after a long pause. “You’d better be prepared to do whatever’s necessary to back yourself up. If you want my help, and my financial backing to continue, you’ll start showing me what you can do for me. You can begin by getting me copies of everything. The legal papers, the contracts, the plans for the ad campaign. Every step of it. The vintner’s logs, Venice and Napa.”

“It’ll be risky. It’ll take time.”

“You’ll be paid for the risk. And the time.” He was a patient man, a wealthy one, and could afford both. Would invest both, to bury the Giambellis. “Don’t contact me again until you have something useful.”

“I need money. I can’t get what you ask without—”

“Give me something I can use. Then I’ll give you payment. COD, friend. That’s how it works.”

“They’re grapevines. Big deal.”

“They’re going to be a big deal for us. The grapevines,” David informed his sulking son, “are what’s going to buy your burgers and fries for the foreseeable future.”

“Are they going to buy my car?”

David glanced in the rearview mirror. “Don’t push your luck, pal.”

“Dad, you can’t live out here in Nowheresville without wheels.”

“The minute you stop breathing, I’ll check out the nearest used-car lot.”

Three months before—hell, David thought—three weeks before that comment would have resulted in his son’s frozen silence or a snide remark. The fact that Theo’s response was to clutch his throat, bug out his eyes and collapse gasping on the backseat warmed his father’s heart.

"I knew we should've taken those CPR classes," David said absently as he turned into MacMillan Wineries.

"It's okay. He goes, it's more fries for us."

Maddy didn't mind being out early. She didn't mind driving around the hills and valleys. What she did mind was having nothing to do. Her greatest hope at the moment was that her father would break down and buy Theo a car. Then she could nag her brother to drive her somewhere. Anywhere.

"Pretty place." David stopped the van, got out to look over the fields and the workers steadily pruning vines in the frosty morning. "And this, all this, my children," he continued, sliding an arm around each of them when they joined him, "will never be yours."

"Maybe one of them has a babe for a daughter. We'll get married, then you'll work for me."

David shuddered. "You're scaring me, Theo. Let's go check it out."

Ty spotted the trio heading down through the rows, and swore under his breath. Tourists, he thought, hoping for a tour and a friendly guide. He didn't have time to be friendly. And he didn't want outsiders in his fields.

He started to cut over to head them off, stopped and studied Sophia. This, he decided, was her turf. Let her deal with people, and he'd deal with the vines.

He crossed to her, noted grudgingly she was doing the job, and doing it well. "We got some tourists heading down," he told her. "Why don't you take a break here and steer them to the winery, the tasting room? Someone should be around to give them the standard tour."

Sophia straightened, turned to scope out the newcomers. The father and son were pretty much out of L.L. Bean, she concluded, while the daughter had taken a left turn into Goth-land.

"Sure, I'll take them." And get a nice hot cup of coffee for the trouble. "But a quick look at the fields, and a brief, informative explanation of the pruning phase, would lead nicely into the winery and make Dad more inclined to pop for a couple bottles."

"I don't want civilians tromping through my fields."

"Don't be so territorial and cranky." She put on a bright smile, deliberately grabbed Ty's hand and dragged him toward the family.

“Good morning! Welcome to MacMillan Vineyards. I’m Sophia, and Tyler and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have. It’s winter pruning time at the moment. An essential, even crucial part of the winemaking process. Are you touring the valley?”

“In a manner of speaking.” She had her grandmother’s eyes, David thought. The shape and the depth of them. Pilar’s were softer, lighter, hinted of gold. “Actually, I was hoping to meet both of you. I’m David Cutter. These are my children. Theo and Maddy.”

“Oh.” Sophia recovered quickly, taking David’s offered hand even while her mind leaped forward. Checking us out, she thought. Well, that would work both ways.

Thus far, her research had only unearthed that David Cutter was a divorced, single parent of two who’d climbed the corporate ladder at La Coeur with a steady, competent hand over two decades.

She’d determine more in a face-to-face. “Well, welcome again. All of you. Would you like to come into the winery or the house?”

“I’d like to take a look at the fields. Been a while since I’ve seen a pruning in process.” Gauging the mood, caution and resentment, David turned to Tyler. “You’ve got a beautiful vineyard, Mr. MacMillan. And a superior product from them.”

“You got that right. I’ve got work to do.”

“You’ll have to excuse Tyler.” Setting her teeth, Sophia wrapped her arm through his like a rope to hold him in place. “He has a very narrow focus, and right now all he sees are the vines. Added to that, he has no discernible social skills. Do you, MacMillan?”

“Vines don’t need chitchat.”

“All growing things do better with audio stimulation.” Maddy didn’t flinch at Ty’s annoyed expression. “Why do you prune in winter?” she demanded. “Instead of in the fall or early spring?”

“We prune during the dormant season.”

“Why?”

“Maddy,” David began.

“It’s okay.” Ty took a closer look at her. She might dress like an apprentice vampire, he thought, but she had an intelligent face. “We wait for the first hard frost that forces the vines into dormancy. Pruning then prepares for the new growth in the spring. Pruning over the winter decreases the

yield. What we're after is quality, not quantity. Overbearing vines produce too many inferior grapes."

He glanced back at David. "I guess you don't have a lot of vineyards in Manhattan."

"That's right, and one of the reasons I accepted this offer. I've missed the fields. Twenty years ago, I spent a very cold, wet January in Bordeaux pruning vines for La Coeur. I've done some fieldwork off and on over the years, just to keep a hand in. But nothing like that very long winter."

"Can you show me how to do it?" Maddy asked Tyler.

"Well, I . . ."

"I'll start you off." Taking pity on Tyler, Sophia radiated cheer. "Why don't you and Theo come with me? We'll get a close-up look at how this is done before we go into the winery. It's a fascinating process, really, though this phase appears to be very basic. It requires precision and considerable practice. I'll show you." She herded the kids out of earshot.

"Theo's going to trip over his tongue." David let out a sigh. "She's a beautiful woman. Can't blame him."

"Yeah, she looks good."

The warning tone had David struggling with a grin. He nodded soberly. "And I'm old enough to be her father, so you've got no worries in that direction."

From his viewpoint, Cutter was just the type Sophia usually went for. Older, slicker, classier. Under the rough gear, there was class. Being a farmer didn't mean he couldn't spot it.

But that was beside the point.

"There's nothing between me and Sophia," he said, very definitely.

"Either way. Let's just clear the air here, okay? I'm not here to get in your way, or interfere with your routine. You're the vintner, MacMillan, and I'm not. But I do intend to do my job, and to keep abreast of every step and phase of the vineyards."

"You've got the offices. I've got the fields."

"Not entirely, no. I was hired to coordinate, to oversee, and I was hired because I know the vines. I'm not just a suit, and frankly, I was tired of trying to be one. Mind?"

He plucked the pruners out of Tyler's belt sheath and turned to the near row. Gloveless, he lifted canes, studied and made his cut.

It was quick, efficient. And correct.

"I know the vines," David repeated, holding the tool out to Tyler. "But that doesn't make them mine."

Irritated, Tyler took back the tool, shoved it into its sheath like a sword into a scabbard. "All right, let's clear some more air. I don't like someone looking over my shoulder, and knowing he's going to be giving me grades like I was in high school. I'm here to make wine, not friends. I don't know how they did things at La Coeur, and I don't care. I run this vineyard."

"You did," David said evenly. "Now we run it, whether we like it or not."

"We don't like it," he said shortly and strode away.

Hardheaded, inflexible, territorial, David mused. It was going to be an interesting little battle. He glanced over to where Sophia entertained his children. Theo's throbbing hormones were all but sending out bolts of sex-crazed red light. And that, David thought wearily, was going to be complicated.

He strolled over, watched with approval as his daughter cut through a cane. "Good job. Thanks," he said to Sophia.

"My pleasure. I assume you'll want to meet with me to be briefed on my promotional campaign plans. I'm setting up an office at the villa. Would this afternoon work for you? Maybe two o'clock."

Clever girl, he thought. Make the first move, establish turf. What a family. "Sure, that works for me. I'll just get these two out of your hair."

"I want to see the rest," Maddy said. "There's nothing to do at home anyway. It's boring."

"We haven't finished unpacking."

"Are you in a hurry for that?" Sophia laid a hand on Maddy's shoulder. "If you're not you can leave Theo and Maddy with me. I have to go back to the villa in an hour or so, and I can drop them off. You're in the guest house, right?"

"That's right." He glanced at his watch. He had some time before his meeting. "If they're not in the way."

"Not at all."

"Fine. I'll see you at two. You guys stay out of trouble."

"You'd think we look for it," Maddy muttered under her breath.

"If you don't," Sophia said as David walked away, "you're not having enough fun."

She liked the kids. Maddy's intense questioning was entertaining, and

kept her on her toes. And it was sweet to find herself the object of a teenage boy's crush-at-first-sight.

Also, who knew more about a man, how he behaved, how he thought, how he planned, than his children? A morning with David Cutter's teenagers would be interesting and, she believed, informative.

"Let's go drag Ty away," Sophia suggested, "and make him take us through the winery. I'm not as familiar with MacMillan's operation as I am with Giambelli's." She tucked her tool away. "We'll all learn something."

Pilar paced the chambers of Judge Helen Moore and tried not to fret. Her life, she thought, seemed to be tumbling out of her control. She wasn't at all sure how to grab it back. Worse, she was no longer sure how much of it she wanted to keep.

Steps had to be taken, of that she was sure. She was so sick of feeling used and useless.

Most of all, she needed a friend.

She'd barely seen her mother or her daughter that morning. Purposely. It was cowardly, she supposed, to avoid those closest to her. But she needed time to shore up the damage, to make her decisions, to coat over the ridiculous hurt that still scraped inside her gut.

Instinctively she reached down to toy with her wedding ring and felt the quick jolt when it wasn't there. She'd have to get used to that naked finger. No, damned if she would. She was going to go out today, this afternoon, and buy some ridiculously expensive, knock-your-eyes-out bauble to go on the third finger of her left hand.

A symbol, she told herself. Of freedom and new beginnings.

Of failure.

On a sigh of defeat, she dropped into a chair just as Helen rushed in.

"Sorry, we ran a little over."

"It's all right. You always look so distinguished and terrifying in your robes."

"If I ever lose this extra fifteen pounds, I'm going to start wearing a bikini under them." She stripped the robe off, hung it up. Rather than a bikini, she wore a quiet brown suit.

Too matronly, Pilar thought. Too boxy. And very Helen.

"I really appreciate your making time for me today. I know how busy you are."

"We've got two hours." Helen flopped into the chair behind her desk, pulled off her shoes and curled her toes. "Want to go out for lunch?"

"Not really. Helen . . . I know you're not a divorce lawyer, but—Tony's moving to finalize things quickly. I don't know what to do."

"I can handle it for you, Pilar. Or I can recommend someone. I know several sleek sharks who'd do the job."

"I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you handled it, and if it was kept as simple as possible. And as clean."

"Well, that's disappointing." With a frown, Helen pushed up her glasses. "I'd love to leave Tony bleeding from the ears. I'll need your financial papers," she began, pulling over a yellow legal pad for notes. "Fortunately, I browbeat you into separating your finances from his years ago. But we're going to keep your ass covered. He may very well make demands, monetary ones, real estate and so on. You are *not* going to agree to anything."

She tipped down her glasses to stare at Pilar over the rims with a look that terrified lawyers. "I mean that, Pilar. He gets nothing. *You* are the injured party. He's petitioning for the divorce. He wants to get remarried. He walks out with what he walked in with. I'm not going to allow you to let him profit from this. You got that?"

"It's not a matter of money."

"Not for you. But he lives high, and he's going to want to continue living high. How much have you funneled to him over the last decade or so?"

Pilar shifted uncomfortably. "Helen . . ."

"Exactly. Loans that are never repaid. The house in San Francisco, the house in Italy. The furnishings in both."

"We sold—"

"He sold," Helen corrected. "You wouldn't listen to me then, but you will now or you find another lawyer. You never recouped your fair share of the real estate, which your money paid for in the first place. And I know damn well he slid plenty of your jewelry and personal property into his pocket, too. That stops cold."

She pushed up her glasses, sat back. The gesture, the body language changed her from judge to friend. "Pilar, I love you, and that's why I'm going to say this to you. You've let him treat you like a doormat. Hell, you all

but stitched 'Welcome' on your tits and invited him to step all over you. And I, and others who love you, hated watching it."

"Maybe I did." She wasn't going to cry now; just absorb the fresh hurt. "I loved him, and part of me thought that if he needed me enough, he'd love me back. Something happened last night, and it's changed things. Changed me, I suppose."

"Tell me."

Rising, Pilar wandered the office and told Helen of the phone call. "When I listened to him making those careless apologies, cutting me off to placate Rene after she'd attacked me, I was disgusted with all of us. And later, after I'd calmed down again, I realized something. I don't love him anymore, Helen. Maybe I haven't for years. That makes me pitiful."

"Not anymore, it doesn't." Helen picked up the phone. "Let's order in. I'll explain what needs to be done. Then, sweetie, we're going to do it. Please." She held out a hand. "Let me help you. Really help."

"Okay." Pilar sighed. "Okay. Will it take more than an hour?"

"Doesn't have to. Carl? Order me two chicken clubs, with side salads, two cappuccinos and a big bottle of fizzy water. Thanks." She hung up the phone.

"Perfect." Pilar sat again. "Is there a good, overpriced jeweler near here?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Why?"

"If you've got time before you have to don your robes again, you could help me buy something symbolic and gaudy." She held up her left hand. "Something that'll make Rene crazy when she sees it."

Helen nodded with approval. "Now we're talking."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunday slid into the week like a balm on a mild, nagging itch. She wouldn't be spending her morning hours covered in wool and flannel and pruning vines. She wouldn't have Ty breathing down her neck just waiting for her to make a mistake.

She could drive into the city, do some power shopping, see people. She could remember what it was like to have a life.

With this in mind, Sophia considered calling one of her friends to set up a few hours of socializing. Then she decided she'd rather spend that frivolous time with her mother.

Next free day, she decided, she'd make plans with friends. She'd spend a weekend in San Francisco, have a dinner party at her apartment, go to a club. Now she was going to nag her mother into taking a girl day.

Sophia knocked briskly on her mother's bedroom door, then pushed it open without waiting for an answer. She'd never had to wait for her mother.

The bed was already made, the curtains open to the wavering sunlight. As Sophia stepped inside, Maria walked in from the adjoining bath.

"Mama?"

"Oh, long up and about. I think she's in the greenhouse."

"I'll find her." Sophia stepped back, hesitated. "Maria, I've barely seen her all week. Is she all right?"

Maria's lips tightened as she fussed unnecessarily with the yellow roses on Pilar's dresser. "She doesn't sleep well. I can tell. Eats like a bird, and then only if you insist. I scolded her just yesterday, and she says it's holiday stress. What stress?" Maria threw up her hands. "Your mama, she loves

Christmas. It's that man who troubles her. I won't speak ill of your father, but if he makes my baby sick, he'll answer to me."

"Get in line," Sophia murmured. "We'll look after her, Maria. I'll hunt her down now."

"See that she eats!"

Christmas, Sophia thought as she jogged downstairs. It was the perfect excuse. She'd ask her mother to give her a hand with some last-minute Christmas shopping.

She scanned the house as she hurried through. Her mother's poinsettias, red and white stars in dozens of silver pots, were mixed with miniature hollies in lush arrangements throughout the foyer. Fresh greenery twined with tiny white lights and glossy red ribbon swagged doorways.

The three Giambelli angels were displayed on the long refectory table in the family parlor. Tereza, Pilar and Sophia, she thought, the carved faces reflecting each of them at the age of twelve.

How alike they looked. It was always a little jolt, a little tug of amused pleasure to see them. The continuity, the undeniable blood tie of those three generations. She'd been thrilled when she was given her angel all those years ago. Thrilled to see her own features on the graceful, winged body. And, she realized as she trailed a fingertip over the trio, she was still.

One day it would fall to her to commission an angel for a child of her own. What an odd thought, she mused. Not unpleasant, but certainly odd. The next generation, when the time came, was hers to begin.

Measured by those who'd come before, she was falling a bit behind on that particular family duty. Then again, it wasn't something she could pencil in on her monthly calendar. Fall in love. Get married. Conceive child.

Nope, such things didn't schedule neatly into a life. She imagined she'd enjoy those things with the right man at the right time. But it was so easy, too easy, to make a mistake. And love, marriage, children couldn't be casually crossed off the slate like an inconvenient dentist appointment.

Unless you were Anthony Avano, she corrected, annoying herself with the automatic snap of resentment that accompanied the thought. In that area she had no intention of following in her father's footsteps. When she made the choice, and the promises that went with it, she would keep them.

So for now, three angels would have to be enough.

She turned to study the room. Candles in spears and chunks of silver and gold, more greenery artfully arranged. The grand tree, one of four that

would traditionally stand in the villa, dripping with crystal garland, laden with precious ornaments brought over from Italy, stood regally by the windows. Presents were already tucked under it, and the house smelled of pine and candle wax.

Time had gotten away from her, she thought guiltily. A great deal of it. Her mother, grandmother and the staff had worked like trojans to dress the house for the holidays while she'd buried herself in work.

She should have taken the time, *made* the time to help. Didn't put it on your appointment calendar, did you, Sophia? she thought with a wince. The annual Christmas party was nearly on them, and she'd done nothing to help with the planning or preparations.

She'd amend that immediately.

She went out the side door, instantly regretting she hadn't stopped for a jacket, as the wind had a bite. As a result she ran down the winding stone path, cut left and sprinted to the greenhouse.

The warm, moist heat felt so inviting. "Mama?"

"Down here. Sophie, wait until you see my paperwhites. They're spectacular. I think I'll take them and the amaryllis into the parlor. Very festive."

Pilar stopped, looked up. "Where's your jacket?"

"Forgot." Sophia leaned over and kissed her mother's cheek, then took a good, long look.

Her mother's ancient sweater was pushed up at the elbows and bagged at the hips. Her hair was tied back at the nape of her neck. "You're losing weight."

"Oh, I am not." Pilar waved that away with hands covered in stained gardening gloves. "You've been talking to Maria. If I don't gorge myself three times a day she's convinced I'm going to waste away. As it is, I stole two sugar cookies on the way out here and expect them to pop out on my hips any moment."

"That should hold you till lunch. Which I'll buy. I'm so behind on my shopping. Help."

"Sophia." With a shake of her head, Pilar shifted her long trough of narcissi and began to fuss with the tulips she was forcing. They would bloom, she thought, and bring color to the dreary days of winter. "You started your holiday shopping in June and finished it in October. Just as you always do to make the rest of us hate you."

“Okay, caught me.” Sophia boosted herself up on the work counter. “Still, I’m dying to go into the city and play for a few hours. It’s been a brutal week. Let’s run away for the day.”

“I was just there a couple of days ago.” Frowning, Pilar set the tulips aside. “Sophie, is this new order of things your grandmother’s set up too much for you? You’re up at dawn every day, and then you spend hours in your office here. I know you’re not seeing any of your friends.”

“I thrive on pressure. Still, I could use an assistant, and I believe you’re supposed to fit that bill.”

“*Cara*, we both know I’d be useless to you.”

“No, I don’t know that. Okay, we move to Plan B. I’m putting you to work. You’ve done all the decorating in the house and it looks beautiful, by the way. I’m sorry I didn’t help.”

“You’ve been busy.”

“I shouldn’t have been too busy. But now it’s office time, and that’ll segue into party-planning time. You need to bring me up to date on that, which is part of an assistant’s duty. Now, which flowers do you want to take in? I’ll help you with them, then we start the clock.”

The girl, Pilar thought, made the head spin. “Sophie, really.”

“Yes, really. You’re the trainee. I’m the boss.” She scooted off the counter, rubbed her hands together. “I get to make up for all the years you bossed me around. Especially between the ages of twelve and fifteen.”

“No, not the hormone years. You couldn’t be so cruel.”

“Bet me. You asked if this new system was too much for me. It’s not. But it’s damn close. That’s a fact. I’m not used to doing all my own filing and phone tags and typing. Since I’m not about to admit to *Nonna*, or to MacMillan, that I’m feeling the least bit squeezed, you could help me out.”

Pilar blew out a breath, tugged off her gloves. “You’re doing this to keep me busy, just as Maria hounds me to eat.”

“Partially,” Sophia admitted. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I spend time every day doing basic office work. If I could pass that over, I might actually begin to date again in this decade. I miss men.”

“All right, but don’t blame me if you can’t find anything in your files.” Pilar pulled the thin band out of her hair, scooped her fingers through it. “I haven’t done basic office work since I was sixteen, and then I was so miserable at it, Mama fired me.”

She turned, started to laugh, then noticed Sophia was gawking at her hand.

Embarrassed, Pilar nearly stuck her hand, and the five-carat square-cut ruby on her finger, behind her back. "It's a little much, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I think I've been struck blind by the glare." Sophia took her mother's hand, examined the stone and the stunning channel-set diamonds around the square. "Wow. *Magnifico*."

"I wanted something. I should have told you. You've been so busy. . . . Damn it." Pilar tried to explain. "I've used your schedule to avoid talking to you. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize to me for buying a ring, Mama. Except I believe that one might be considered a small monument."

"I was angry. You should never do anything when you're angry." To give herself something to do, Pilar picked up her gardening tools, began to replace them. "Baby, Helen is handling the divorce for me. I should've—"

"Good. She won't let you get scalped. Don't look at me like that, Mama. You've been careful, all my life you've been careful never to speak against my father. But I'm not blind, and I'm not stupid."

"No." Overcome by sadness, Pilar set her little trowel aside. "No, you've never been either." And had seen, had understood so much more than a child should.

"If you let him, he'd take your money and anything else that wasn't nailed down. He wouldn't be able to help himself. I feel better knowing Aunt Helen's looking out for your interests. Now let's get these flowers into the house."

"Sophie." Pilar laid a hand on her daughter's arm as Sophia picked up a pot of amaryllis. "I'm so sorry this hurts you."

"You've never hurt me. He always has. I don't suppose he can help that, either." She picked up a second pot. "Rene's going to swallow her tongue when she gets a load of that rock."

"I know. That was the idea."

For over fifty years, Giambelli, California had held lavish Christmas parties for family, friends, employees and associates. As the company had grown, so had the guest list.

Following the tradition set by the Italian branch of the company, the

parties were held simultaneously on the last Saturday before Christmas. The house was open to family and friends, and the winery to employees. Associates, depending on their position on the feeding chain, were placed in the proper location.

Invitations to the main house were prized like gold and often used as a symbol of status or success. Still, the Giambellis didn't stint on the festivities in the winery. Food was elegant and plentiful, wine flowed freely, and both the decorations and the entertainment were top-notch.

Every member of the family was expected to make an appearance at both venues.

Having done so since her fifteenth year, Sophia was well aware that the winery party was a great deal more entertaining. And less full of irritating relations.

She could hear one of her cousin Gina's progeny shrieking at the other end of the hall. Her hopes that Don and his herd would remain in Italy had been dashed the evening before when they'd arrived.

Still even their presence wouldn't be as annoying as that of her father and Rene. Her mother had stuck firm on their being invited, going head to head with *La Signora* on the issue. The consolation was their invitation had been to the winery.

That, she thought as she fastened on her diamond teardrop earrings, would stick sharply in Rene's craw.

She stepped back, studied the results in her cheval glass. The shimmering silver gown with its short, fitted jacket worked well. The scooped neck was a nice frame for the diamond necklace. Both it and the earrings had been her great-grandmother's.

She turned, checked the line of her skirt, then called out an invitation at the knock on her door.

"Look at you!" Helen came in, pretty and plump in frosty pink. "You sparkle all over."

"It's great, isn't it?" Sophia took another turn, for the fun of it. "I bought it in New York, thinking of New Year's, but I had to press it into duty tonight. Not too much with the diamonds?"

"Diamonds are never too much. Honey." She shut the door. "I wanted a minute. I hate to bring this up now, right before you have to socialize with hundreds of people, but Pilar told me Tony and Rene will be here."

"What is it?"

“The divorce is final. Yesterday. It was really no more than a formality after all these years. Since Tony was in a hurry and didn’t complicate matters with financial negotiations, it was really just a matter of filing the papers.”

“I see.” Sophia picked up her evening bag, opened and closed the catch. “Have you told Mama?”

“Yes. Just now. She’s fine. Or she’s holding up. I know it’s important to her you do the same.”

“Don’t worry about me. Aunt Helen.” She crossed the room, took Helen’s hands. “You’re a brick. I don’t know what she’d have done without you.”

“She needs to move on.”

“I know.”

“And so do you.” She squeezed Sophia’s hands. “Don’t let Rene have the satisfaction of seeing this hurts you, on any level.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. Now I’ve got to go down and run herd on my husband. If I leave James alone down there this early, he’ll sneak canapés and ruin the caterer’s presentation.” She opened the door, glanced back. “Tony didn’t do many admirable things in his life. You’re one of them.”

“Thanks.” Alone, Sophia let out a long breath. Then she straightened her shoulders, marched back to her mirror. Opening her bag she took out her lipstick. And painted her lips bloody-murder red.

David sipped a full-bodied Merlot, mingled with the crowd packed into the towering stone walls of the winery, tried to tune out the hot licks from the band that was currently thrilling his son, and scanned the area for Pilar.

He knew the Giambellis would put in an appearance. He’d been well schooled on the pomp and protocol for the holiday festivities. He’d be expected to split his time between parties, which—though it hadn’t been put precisely that way—was both a privilege and a duty.

He was learning fast that nearly every assignment in this organization came under the heading of both.

He could find no complaint with it. He’d been given a challenge, which he needed. He was being well compensated financially, which he appreciated. And he was associated with a company he respected. And that he valued.

Everything he'd seen in the past weeks had confirmed that Giambelli-MacMillan was a tight, family-oriented ship, run with efficiency and little sentiment. It wasn't cold, but it was calculated.

Product was king and queen here. Money was respected and expected, but it was not the goal. Wine was. He'd found the opposite true in his later years with La Coeur.

Now, seeing his son actually enjoying himself, watching his daughter interrogate some poor winemaker over some point of procedure, he was content.

The move had been exactly what all of them had needed.

"David. Good to see you."

He turned, surprise registering briefly as he looked into Jeremy DeMorney's smiling face.

"Jerry, I didn't know you'd be here."

"I try never to miss an annual Giambelli bash and always hit the winery before the villa. Very democratic of *La Signora* to invite reps from the competition."

"She's quite a lady."

"One of a kind. How are you taking to working for her?"

"It's early days yet. But the move's gone well. I'm glad to get the kids out of the city. How are things back in New York?"

"We're managing to grope along without you." The little sting in the statement wasn't softened by the smirk. "Sorry, we're still a little sore. Hated losing you, David."

"Nothing lasts forever. Anyone else here from La Coeur?"

"Duberry flew in from France. He's known the old lady for a hundred years. Pearson's representing the local group. A few top levels from other labels. Gives us all a chance to drink her wine and spy on each other. Got any gossip for me?"

"Like I said, it's early days yet." He spoke casually, but he'd become wary. Jerry's policy of gossip and corporate backstabbing had been one of the reasons it had been so easy to leave La Coeur. "Great party though. Excuse me, there's somebody I've been waiting for."

Maybe all my life, David thought as he left Jerry without a backward glance and worked through the crowd to Pilar.

She wore blue. Deep blue velvet with a long rope of pearls. She looked warm and regal, and he would have said utterly confident if he hadn't noticed the quick flicker of panic in her eyes.

Then she shifted her head, just a little, and focused on him. And God help him, she blushed. Or at least more color came into her face. The idea that he'd put it there drove him crazy.

"I've been watching for you." He took her hand before she could do anything about it. "Like a kid at a school dance. I know you have to mingle, but I want a minute first."

It was like being swept away by a single warm wave. "David—"

"You can't mingle without wine. It won't do." He tugged her forward. "We'll talk about business, about the weather. I'll only tell you you look beautiful five or six dozen times. Here." He plucked a flute of champagne from a tray. "I don't see how you can drink anything else looking the way you do."

That same flutter was back in her stomach. "I can't keep up with you."

"I can't keep up with myself. I'm making you nervous." He touched his glass lightly to hers. "I'd say I was sorry for that, but I'd be lying. It's best to start out a relationship with honesty, don't you think?"

"No. Yes. Stop." She tried to laugh. He looked like some sort of sophisticated knight in his formal black with his rich blond hair glinting in the shimmer of light. A foolish thought, she told herself, for a middle-aged woman to have. "Are your children here?"

"Yeah. They whined about being dragged here, and now they're having the time of their lives. You're beautiful. I did mention I was going to tell you that, didn't I?"

She nearly giggled before she reminded herself she was forty-eight, not eighteen, and supposed to know better. "Yes, I believe you did."

"I don't suppose we could find a dark corner and neck."

"No. That's a definite."

"Then you'll just have to dance with me, and give me a chance to change your mind."

It staggered her that she thought he could change it. That she wanted him to. Inappropriate, she told herself firmly. Ridiculous. She was years older than he.

God, what was she supposed to do? Say? Feel?

"There are a thousand thoughts going through your head," he murmured. "I wish you'd tell me all of them."

"Jesus." She pressed a hand to her belly where a soft, gooey ball slid in among the flutters. "You're awfully good at this."

"I'm glad you think so because I start feeling clumsy every time I see you."

"Fooled me." She drew in a breath, steadied herself. "David, you're very attractive—"

"You think so?" He touched her hair, couldn't help himself. He loved the way it curved against her cheek. "Could you be more specific?"

"And very charming," she added, struggling to keep her voice firm. "I'm very flattered, but I don't know you. And besides . . ." She trailed off, her smile freezing. "Hello, Tony. Rene."

"Pilar. You look lovely." Tony leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Thank you. David Cutter, Tony Avano and Rene Foxx."

"Rene Foxx Avano," Rene corrected with a purr. She lifted her hand, wiggled her fingers to send the diamond circlet wedding ring flashing. "As of today."

It wasn't a stab in the heart, Pilar realized, as she'd thought it would be. But more of a burn, a quick shock that annoyed as much as it hurt. "Congratulations. I'm sure you'll be very happy together."

"Oh, we already are." Rene slid her arm through Tony's. "We're flying out to Bimini right after Christmas. It'll be lovely to be out of this cold and rain. You really should take time for a little vacation yourself, Pilar. You're looking pale."

"Strange. I was thinking how vital she looks tonight." Gauging the ground, David lifted Pilar's hand, kissed her fingers. "Delicious, in fact. I'm glad I had a chance to meet you, Tony, before you left the country."

Smoothly, David slid an arm around Pilar's waist. "I've had considerable trouble reaching you the last few days." He gave Rene a glance, just a few degrees short of polite. "Now I see why. Let my office know your travel plans, won't you? We've business to discuss."

"My people know my plans."

"Apparently mine don't. You'll excuse us, won't you? We need to make the rounds before heading up to the villa."

"That was unkind," Pilar whispered.

"So what?"

Gone was the flirtatious charm. In its place was power of the cold and ruthless sort. It wasn't, she thought, any less appealing on him.

"Over and above the fact that I didn't like him on principle, I'm COO and should have been informed if one of the VPs was going out of the country. He's been dodging me for days, avoiding my calls. I don't care for it."

“He’s just not used to having to report to you, to anyone.”

“He’ll have to adjust.” Over her head, David spotted Tyler. “So will others. Why don’t you help clear the way a little and introduce me to some of the people who are wondering what the hell I’m doing here?”

Ty was trying to be invisible. He hated big parties. There were too many people to talk to, and too few who had anything to say. He’d already calculated his plan. One hour in the winery, one hour in the main house. Then he could slide away, go home, catch a little ESPN and go to bed.

As far as he was concerned, the music was too loud, the winery too crowded and the food too rich. Not that he minded looking at people, especially when they were all slicked up and polished and trying to look better than the people they were talking to.

It was kind of like watching a play, and as long as he could stay safely in the audience he could manage for a while.

He’d watched the little drama between Pilar and Rene. Tyler was fond enough of Pilar that he’d have sacrificed his corner and gone to her side if David Cutter hadn’t already been there. Cutter irritated him on principle, but Tyler had to give him points for quick action. The little hand kiss had been a good move, one that seemed to annoy Rene and Avano.

And whatever he’d said had wiped that idiot smile off Avano’s face in a hurry.

Avano was an asshole, Tyler thought, sipping his wine. But with Rene prodding at him, he could be a dangerous one. If Cutter could keep him in line, it was almost worth having him in the mix.

Almost.

“Why are you standing over here all by yourself?”

Tyler looked down, frowned at Maddy. “Because I don’t want to be here.”

“Why are you? You’re an adult. You can do what you want.”

“You keep thinking that, little girl, you’re doomed to disappointment.”

“You just like being irritable.”

“No, I just *am* irritable.”

She pursed her lips at him, nodded. “Okay. Can I have a sip of your wine?”

“No.”

“In Europe, children are taught to appreciate wine.”

She said it so grandly, standing there in her layers of black and dead-ugly shoes, Ty wanted to laugh. “So, go to Europe. Around here it’s called contributing to the delinquency.”

“I’ve been to Europe, but I don’t remember it very well. I’m going to go back. Maybe I’ll live in Paris for a while. I was talking to Mr. Delvecchio, the winemaker. He said wine was a miracle, but it’s really just a chemical reaction, isn’t it?”

“It’s both. It’s neither.”

“It has to be. I was going to do an experiment, and I thought you could help me.”

Tyler blinked at her, a pretty, badly dressed girl with an inquiring mind. “What? Why don’t you talk to your father?”

“Because you’re the vintner. I thought I would get some grapes, put them in a bowl and see what happens. I’d have another bowl, with the same type and weight of grapes, and I’d do stuff to it. The kind of things you do.”

“I eat grapes in a bowl,” he said, but she’d caught his interest.

“See, one bowl would be left alone, Mr. Delvecchio’s miracle. The other I’d process, using additives and techniques. Pushing the chemical reaction. Then I could see which worked best.”

“Even if you use the same type of grapes, you’ll have variations between your tests.”

“Why?”

“You’re talking store-bought this time of year. They may not have come from the same vineyard. Even if they do, you get variations. Soil type, fertility, water penetration. When they were picked. How they were picked. You can’t test the grapes on the vine because they’re already off the vine. The must in each bowl could be considerably different even if you left them both alone.”

“What’s must?”

“Juice.” Bowl wine, he thought. Interesting. “But if you wanted to try it, you should use wooden bowls. The wood’ll give the must some character. Not much, but some.”

“A chemical reaction,” Maddy said with a grin. “See? It’s science, not religion.”

“Baby. Wine’s that and a whole lot more.” Without thinking, he offered her his glass.

She sipped, delicately, her gaze shifting just in case her father was nearby. Experimentally she let the wine roll around on her tongue before she swallowed. "It's pretty good."

"Pretty good?" With a shake of his head, he took the glass back from her. "That's vintage Pinot Noir. Only a barbarian would call it 'pretty good.'"

She smiled, charmingly now because she knew she had him. "Will you show me the big wine barrels and the machines sometime?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Mr. Delvecchio said you do the white in stainless steel and the reds in wood. I didn't get a chance to ask him why. Why?"

Didn't he look cute? Sophia thought. Big, grouchy MacMillan deep in what seemed to be a serious conversation with the miniature Morticia. And if things were as they appeared, he was enjoying himself. He even looked good doing it.

The fact that he did made her even more pleased she'd decided against bringing a date. Having a date meant her attention would have to be focused. Being loose gave her much more room to circulate and enjoy whoever's company intrigued her the most.

At the moment, she thought Tyler fit the bill.

It would take her a little while to work her way over to him. After all, she had social obligations to dispense. But she kept him at the corner of her vision as she began to work the crowd.

"Sophia. Stunning as always."

"Jerry. Happy holidays." She leaned in, kissed both of his cheeks. "How's business?"

"We've had a banner year." He slipped an arm around her shoulders, steering her through the groups in the tasting room and toward the bar. "And expect another. A little bird tells me you're planning a brilliant promotion campaign."

"Those little birds chatter entirely too much, don't they?" She beamed at the bartender. "Champagne, please. Another from the flock was singing about you launching a new label. Mid-market, with an American target."

"Someone's going to have to shoot those birds. I saw the write-up in *Vino* on your Cabernet '84."

"An excellent vintage."

"And the auction went quite well for you. Shame on you, Sophia, for standing me up when you were in New York. You know I'd looked forward to seeing you."

"Couldn't be helped. But I'll cash in my rain check next trip."

"I'm counting on it."

She lifted her wine, sipped.

He was an attractive man, smooth, almost silkily attractive. The faintest sprinkling of silver at the temples to add distinction, the slight dip in the chin to add charm.

Neither of them would mention her father, or the poorly kept secret of Jerry's wife's infidelity. Instead, they would keep it light, mildly flirtatious, friendly.

They understood each other, Sophia thought, very well. The competition between Giambelli and La Coeur was high, and often exhilarating. And Jeremy DeMorney was not above using whatever means came to hand to push his edge.

She admired that.

"I'll even spring for dinner," she told him. "And the wine. Giambelli-MacMillan wine. We'd want the best, after all."

"Then perhaps some La Coeur brandy, back in my apartment."

"Now, you know how I feel about mixing business with . . . business."

"You're a cruel woman, Sophia."

"You're a dangerous man, Jerry. How're your kids?"

"The children are fine. Their mother has them in Saint Moritz for the holidays."

"You must miss them."

"Of course. I thought I might spend a day or two in the Valley before heading home. Why don't you and I mix pleasure with pleasure?"

"That's tempting, Jerry, but I'm swamped. I don't think I'll come up for air until after the first of the year." She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye, watched her mother slip off toward the ladies' room. With Rene a few feet behind.

"Speaking of swamped, I have something I have to deal with right now. Lovely to see you."

"And you," he replied as she worked her way through the crowd. It would be even lovelier to see her, he thought, when she and the rest of her family were ruined.

Helping bring that about would be mixing business with business, he thought. And pleasure with pleasure.

Rene pushed through the door of the cozy, wood-walled ladies' lounge one step behind Pilar. "Managed to land on your feet, didn't you?" Rene leaned against the door, to discourage anyone from joining them.

"You got what you wanted, Rene." Though her hands wanted to tremble, Pilar opened her evening bag and pulled out her lipstick. She'd intended to steal two private minutes before making her last rounds and heading up to the villa. "I shouldn't be an issue for you anymore."

"Ex-wives are always an issue. I'll tell you this, I won't tolerate you calling me, or Tony, and spewing out your neurotic abuse."

"I didn't call."

"You're a liar. And a coward. Now you're going to hide behind David Cutter." She grabbed Pilar's hand, jerked it up so the ring fired in the lights. "What did you have to do to wheedle this out of him?"

"I don't need a man to buy me jewelry, Rene, or anything else. That's an elemental difference between us."

"No, I'll tell you the difference between us. I go after what I want, in the open. If you think I'm going to let Tony slink away because you've gone whining to your family, you're wrong. You're not going to shove him out, your David Cutter isn't going to shove him out. And if you try . . . just think of all the interesting information he could pass along to your competitors."

"Threatening the family, or the business, isn't going to help secure Tony's position. Or yours."

"We'll see about that. I'm Mrs. Avano now. And Mr. and Mrs. Avano will be joining the family, and the other top-level executives, at the villa tonight. I'm sure our invitation was misdirected."

"You'll only embarrass yourself," Pilar told her.

"I don't embarrass easily. Remember this. Tony has a piece of Giambelli, and I have a piece of him. I'm younger than you, and a hell of a lot younger than your mother. I'll still be here when you're gone."

"Will you?" Deliberately, Pilar turned to the mirror, slowly, carefully painted her lips. "How long do you think it will take for Tony to cheat on you?"

“He wouldn’t dare.” Secure in her own power, Rene smiled. “He knows if he does, I’ll kill him. I’m not the passive, patient wife. Tony told me what a lousy lay you were. We laugh about it. My advice? If you want to keep Cutter on the string, pass him down to your daughter. She strikes me as someone who knows how to entertain a man in bed.”

Even as Pilar whirled, Sophia opened the door. “Oh, what fun. Girl talk? Rene, how brave of you to wear that shade of green with your coloring.”

“Fuck you, Sophia.”

“Erudite, as always. Mama, you’re needed at the villa. I’m sure Rene will excuse us. She’ll want plenty of room and privacy to fix her face.”

“On the contrary, I’ll just leave the two of you alone so you can hold your mother’s hand while she dissolves into helpless tears. I’m not finished, Pilar,” Rene added as she opened the door. “But you are.”

“That was entertaining.” Sophia studied her mother’s face. “You don’t look like you’re about to dissolve into tears, helpless or otherwise.”

“No, I’m done with them.” Pilar dropped her lipstick back in her bag, closed it with a snap. “Sophie, honey, your father married her today.”

“Well, hell.” On a long sigh, Sophia stepped over, put her arms around her mother, laid her head on Pilar’s shoulder. “Merry Christmas.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sophia bided her time. She needed to catch her father alone to say what she had to say, and not when Rene was draped all over him like poison ivy on a tree trunk. She promised herself she'd be calm, mature and crystal clear. Losing her temper was not an option.

She worked the crowd as she waited, danced once with Theo, who'd been so entertaining he'd nearly cured her sour mood.

When she spotted Rene on the dance floor with Jerry, she made her move.

It didn't surprise her to see her father tucked into a corner table flirting with Kris. It revolted her slightly, but didn't surprise her he'd turn on the charm for another woman on his wedding day.

But as she approached, she caught the subtle signals—a light touch, a promising glance—that told her it was more than flirtation. And that did surprise her.

Her father, she was certain, was cheating on Rene with Kris. Still, it was so like him, so ridiculously like him, it barely put a hitch in her stride.

She didn't know which of the three of them in that sticky triangle was the biggest fool, and at the moment, it wasn't her problem.

"Kris, I'm sorry to break up this tender moment, but I need to speak with my father. Alone."

"Nice to see you, too." Kris got to her feet. "It's been so long since you've bothered to come by the office, I nearly forgot what you look like."

"I don't believe I report to you, but I'll be sure to send in a photo."

"Now, princess," Tony began.

“Don’t push it.” Sophia kept her tone quiet, level, but the look she sent her father had his color going up and his mouth closing. “Let’s just put this entire situation down to Christmas-party insanity. We’ll have a meeting, Kris, in my office, when my schedule permits. For tonight, let’s put business aside for personal matters. You can consider yourself lucky I saw you before Rene did. Now I need to speak to my father on family business.”

“With you at the wheel, your family’s not going to have much of a business.” Deliberately Kris leaned down, skimmed a fingertip over the back of Tony’s hand. “Later,” she murmured and strolled away.

“Sophie, you have the entirely wrong impression. Kris and I were just having a sociable drink.”

Her gaze cut like a blade. “Save it for Rene. I’ve known you longer. Long enough not to have the slightest interest in your bimbos. Please don’t interrupt,” she said before he could sputter out a protest. “This won’t take long. I hear congratulations are in order. Or if not in order, required by elemental manners. So fucking congratulations.”

“Now, Sophie.” He stood, reached for her hand, but she snatched it out of reach. “I know you’re not fond of Rene, but—”

“I don’t give a damn about Rene, and at the moment, I don’t give much of one about you.”

He looked sincerely surprised, sincerely hurt. She wondered if he practiced the expression in his shaving mirror. “You don’t mean that. I’m sorry you’re upset.”

“No, you’re not. You’re sorry I’ve cornered you about it. You were married today, and you didn’t bother to tell me. That’s one.”

“Princess, it was a small, simple ceremony. Neither Rene nor I felt—”

“Just be quiet.” His answer had been quick and smooth, but she knew the truth. He hadn’t so much as thought of telling her. “You came to a family function, and under the business cloak, this is a family function, flaunting yourself and your new wife and a side piece for good measure. That’s insensitive enough, but it goes up a considerable number of levels as you didn’t have the decency to tell Mama about the marriage first. That’s two.”

Her voice had risen, just enough to turn some heads. Uneasy, Tony moved in closer. He took her arm, stroked it, tugged gently. “Why don’t we go outside and I’ll explain. There’s no need to cause a scene in here.”

“Oh, there is. Every need. I’m desperately trying to resist the temptation to do just that. Because here’s the kicker, you son of a bitch. You pushed that

woman in my mother's face." She jabbed a finger into his chest as her temper reared up and took over. "You let Rene corner her, let her spew all over her, let her make scenes and cause pain while you sit over here and slobber over yet another woman—and one young enough to be your daughter, if you ever remembered you have one. That's three, goddamn you. That's three and you're out. You stay away from her, and you stay away from me. You keep your distance, and see that your *wife* does the same. Or I'll hurt you, I promise you, I'll make you bleed."

She whirled away before he recovered, caught the amused smirk on Kris's face. She took a step in that direction, then another, not entirely certain what she intended to do. Then her arm was gripped and she was being swept away into the crowd.

"Bad idea," Ty said quietly as he slid his grip from her arm to her waist to keep her close. "Really bad idea to murder staff members at the company Christmas bash. Let's go outside."

"I don't want to go outside."

"You need to. It's cold. You'll cool off. So far you only entertained a handful of people who were close enough to hear your rip into Avano. Nicely done, by the way. But with the steam puffing out of your ears, you're going to end up putting on a show for the whole party."

He all but pushed her out the door.

"Stop shoving, stop dragging. I don't like being manhandled." She jerked free, rounded and nearly, very nearly struck him.

"Go ahead. First shot's free. After that, I hit back."

She sucked in a breath, blew it out, sucked in another while she continued to glare at him. With every breath her glittery gown threw out sparks in the moonlight.

She was, Ty thought, outrageous and magnificent. And dangerous as a handful of dynamite with the fuse already hissing.

"There you go," he said with a nod. "A few more and you might be able to see past the blood in your eyes."

"The bastard."

She stalked away from the ivy-covered stone walls of the winery, its shrubberies draped in festive lights. Away from the laughter, the music that pulsed against the tall, narrow windows. Into the shadows of the old cypress trees where she could rant privately until she was calm again.

He heard her muttering in Italian, some of which he understood, none of which sounded particularly pleasant.

"I couldn't help it." She turned back to where he stood, waiting while she worked it off. Her busy hands dropped to her sides.

"No, I don't guess you could. Always were a brat." Because it was cold, and she was starting to shiver, he stripped off his jacket, dropped it over her shoulders.

Her temper had fizzled, left her feeling raw and empty inside. "I don't care about him and Kris, even though it complicates my department. I can deal with that, with her. But he hurt my mother."

"She's handling it, Sophie. She's going to be okay." He jammed his hands in his pockets before he gave in to the urge to stroke and pet. She looked so damn miserable. "I'm sorry he hurt you."

"Yeah. Well, what else is new?" The blast of anger had left her with a dull headache and a raw stomach. "I guess I should thank you for getting me out of there before I cut loose on bystanders."

"If you mean Kris, she doesn't strike me as a bystander. More an operator. But no thanks necessary either way."

She turned back, saw by his face he was beginning to be embarrassed. Because she found that endearing she rose on her toes, lightly kissed his cheek. "Still. Thanks. I wasn't shouting, was I? I lose track when I'm in a tantrum."

"Not very much, and the band was loud."

"That's something then. Well, I believe my work is done here. Why don't you walk me up to the villa? You can make sure I don't throw another tantrum."

"I guess. You want your coat?"

"That's all right." She smiled and pulled his jacket a little closer. "I've got yours."

The gardens of the villa sparkled with thousands of fairy lights. The heated terraces were decked with flowers and ornamental trees. Table groupings invited guests to spill out into the starlight, enjoy the night and the music that slipped through the doors and windows of the ballroom.

Pilar used it as an excuse to have a moment in the air before returning

inside to circulate among the guests and do her duty. She considered sneaking in an emergency cigarette.

“Hiding out?”

She jumped in her shadowy corner, then relaxed when she saw it was her stepfather. “Caught me.”

“I was sneaking out myself.” In an exaggerated move, he craned his neck, looking side to side, then whispered, “You carrying?”

The laugh felt marvelous. “Just one,” she whispered back. “We can share it.”

“Light it up, partner. Your mother’s busy. We’ve got enough time to suck one down.”

She lit the cigarette, and they stood in the shadows, companionably, conspiratorially passing it between them.

Relaxed in his company, she leaned back on the wall of the house, looked out. Lights were glowing in the fields, highlighting the naked twists and fingers of the vines. Behind them, the glamour of the music swelled.

“It’s a beautiful party.”

“As always.” With enough regret for both of them, Eli stubbed out the last of the cigarette. “You and your mother and Sophia have outdone yourselves this year. I hope Tereza let you know how much we appreciate all the work you put into this event.”

“She has. In her way.”

“Then let me thank you in mine.” He slipped his arms around her, guided her into a dance. “A pretty woman should never be without a dance partner.”

“Oh, Eli.” She laid her head on his shoulder. “What would I do without you? I’m such a mess.”

“Not you. Pilar, you were a grown woman with a child of your own when I married your mother. I’ve tried not to interfere in your life.”

“I know.”

“Tereza does enough of that for both of us,” he said and made her chuckle. “However,” he continued, “I’m going to speak my mind. He was never good enough for you.”

“Eli—”

“Never would have been good enough. You wasted a lot of years on Tony Avano, but you managed to get a wonderful daughter out of it. Treasure that, and don’t waste the rest of your life wondering why it didn’t work out.”

“He married Rene. Just like that.”

“All the better.” He nodded when she jerked back to stare at him. “For you, for Sophia, for everyone involved. They suit, such as they are. And their marriage simply takes him one step further out of your life. If I had my way, he’d be out of the business as well. Completely out. And I suspect that’s what’s going to happen within the next year.”

“He’s good at his job.”

“Others will be equally as good, and won’t give me indigestion. Your mother’s had her reasons for keeping him on. But those reasons aren’t as important as they once were. Let him go,” Eli said, kissing her forehead. “He’ll sink or he’ll swim. Either way, it’s no longer your problem.”

From the terrace below, Tony listened, and his mouth hardened. He was still stinging from what he continually told himself had been a completely uncalled-for and inappropriate attack by his own daughter. He’d have been able to shrug it off, but it had been in public. In public at a business event.

And business, he thought, wasn’t what it had been.

He didn’t believe, not really, that the Giambellis would cut him loose. But they were going to make his life difficult.

They thought he was stupid, that he was careless. But they were wrong. He already had a plan in place to ensure his financial security held. God knew he needed money, and plenty of it. Rene was already draining the resources he had.

Of course he’d been unwise to become involved with Kris. He was doing his best to break that off, delicately. So far that had been a bit more problematic than he’d anticipated. It was flattering, really, that a lovely young woman like Kris would be so attached, so reluctant to part ways. And angry, he recalled, angry enough to call Rene in the middle of the night.

Still, he’d handled that. Rene had assumed the caller was Pilar, and he hadn’t corrected her. Why should he have?

He sipped his wine, enjoyed the starlight and, as was his way, began to put trouble aside before it could take root.

He was handling Kris as well, he decided. Promising to help her move into Sophia’s position with Giambelli had stemmed that flood, just as a nice little bauble generally stemmed floods from Rene.

It was all, he thought, knowing your quarry’s weakness.

And knowing it, using it, maintained the status quo.

He intended to continue living his life as he believed he deserved. It was

time to tap his sources, a little more here, a little more there. And look toward the future.

Sophia moved through her circle of friends and did her best to avoid her cousin Gina. The woman was becoming more than a pest. She'd moved up the scale to embarrassment. Not only was she dressed in what appeared to be a Christmas-red tent with fifty pounds of sequins, but she was busily chirping to anyone she could corner about her husband's brilliance.

Don, Sophia noted, was keeping very close to the bar. He was easily half-drunk and trying to make himself invisible.

"Your mother all right?"

Sophia stopped to smile at Helen. "Last time I saw her. Hello, Uncle James." She turned to give Helen's husband a hard hug. James Moore had been one of the constants in her life, and often more a father to her than her own.

He'd let himself go pudgy, had lost more hair than he'd kept, but behind his silver wire glasses, his eyes twinkled green at her. He looked like everyone's favorite uncle and was one of the top, and most devious, criminal defense attorneys in California.

"Prettiest girl in the room, isn't she, Helen?"

"Always."

"You haven't been by to see me in weeks."

"I'll make up for it." She gave his cheek a second kiss. "*La Signora* has been keeping me busy."

"So I hear. We brought you a present."

"I love presents. Gimme."

"It's over there, making time with that redhead."

Sophia glanced over and gave a quick yip of pleasure as she spotted Lincoln Moore. "I thought Linc was still in Sacramento."

"He'll fill you in," James told her. "Go on over. Talk him into marrying you this time."

"James." Helen arched a brow. "We're going to find Pilar. Go enjoy yourself."

Lincoln Moore was tall, dark and handsome. He was also the closest thing Sophia had to a brother. At various stages of their lives, her two-month seniority had been used to advantage—by both of them. Their

mothers' friendship had been a bond that had ensured they'd grow up together. Because of it, neither of them had ever felt like an only child.

She walked up behind him, slid an arm through the crook of his and asked the redhead, "Is this guy coming on to you?"

"Sophie." With a laugh, he picked her off the floor, gave her a quick turn. "My surrogate sister," he told the redhead. "Sophia Giambelli, Andrea Wainwright. My date. Be nice."

"Andrea." Sophia offered a hand. "We'll talk."

"No, you won't. She lies about me. It's a hobby."

"It's nice to meet you. Linc's told me a lot about you."

"He lies, too. Did you both come in from Sacramento?"

"No, actually, I'm an intern at Saint Francis, the emergency-medicine rotation."

"Basketball injury." Linc held up his right hand, showed off the splint on his right finger. "Dislocated it trying to jam. Andy took a look at it, fixed me up. Then I hit on her."

"Actually, he hit on me before I fixed him up. But since I couldn't dislocate the rest of his fingers, here I am. And it is a great party."

"I'm living in San Francisco again," Linc told Sophia. "I decided to take my father up on a job with his firm. I want some real law experience before I get too deep in the political thing. I'm a glorified law clerk, and not that glorified, but it's going to give me what I want until I pass the bar."

"That's great! Linc, that's fabulous. I know your parents must be thrilled to have you home again. We'll make time to catch up, okay?"

"Absolutely. I heard you've got your hands full right now."

"Never too full. When do you take the bar?"

"Next month."

"He's brilliant, you know," she told Andy. "It can be a real pain in the butt."

"Don't start, Sophie."

"Enjoy yourselves." She spotted Ty coming in, looking miserable. "Duty calls. Don't sneak out without seeing my mother. You know she dotes on you." Sophia brushed at his jacket. "God knows why."

"I won't. I'll call you."

"You'd better. Nice meeting you, Andrea."

"You, too." Andy glanced up at Linc. "So, are you brilliant?"

"Yeah. It's a curse." Grinning, he drew her onto the dance floor.

“Smile, MacMillan.”

Ty looked down at Sophia. “Why?”

“Because you’re going to dance with me.”

“Why?” He bit back a sigh as she took his hand. “Sorry. Been hanging around with Maddy Cutter too long. The kid never stops asking questions.”

“The two of you seemed to be hitting it off. We’d dance better if you actually touched me.”

“Right.” He laid a hand at her waist. “She’s an interesting kid, and bright. Have you seen my grandfather?”

“Not for a bit. Why?”

“I want to see him, and *La Signora*. Then I figure I’m done with this and can go home.”

“You’re such a party animal.” She slid her hand over his shoulder and tugged playfully at his hair. There was so much of it, she thought. All thick and unruly. “Live a little, Ty. It’s Christmas.”

“Not yet. There’s still a lot of work to be done before Christmas, and to be done after.”

“Hey.” She tugged his hair again so that he stopped scanning the crowd for his grandfather and looked at her. “There’s no work to be done tonight, and I still owe you for coming to my rescue.”

“You weren’t in trouble. Everyone else was.” It wasn’t gratitude he was looking for, but distance. A safe distance. She was always dangerous, but pressed up against a man, she was lethal. “And I have some charts and some grafts I want to go over. Why is that funny?” he demanded when she chuckled.

“I was just wondering what you’d be like if you ever loosened up. I bet you’re a wild man, MacMillan.”

“I get loose,” he muttered.

“Tell me something.” She skimmed her fingers down the nape of his neck, enjoyed the way those lake-blue eyes flared with annoyance. “Something that has nothing to do with wine or work.”

“What else is there?”

“Art, literature, an amusing childhood experience, a secret fantasy or desire.”

“My current fantasy is to get out of here.”

“Do better. Come on. The first thing that pops into your head.”

“Peeling that dress off you, and seeing if you taste like you smell.” He waited a beat. “Good, that shut you up.”

“Only momentarily, and only because I’m assessing my reaction. I find myself a great deal more intrigued by the image than expected.” She tipped her head back to study his face. Oh yes, she liked his eyes, especially now, when there were sparks of heat in them. “Why do you suppose that is?”

“I’ve answered enough questions for one night.” He started to step back, but she clamped her hand on his shoulder.

“Why don’t we fulfill our duty here, then go to your place?”

“Is it that easy for you?”

“It can be.”

“Not for me, but thanks.” His tone turned careless and cold as he looked away from her again and around the room. “But I’d say you’ve got plenty of alternates here if you’re up for a quick one-night stand. I’m going home.”

He stepped back, walked away.

It took her nearly ten seconds before she had her wind back, and another three before the fury spurted up and scored her throat. The delay allowed him to get out of the room and down the first flight of stairs before she came after him.

“No, you don’t.” She hissed it under her breath, then stalked past him. “In here.” She strode into the family parlor, banged the pocket doors closed.

“*Cazzo! Culo!* You son of a bitch.” Even now her voice was quiet, controlled. He couldn’t know how much that cost her.

“You’re right.” He cut her off before she could spew all the venom. “That was out of line, and I’m sorry.”

The apology, quietly given, turned temper to tears, but she held them back by sheer raw will. “I’m a whore, in your opinion, because I think of sex the way a man does.”

“No. Jesus.” He hadn’t meant that, only to get under her skin the way she got under his. Then get the hell away from her. “I don’t know what I think.”

“It would be all right, wouldn’t it, if I pretended reluctance, if I let you seduce me. But because I’m honest, I’m cheap.”

“No.” He gripped her arms now, hoping to steady them both. “You got

me worked up. You always have. I shouldn't have said what I did. Anything that I did. For God's sake, don't cry."

"I am *not* going to cry."

"Good. Okay. Look, you're beautiful, outrageous and over my head. I've managed to keep my hands off you up till now, and I'm going to keep them off."

"You've got them on me now."

"Sorry." He dropped his arms to his sides. "Sorry."

"You're saying you insulted me because you're a coward?"

"Look, Sophie. I'm going home, soak my head. We'll get back to work tomorrow and forget this happened."

"I don't think so. I get you worked up, do I?" She gave him a little shove, moving in, and he stepped back. "And your answer to that is to take a slap at me."

"It was the wrong answer. I said I was sorry."

"Not good enough. Try this."

She was on him before he could act. All that was left was reaction.

Her mouth was hot, and soft and very skilled. It fed ravenously on his. Her body was lush and smooth and very female. It pressed intimately against his.

His mind blanked. He could admit that later—just snapped from on to off like a switch, giving him no shield against the panther leap of arousal. She tasted like she smelled; he learned that much.

Dark and dangerous and female.

He'd jerked her closer before he could stop himself, responded to the sharp nip of her teeth even as his system went to fast overload.

One minute she was wrapped around him like some exotic, strangling vine, and the next he was cut loose with every ounce of blood drained from his head.

"Deal with it." She ran a finger lightly over her own bottom lip, then turned to shove the doors open again.

"Just a damn minute." He had her arm, spun her around. He wasn't sure what he planned to do, but he didn't plan for it to be pleasant.

Then he saw the utter shock on her face. Before he could react she was shoving him aside, racing across the room to the refectory table.

"*Dio! Madonna*, who would do such a thing?"

He saw it then, the three Giambelli angels. Red ran down the carved faces like blood from slash wounds. Written across the chest of each, in that same violent hue, were vicious messages.

BITCH #1

BITCH #2

BITCH #3

“Sit down, Sophie. I’ll get them out before your mother or grandmother sees them. Take them home, clean them up.”

“No, I’ll do it. I think it’s nail polish. A nasty girl trick,” she said quietly. Temper would do no good, she thought as she gathered the three figures. And she couldn’t find her anger under the sadness. “Rene, I suppose. Or Kris. They both hate the Giambelli women at the moment.”

“Let me take care of it for you.” He laid his hands on her shoulders. “Whoever did it knew it would hurt you. I can get them cleaned up and put back before anyone notices.”

She wanted to push the angels into his big, strong hands, and herself along with them. Because she did, she stepped away from him. “I take care of my own, and you’re in a hurry to go home.”

“Sophie.”

His tone was so patient, so kind, she sighed. “I need to do it myself. And I need to be angry with you a little while longer. So go away.”

He let her go, but once he was outside, he turned and climbed the stone steps to the ballroom. He’d hang around awhile, he decided. Just to be sure the only thing anyone hurt that night were wooden angels.

In her room. Sophia carefully cleaned off the figures. It was, as she suspected, smears of bold red nail polish. A petty vandalism, and an ugly one, but not permanent.

You can’t destroy the Giambellis so easily, she thought. We’re tougher than that. Tough enough, she thought, for her to ignore the nastiness of the act and leave the perpetrator of it disappointed.

She took them back downstairs, replaced them and found that single act steadied her again.

Easier, she realized, than steadying herself against what had passed between her and Tyler.

Moron, she thought, wandering to an antique mirror to add a fresh dusting of powder to her nose. The moron could certainly kiss when he put some effort into it, but that didn't make him less of a moron. She hoped he suffered. She hoped he spent a long, sweaty, uncomfortable night. If he looked haggard and miserable the next day, she might, just might let him off the hook.

Then again.

She watched herself in the mirror as she traced a finger over her lips.

Dropped her hand quickly to retrieve her lipstick when the doors opened.

"Sophia."

"*Nonna*." She glanced toward the three angels. All was as it should be. "Just doing some repairs. I'll be right back up."

Tereza closed the doors behind her. "I saw you go out after Tyler."

"Mmm." Keeping it at that, Sophia carefully painted her lips.

"Do you think, because I'm old, I don't recognize the look in your eye?"

"What look is that, *Nonna*?"

"Hot blood."

Sophia gave a little shrug, recapped her lipstick. "We had an argument."

"An argument didn't require you to replace your lipstick."

Laughing now, Sophia turned. "What sharp eyes you have, Grandma. We did have an argument, and I solved it my way. It's both legal and moral for me to kiss Ty, *Nonna*. We're not blood kin."

"I love you, Sophia. And I love Tyler."

Sophia softened. The words came rarely from Tereza. "I know."

"I didn't put the two of you together so you would hurt each other."

"Why did you put us together?"

"For the good of the family." Because the day had been long, Tereza gave in and sat. "Hot blood can cloud the judgment. This is a pivotal year, and already before it begins, we have upheaval. You're a beautiful young woman."

"Some say I look like my grandmother."

Tereza allowed herself a small smile. She, too, glanced toward the three carved figures, and her eyes softened. "A little, perhaps. But more you favor your grandfather. He was beautiful, like a painting. I married for duty, but

it wasn't a hardship. And he was kind. Beauty is a weapon, *cara*. Take care how you use it, for without that kindness, it will turn and strike back at you."

Sophia sat. "Am I . . . hard, *Nonna*?"

"Yes." Tereza reached over, touched her hand lightly to Sophia's. "That's not a bad thing. A soft woman is too easily molded, and too easily bruised. Your mother's been both. She's my daughter, Sophia," she added coolly, when Sophia stiffened. "I will speak my mind there. You're not soft, and you go your own way. I'm pleased with you. I say only that hard can become brittle, without care. Take care."

"Are you pleased with me, *Nonna*, because in going my own way, I go yours?"

"Perhaps. You're Giambelli. Blood tells."

"I'm also Avano."

Tereza inclined her head, her voice turned fierce. "You're proof, aren't you, of which line is stronger? Your father's in you. He's a sly man, and you can be sly. He's ambitious, and so are you. But his weaknesses have never been yours. His lack of heart has ruined him as much as his lack of courage. You have both heart and courage, and so you can be hard and not brittle."

"I know you hate him," Sophia said softly. "Tonight, so do I."

"Hate' is a strong word. You shouldn't use it against your father, whatever he is, whatever he's done. I have no hate for Anthony Avano." Tereza got to her feet again. "I have no feelings toward him now. He's made his last choice that concerns me. We'll deal with each other one final time, then he'll no longer exist for me."

"You mean to cut him loose."

"He made his choice," Tereza repeated. "Now he'll deal with the consequences of it. It's not for you to worry over." She held out a hand. "Come, you should be at the party. We'll find your mother and show them three generations of Giambelli women."

It was very late when Tony let himself into the apartment. He wondered if anyone knew he had the key, after all this time.

He'd brought his own bottle of wine, a choice from his personal cellar. The Barolo would keep things civilized. Business discussions, and the word "blackmail" never entered his mind, should always be conducted in a civilized manner.

He uncorked the bottle in the kitchen, left the wine on the counter to breathe and selected two glasses. Though he was disappointed not to find fresh fruit in the refrigerator, he made do with the wheel of Brie.

Even at three in the morning, presentation mattered.

It was lucky he'd made the appointment so late. It had taken quite some doing to wind Rene down. She'd spent over an hour, even after the drive back to the city, haranguing him about the Giambellis, their treatment of her, his future with the company. And money.

Money was the main matter, of course.

He could hardly blame her for it.

Their lifestyle required a great deal of money. Unlike Pilar, Rene didn't bring unlimited funds to the table. And unlike Pilar, Rene went through money like it would shortly become unfashionable to have any in your pocket.

No matter, he thought, arranging crackers with the cheese. It would be a simple and civilized matter to increase their cash flow.

The Giambellis intended to cut him loose. He was certain of that now. Neither Pilar nor Sophia would stand up for him. He'd known that was a possibility, but had chosen to ignore it and hope for the best. Or rather, he admitted here, in private, he'd allowed Rene to push him into a corner.

But he had options. Any number of options. The first of which should be coming along any minute.

This first business deal would be a stopgap, buy him time. He had other avenues, and they could be widened if necessary. He had contacts, and prospects.

Tereza Giambelli would be very sorry she'd underestimated him. A great many people would be sorry.

In the end he would land on his feet, as he always had. He had no doubt of it.

The knock on the door made him smile. He poured two glasses of wine, set them and the bottle on a tray with the cheese and crackers. He set the tray on the coffee table in the living room.

He shot his cuffs, smoothed his hair, then walked to the door prepared to begin negotiations.



PART TWO

The Growing

Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming,
is the character of perfection as culture conceives it.

—MATTHEW ARNOLD

CHAPTER NINE

"I don't know why we had to come back here."

"Because I needed a few more things." She could have put it off, Sophia admitted. But no reason to waste a trip into San Francisco without stopping by her apartment. Hadn't she taken pity on Ty and driven Eli's SUV instead of her convertible?

"Look," she continued. "I explained that at the beginning I'm going to have to spot-check the offices. Kris is going to continue to resist the new feeding chain. She needs to see you and me together, a team."

"Some team."

"I'm managing." She pulled into her parking slot, set the brake. "I think we should call a holiday truce. At the moment, Ty, I just don't have the time to fight with you."

She climbed out, slammed her door, jammed her keys in her briefcase.

"What's the problem?"

"I don't have a problem. You're the problem."

He walked around to her side, leaned on the fender. She'd been edgy for two days, he thought. Long enough for anybody to stew. He didn't think it was about their incident at the Christmas party. She'd come out on top of that one.

"A team, remember? Are you still upset about the angels?"

"No. I took care of them, didn't I? Good as new."

"Yeah, you deal, all right. So what's the problem now?"

"You want to know the problem? Fine. I hate getting up at the crack of dawn every day, tromping around the fields in the cold. But I'm doing it."

Then I go back and do the work I'm trained to do. But I'm obliged to juggle it from the villa and the offices here, where I have a second-in-command who's not only slept with my father but is ready to mutiny."

"Fire her."

"Oh, that's an idea." She tapped a finger to her temple, while her voice dripped disdain. "Why hasn't that occurred to me? Could it be because we're weeks into a reorganization, in the middle of a huge and intense and vital promotional campaign and I have no one qualified to take over her work? Yes, you know, I think that might be the reason I haven't kicked her bitchy, cheating ass out."

"Look, brat, you got sand in your shoe, you shake it out."

"I don't have time," she snapped and, to prove it, yanked out her Filofax. It bulged. "Would you like to take a look in here, see my schedule for the next six weeks?" She jammed it back in her briefcase.

"So you're pressed." He gave a little shrug. "Take the mornings off to do what you have to do. I'll carry you in the vineyard."

The look she gave him shot like a bullet.

"Nobody carries me, MacMillan. But you're damn right I'm pressed. I'm supposed to be training my mother, who has little to no interest in public relations. I've had to cancel three dates with three very interesting men because I'm buried in work. My social life is going down the toilet. I haven't been able to get through goddamn Rene for two days to contact my father, who hasn't been to *his* office. And it's imperative I speak with him about one of our top accounts within the next forty-eight hours as someone—who unfortunately won't be me—is going to need to fly to San Diego for a meeting in approximately forty-nine hours."

"What about Margaret? I thought she was taking over most of the major accounts."

"Do you think I didn't try that? Do I look stupid?" Tired, frustrated and fed up, she stalked to the garage elevator and stabbed the button. "She left for Italy yesterday afternoon. Neither she nor her office is fully updated on the Twiner account because it's always been my father's baby. Since I don't want the people at Twiner to know we've got a hole in the loop, I've been tap-dancing with them for days."

"Nobody carries you," Ty pointed out. "But you're carrying Avano."

"No, I'm through carrying him. But I'll carry Giambelli, and that's why

I'm covering for him as long as I can. I don't like it, I'm pissed off and I have a stupid headache."

"Okay." He surprised them both by reaching up to rub her stiff shoulders when they stepped onto the elevator. "Take some aspirin, then we'll work it through a step at a time."

"She's got no right to block me from speaking to my own father. Not on a personal level or a business one."

"No, she doesn't." That, Ty assumed, was the real headache. "It's a power play. She won't get her kicks unless you let her know it steams you. Work around him."

"If I work around him, it makes him look like a . . . damn it. He *is* a fool. I'm so angry with him for putting me into this spot. If I don't clean it up by end of day—"

"You'll clean it up by end of day."

"Yeah." She let out a breath, stepped off the elevator on her floor. Turned to study him. "Why are you being nice to me?"

"It throws you off. Plus, Twiner is a big stake. I don't spend all my time in the fields," he said when she lifted her eyebrows at him. "If you'd told me you were trying to track down your father, I'd have given you a hand with it. You haven't gone to Cutter."

She pressed her lips together. "No. But I figure he knows something's up. He'll pinpoint the target soon enough."

"Then we'll just have to be faster. Teamwork, remember?"

"That's only because you dislike him more than you dislike me."

"And your point is?"

It made her laugh as she put the key in the lock. "As good a reason as any. I just need to grab a few things, including some old files I want my mother to study. And I think I might have some notes on Twiner that'll partially plug this hole. I'll have you back home by dinner."

She stopped, turned. "Unless," she said, adding a slow smile, "you'd like to order in and try out a different kind of teamwork."

"Cut it out."

"You liked kissing me."

"When I was a kid I liked green apples. I found out they're hell on the system."

"I'm ripe."

He reached past her to turn the knob. "You're telling me."

She gave his arm a friendly squeeze as she turned. "I'm starting to like you, MacMillan. What the hell will we do about that?" She pushed open the door, took one step inside, froze.

"Dad?"

She had a brief impression, no more than a blur, before Ty was shoving her out the door again. But that blurred image stayed in her mind, was all she could see.

Her father, slumped in her chair, the side of his face, the glinting silver at his temples, the front of his shirt all crusted and dark. And his eyes, his handsome, clever eyes, filmed over and staring.

"Dad. He's . . . I have to . . . My father."

She was pale as a sheet and already beginning to shudder when Ty pushed her against the wall outside her apartment. "Listen to me, Sophia. Listen. Use your cell phone. Call nine-one-one. Do it now."

"An ambulance." She fought her way through the fog that wanted to slither over her brain, and began to fight Tyler. "He needs an ambulance. I have to go to him."

"No." He gripped her arms, gave her one brisk shake. "You can't help him." He tabled the idea of going back in to check on Tony himself. Sophia couldn't be left alone. And he'd already seen enough to be certain there was nothing to be done.

He pulled Sophia to the floor, opened her briefcase himself and dug out her cell phone. "I need the police," he said.

Sophia lowered her head to her knees as Tyler gave the emergency operator the necessary information. She couldn't think. Wouldn't think yet. Somehow she had to steady herself and get through.

"I'm all right." Her voice was quiet, almost calm, even if her hands couldn't be. "I know he's dead. I have to go in to him."

"No." He settled down on the floor beside her and draped an arm over her shoulders as much in restraint as comfort. "You don't. You're not. I'm sorry, Sophia. There's nothing you can do."

"There's always something." She lifted her head. Her eyes were dry. Burning dry. "Someone killed my father, and there has to be something I can do. I know what he was." Her voice broke there, and the tears that were scalding her throat poured up and out. "He's still my father."

"I know it." He tightened his grip until she laid her head on his shoul-

der. There was something to do, he thought as she wept. Even if it was only to wait.

He didn't leave her. Sophia told herself to remember that whatever happened between them—or didn't—when things had been at their very worst, Tyler had stayed with her.

She sat on the sofa in the apartment across the hall from her own. She'd been to a couple of parties there, she recalled. The gay couple who lived there threw delightful parties. And Frankie, a graphic artist who often worked at home, had opened the apartment to her, and the police. And bless him, had discreetly closed himself in the bedroom to give them privacy.

No doubt the story would make its way like an electric fire through the building. But for now, he was being a pal. She'd remember that, too.

"I don't know what he was doing in my apartment," Sophia said, again. She tried to study the face of the man who questioned her. Like his name—Detective Lamont? Claremont?—his features kept slipping out of focus.

"Did your father, or anyone else, have a key?" The name was Claremont. Alexander Claremont.

"No, I . . . Yes." Sophia lifted a hand, pressed a fingertip against her temple as if to loosen the thought. "My father. I gave him a key not long after I moved in. He was having some decorating work done on his place, and I was going to be out of the country. I offered to let him use my place while I was gone. I don't think I ever got the key back. I never thought of it again."

"Did he often use your place?"

"No. He didn't use it when I offered, but stayed at a hotel." Or said he had, she thought. Had he used her apartment then, and since? Hadn't there been times she'd come back from a trip and felt someone had been there in her absence?

Little things out of place.

No, that was stupid. It would have been the cleaning service. Her father would have had no reason to use her apartment. He'd had his own, with Rene.

He cheated on your mother, a voice murmured in her brain. He cheated on Rene.

"Ms. Giambelli?"

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"You want some water? Something?" Tyler interrupted, to give her a moment to tune back.

"No, no thanks. I'm sorry, Detective. I keep losing the thread."

"It's all right. I asked when was the last time you had contact with your father."

"Saturday night. There was a party at our vineyard. It's an annual event. My father was there."

"What time did he leave?"

"I couldn't say. There were a great many people. He didn't say goodbye to me."

"Did he attend alone?"

"No, his wife was with him. Rene."

"Your father is married?"

"Yes, he was married the day of the party. Rene Foxx. Hasn't she been contacted?"

"I was unaware of her. Can I reach her at your father's address?"

"Yes, I . . . Yes," she said again, biting back what had nearly tumbled off her tongue.

"Do you own a gun, Ms. Giambelli?"

"No."

"You had no handgun in your apartment?"

"No. I don't like guns."

"Did your father own a gun?"

"I don't know. Not to my knowledge."

"When was the last time you were in your apartment?"

"Over a week ago. As I told you, I'm staying primarily in Napa for the next several months. I came here today, after Mr. MacMillan and I left the offices downtown, to pick up a few more things."

"What was your relationship with your father?"

She toughened up. Sitting beside her, Tyler felt it. "He was my father, Detective. Why don't I save you the trouble of asking me if I killed him. No, I didn't. Nor do I know who killed him, or why."

Claremont's voice remained steady. "Did your father have any enemies?"

"Obviously."

"That were known to you," he added without skipping a beat.

"No. I don't know of anyone who would have killed him."

Claremont looked down at his pad, appeared to study some notes.

“How long have your parents been divorced?”

“They’ve been legally separated over seven years.”

“Separated?”

“Yes. They haven’t lived together, in any real sense, since I was a child.”

“Would this Rene Foxx be your father’s second wife?”

“That’s correct.”

“Just married a couple days ago.”

“So I was informed.”

“When were your parents divorced, Ms. Giambelli?”

There was a cold ball in her belly now. She wouldn’t let him see the nerves. “I believe the decree was final the day before my father married Rene. It was only a legality, Detective.”

Though her knees shook, she got to her feet. “I’m sorry, I have to go to my family. I don’t want them to hear about this on the evening news, or from a stranger. I need to go home. Can you tell me . . . what happens with my father now? What arrangements need to be made?”

“We’ll continue our investigation. My partner is working across the hall with the crime-scene unit. I’ll discuss arrangements with next of kin.”

“I’m my father’s only child.”

“His wife is his legal next of kin, Ms. Giambelli.”

Her mouth opened, closed. When her hand fluttered up, Tyler simply took it in his and held it. “I see. Of course. I have to go home. Ty.”

“We’re going.”

“Mr. MacMillan, I have some questions for you.”

“I gave you my address.” Tyler shot a look over his shoulder as he led Sophia to the door. “You know where to find me.”

“Yeah.” Claremont tapped his pad as the door closed. “That I do.” He had a feeling he and his partner were going to take a ride into the country, very soon.

He walked to the bedroom door, sure if he opened it, the neighbor would tumble out, ear first. Instead he knocked. Might as well keep things friendly while he asked more questions.

Alexander Claremont liked French wine, Italian shoes and American blues. He’d grown up in San Francisco, the middle son of solidly

middle-class parents who'd worked hard to ensure a good life and good educations for their three boys.

His older brother was a pediatrician, his younger a professor at Berkeley. Alex Claremont had planned to be a lawyer.

He'd been born to be a cop.

The law was a different entity in the hands of a cop than it was in the hands of a lawyer. For a lawyer it was there to be bent, twisted, manipulated and tailored to fit a client's needs.

He understood that and, on a very basic level, respected that.

To a cop it was the line.

It was the line Claremont worshiped.

Now, barely two hours after walking onto the crime scene, he was thinking about the line.

"What do you think of the daughter?"

He didn't answer at first, but his partner was used to that. She was driving because she'd gotten to the car first.

"Rich," he said at length. "Classy. Tough shell. Didn't say anything she didn't want to say. Thought it, lots of thinking going on, but she watches her words."

"Big, important family. Big, juicy scandal." Maureen Maguire braked at a light. Tapped her fingers on the wheel.

She and Claremont were polar opposites, which was, in her opinion, why they'd found their rhythm after the initial bumps three years back, and worked well together.

She was as white as a white woman could be. Irish and freckled and strawberry-blond with soft blue eyes and a dimple in her left cheek. At thirty-six, she was four years Claremont's senior, comfortably married where he was radically single, cozily suburban where he was uptown urban.

"Nobody sees the guy go in. No vehicle. We're running the cab companies to see if they had a drop-off here. From the looks of the body, he'd been dead at least thirty-six hours. Key to the place was in his pocket, along with three hundred and change in cash and plenty of plastic. He had a gold Rolex, gold cuff links with pretty little diamonds in them. The apartment had plenty of easily transported items. No robbery."

He shot her a look. "No kidding."

"Just crossing off the list. Two glasses of wine, one full, one half-full. Only one with prints—his prints. He got plugged where he sat. No tussle, no signs

of struggle. From the angle of the shots, the killer was sitting on the sofa. Nice little wine-and-cheese party and oh, excuse me, bam, bam, bam. You're dead."

"Guy was divorced and remarried within a day. Romantic interlude gone bad?"

"Maybe." Maguire pursed her lips. "Hard to say from the scene. Three shots, twenty-five-caliber, I'd say, and close range. Not much of a pop, but it's surprising nobody heard anything in a snazzy building like that."

She parked, glanced up at the next snazzy building. "Funny, huh, how a new husband doesn't come home and the new bride doesn't report him missing."

"Let's find out why."

Rene had just gotten in from a three-hour session at her salon. Nothing smoothed her feathers better than a long bout of pampering. Unless it was shopping. But she'd taken care of that as well with a quick foray into Neiman's, where she'd treated herself lavishly.

Tony, she thought, as she poured herself a small vermouth, was going to pay and pay dearly for this little bout of the sulks.

He'd gone off like this before, a couple of days at a time, when she'd pressured him over some matter. The good part was, he always came back, always with some very attractive trinket in hand, and naturally agreed to do whatever she'd demanded he do in the first place.

She didn't mind so much, as it gave her a little time to herself. Besides, now it was all legal and tidy. She lifted her left hand, studied the glitter of her rings. She was Mrs. Anthony Avano, and intended to stay that way.

Or scalp him bald in a divorce.

When the bell rang, she smiled. It would be Tony, come crawling back. He knew better than to use his key when he'd been gone. The last time he'd done so, she'd pulled a gun on him.

One thing about her Tony, he learned fast.

She opened the door, prepared to make him beg, then frowned at the couple holding up badges.

"Mrs. Avano?"

"Yes. What's this about?"

"Detective Claremont, and my partner, Detective Maguire, San Francisco PD. May we come in?"

“Why?”

“Please, Mrs. Avano, may we come in?”

“Is Tony in jail?” she hissed through her teeth as she stepped back. “What the hell did he do?”

“No, ma’am, he’s not in jail.” Maguire moved in. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Avano. Your husband is dead.”

“Dead?” Rene let out an annoyed huff of breath. “That’s ridiculous. You’ve made a mistake.”

“There’s no mistake, Mrs. Avano,” Claremont said. “Could we sit down?”

Rene felt a little jerk in her stomach, stepped back. “You expect me to believe Tony’s dead. Just dead?”

“We’re very sorry, ma’am. Why don’t we sit down?” Maguire started to take her arm, but Rene yanked away.

She’d lost some of the color in her face, but her eyes were alive. And angry. “Was there an accident?”

“No, ma’am. Could you tell us the last time you saw your husband, or had contact with him?”

Rene stared hard at Claremont. “Saturday night, early Sunday morning, I guess. What happened to Tony?”

“You weren’t concerned when you didn’t hear from him?”

“We had an argument,” she snapped. “Tony often goes off on little sulks afterward. I’m not his mother.”

“No, ma’am.” Maguire nodded. “His wife. You were married recently, weren’t you?”

“That’s right. What happened to him? I have a right to know what happened.”

“Anthony Avano was shot and killed.”

Her head jerked back, but almost immediately the color rushed back into her face. “I knew it! I warned him she’d do something crazy, but he wouldn’t listen. She was harassing us, wasn’t she? Those quiet types, you can’t trust them.”

“Who is that, Mrs. Avano?”

“His wife.” She sucked in a breath, turned and stalked over to pick up her drink. “His *ex*-wife. Pilar Giambelli. The bitch killed him. If she didn’t, his little tramp of a daughter did.”

. . .

He didn't know what to do for her. She sat in the passenger seat, her eyes closed. But he knew she wasn't sleeping. Her composure was a thin and tensile veneer, and he wasn't certain what he'd find if he managed to crack it.

So he gave her silence on the long drive north.

The energy, the vitality Sophia owned like breath was gone. That concerned him most. It was like having a doll sitting beside him. Maybe it was a kind of bubble, a void between the shock and the next stage of grief. He didn't know about such things. He'd never lost anyone important to him. Certainly never lost anyone so brutally and suddenly.

When he turned into the drive, she opened her eyes. As if she sensed home. In her lap her fingers linked together.

The bubble's burst, Ty thought, watching her knuckles go white.

"I'll come in with you."

She started to refuse, that knee-jerk I-can-do-it-myself response. It was hard to admit she wasn't sure she could do anything herself just yet. And he was family. She needed family.

"Thanks. My mother." She had to swallow as he stopped the four-wheel at the base of the steps. "It's going to be very hard for my mother."

"Sophia." He laid his hand over hers, tightening his grip when she would have shifted away. "Sophia," he said again until she looked at him. "People always think they have to be strong. They don't."

"Giambellis do. I'm numb, Ty. And I'm afraid of what's going to happen inside me when I'm not. I'm afraid to start thinking. I'm afraid to start feeling. All I can do is the next thing."

"Then we'll do the next thing."

He got out of the car, came around to her side. And in a gesture that made her throat burn, took her hand.

The house was warm, and fragrant with her mother's flowers. Sophia looked around the grand foyer like a stranger. Nothing had changed. How could it be that nothing had changed?

She watched Maria come down the hall. Everything moves like a dream, Sophia thought. Even footsteps echo like a dream.

"Maria, where is my mother?"

"Upstairs. She's working in your office. Miss Sophia?"

"And *La Signora*?"

Uneasy, Maria looked toward Tyler. "She is in the fields, with Mr. Mac."

"Would you send someone for them, please. Send someone out for my grandparents?"

"Yes, right away."

She went quickly, while Sophia turned toward the stairs. Her hand tightened on Tyler's. She could hear music coming from her office. Something light and frothy. When she stepped into the doorway, she saw her mother, her hair scooped back, bent over the keyboard of the computer.

"What do you mean I've committed an illegal function? Damn it, I hate you."

Another time the baffled frustration would have amused Sophia. Now it, and everything, made her want to weep.

"Mama?"

"Oh, thank God! Sophia, I've done something. I don't know what. I've been practicing for an hour and still I'm useless on this thing."

She pushed back from the desk, glanced up—and froze.

"What is it? What's wrong?" She knew every line, every curve, every expression of her daughter's face. Her stomach twisted painfully as she rushed across the room. "What's happened?"

"Mama." Everything changes now, Sophia thought. Once it was said, nothing was ever going to be the same again. "Mama, it's Dad."

"Is he hurt? Is he ill?"

"He . . ." She couldn't say the words. Instead, she released Ty's hand and wrapped her arms tight around her mother.

The twisting in Pilar's stomach stilled. Everything inside her stilled. "Oh God. Oh my God." Pressing her face to Sophia's hair, she began to rock. "No. Oh, baby, no."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Mama. We found him. In my apartment. Someone . . . someone killed him there."

"What? Wait." Shaking, she drew back. "No."

"Sit down, Pilar." Tyler was already leading them both to the curved love seat against the wall.

"No, no. This can't be right. I need to—"

"Sit," Tyler repeated and gently pushed both of them down. "Listen to me. Look at me." He waited while Pilar groped for Sophia's hand. "I know

this is hard for both of you. Avano was in Sophia's apartment. We don't know why. It looked like he was meeting someone there."

Pilar blinked. Her mind seemed to be skipping, as if there was a tooth missing on a gear. "In Sophie's apartment? Why do you say that? What do you mean?"

"There was a bottle of wine on the table. Two glasses." He'd memorized the scene. Quiet elegance, stark death. "It's likely whoever it was he met there killed him. The police have already questioned Sophia."

"Sophia." Her fingers gripped her daughter's like a clamp. "The police."

"And they're going to have more questions for her. For you. Maybe all of us. I know it's hard, hard to think straight, but you have to prepare yourself to deal with them. I think you should call a lawyer. Both of you."

"I don't want a lawyer. I don't need a lawyer. For God's sake, Ty, Tony's been murdered."

"That's right. In his daughter's apartment, only days after divorcing you and marrying someone else. Only days after Sophie went after him in public."

Guilt, ugly and fierce, bared its teeth inside Sophia. "Goddamn it, Ty, if either of us was going to kill him, we'd have done it years ago."

Tyler shifted his gaze to Sophia's. The energy was back, he noted, and it was furious. That, he decided, was a plus. "Is that what you're going to say to the cops? Is that what you're going to say to the reporters when they start calling? Publicity's your business, Sophie. Think."

Her breath was coming too fast. She couldn't stop it. Something inside her wanted to explode, to burst out of the fragile skin of control and scream. Then she felt her mother's hand tremble in hers, and reeled it back in. "All right. But not yet. Not now. We're entitled to mourn first." She drew her mother closer. "We're entitled to be human first."

She got to her feet, walked to the door on legs that felt stiff and brittle. "Would you go down, talk to *Nonna* and Eli? Tell them what they need to be told. I want to be alone with my mother."

"Okay. Pilar." He bent down, touched her knee. "I'm sorry." He met Sophia's eyes as he walked out. The great, dark depth of them was all he saw as she closed the door between them.

CHAPTER TEN

Ty was right, but Sophia would stew about that later. It might help to have something petty to brood about. The reporters started to call less than ten minutes after she'd told her mother, and before she'd been able to go downstairs and speak with her grandmother.

She knew the line they would take. Unity. And she was prepared to go head-to-head with the police to soften the blow for her mother.

There would be no comment to the press until she was able to write the appropriate release. There would be no interviews. She was perfectly aware her father's murder would generate a media circus, but the Giambellis would not step into the center ring and perform.

Which meant she had a great many phone calls to make to family members and key employees. But the first—damn Tyler—was to Helen Moore.

They needed legal advice.

"I've called Aunt Helen," she told Tereza.

"Good." Tereza sat in the front parlor, her back ruler-straight, her face composed. "Your mother?"

"She wanted a few minutes alone."

With a nod, Tereza lifted her hand, took Sophia's. It was a connection, and it was enough. "Who do you trust most on your staff to write a statement for the press and filter the calls?"

"Me. I want to do it myself, *Nonna*."

"Good." Tereza gave her hand a squeeze, released it. "I'm sorry for your grief, *cara*. Tyler's told us everything he knows. I don't like that you were questioned before you were able to speak with Helen or James."

"I have nothing to hide. I know nothing. My father was shot while he sat in my chair in my apartment. How could I not tell them anything that might help them find who killed him?"

"If you know nothing, you could tell them nothing that would help." She dismissed the police with one impatient gesture. "Tyler, get Sophia some wine." When the phone rang again, she slapped a hand on the arm of her chair.

"I'll take care of it," Tyler began.

"No, we don't want a family member talking to the press today." Sophia rubbed her forehead, ordered herself to think. "You should get David. Ask him to come. If you could explain things to him, I'll get started on a statement. For now, it's simply, the family is in seclusion and has no comment."

"I'll get him here." Tyler crossed to her, lifted her face with a hand on her chin. "You don't need wine. You need an aspirin."

"I don't need either." She stepped back. "Give me a half hour," she said to her grandmother.

"Sophie." Eli left Tereza's side to put his arms around Sophia. "Take a breath."

"Can't."

"All right, do what's best for you. I'll start making the calls."

"I can do that."

"You can, but I will. And take the aspirin."

"All right, for you."

It helped. The aspirin and the work. Within an hour she was steadier, had the official statement drafted and had briefed David.

"I'll take care of the press, Sophia. You take care of yourself, and your mother."

"We'll get through. You need to be aware that some enterprising reporter is bound to try to get close to the villa, and to MacMillan's. You have children, and that connection to the family will also be made."

"I'll talk to my kids. They're not going to sell a story to the tabloids, Sophia."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to imply that. But they're still children. They could be harassed and they could be caught off guard."

"I'll talk to them," he repeated. "I know this is rough for you. I can't

imagine how rough for you. And your mother.” He got to his feet. “Anything I can do, just tell me what it is.”

“I appreciate that.” She hesitated, measuring him as she did so. Petty resentments, company policies had to be put aside. “My grandparents trust you, or you wouldn’t be here. So I’m going to trust you. I’m going to set you up here in the house so you can handle the phones. I’d give you my space, but I may need it.”

She started for the door, then just stopped in the middle of the room. She looked, he thought, blank. As if some internal mechanism had shut down.

“Why don’t you rest a little.”

“I can’t. As long as I keep moving, I can handle it. I know what people thought of him. I know what’ll be said about him, in whispers over cocktails, in gleeful articles in the press.”

What *I* thought of him. What *I* said to him. Oh God, don’t think of it now.

“It can’t hurt him. But it can and will hurt my mother. So I can’t stop.”

She hurried out. “I think the library would be best,” she began. “You’ll have privacy there, and it’s convenient if you need anything we haven’t thought of.”

She was halfway down the steps when Maria opened the front door to the police. Claremont looked over the housekeeper’s head and saw Sophia.

“Ms. Giambelli.”

“Detective. It’s all right, Maria. I’ll take care of this. Do you have any more information for me?” she asked him as she continued down the steps.

“Not at this time. We’d like to speak to you again, and to your mother.”

“My mother is resting. David, this is Detective . . .”

“Claremont,” he finished. “And my partner, Detective Maguire.”

“David Cutter, Detectives Claremont and Maguire. Mr. Cutter is chief operating officer of Giambelli-MacMillan. I’ll show you into the parlor and be with you in just a moment.”

“Is your mother at home, Ms. Giambelli?”

“I said my mother is resting. She’s not up to speaking with you at this time.”

“Sophia.” Pilar came down the steps, one hand holding the banister, with Helen just behind her. “It’s all right. I want to do what I can.”

“Ms. Avano,” Helen began, careful to use Pilar’s married name, “is willing to answer your questions. I’m sure you’ll take her emotional state into

consideration. Judge Moore," she added with a cool nod. "I'm an old family friend."

Claremont knew of her. And had been under ruthless cross-examination by her husband. Lawyers at the ready, he mused. "Are you representing Ms. Avano, Judge Moore?"

"I'm here to offer my friend my support and my advice, should that be necessary."

"Why don't we go sit down?" Pilar said. "Sophia, would you ask Maria to arrange for some coffee?"

"Of course."

Slick and civilized, Claremont thought. He saw where the daughter got her class. But classy women killed, just like all the other kinds.

Especially when they'd been tossed over for a younger model.

Still, she answered questions directly.

Hadn't seen or spoken with the deceased since the famous party. Hadn't been to her daughter's apartment in more than a month. Didn't have a key. Didn't own a gun, though she admitted before the judge could cut her off that there were guns in the house.

"You were upset when your husband finalized your divorce to marry Rene Foxx."

"Yes," Pilar agreed, even as Helen opened her mouth. "It's foolish to deny it, Helen. Naturally I was upset. I don't find the end of a marriage a reason to celebrate. Even when the marriage had become no more than a legality. He was my daughter's father."

"You argued?"

"No." Her lips curved, and put Claremont in mind of an elegantly sorrowful Madonna. "It was difficult to argue with Tony. He slipped around most arguments. I gave him what he wanted. There was really nothing else to do, was there?"

"I handled the divorce for Mrs. Avano," Helen put in. "It was amicable on both sides. Legally as simple as such matters can be."

"But you were upset nonetheless," Maguire stated. "Upset enough to phone your ex-husband's residence last week in the middle of the night and make certain threats and accusations."

"I did no such thing." For the first time a battle light came into her eyes. "I never called Tony's apartment, never spoke to Rene at all. She assumed I did."

"Mrs. Avano, we can easily check phone records."

"Then please do so." Her spine stiffened, and so did her voice. "However displeased I was with the choices Tony made, they were his choices. I'm not in the habit of calling anyone in the middle of the night to make threats or accusations."

"The current Mrs. Avano claims otherwise."

"Then she's mistaken, or she's lying. She called me, in the middle of the night, and accused me of this, was abusive and upsetting. You'll find that call on your phone records, Detective, but you won't find one on mine."

"Why would she lie?"

"I don't know." On a sigh, Pilar rubbed her temple. "Perhaps she wasn't. I'm sure someone did call her, and she assumed it was me. She was angry. She disliked me on principle."

"Do you know what time Mr. Avano left the premises here the night of the party?"

"No. Frankly, I avoided both him and Rene as much as possible that evening. It was awkward and it was uncomfortable for me."

"Do you know why he went to your daughter's apartment at . . ." The cab company had come through. Claremont looked at his pad as if refreshing his memory. "Three o'clock that morning?"

"No."

"Where were you at that time?"

"In bed. Most of the guests were gone by one. I went to my room sometime before two. Alone," she added, anticipating the question. "I said good night to Sophia, then I went straight to bed because I was tired. It had been a long day."

"Could we have a moment?" Helen asked, and gestured to indicate the detectives should step out of the room.

"You can get from here to San Francisco in an hour," Maguire speculated in the hallway. "She's got no alibi for the time in question. She's got a decent motive."

"Why meet the ex in your daughter's apartment?"

"All in the family."

"Maybe," Claremont responded, and stepped back in when the judge called.

"Detectives, Mrs. Avano is reluctant to bring up certain information. Anthony Avano was her husband for a number of years, and they share a

daughter. She's distressed to say anything that damages his reputation. However, as I've advised her, it's more constructive to pass on this information, as it may be useful to your investigation. And moreover . . . Moreover, Pilar," she said quietly, "they're going to get the picture soon enough from other sources."

"All right." She got to her feet, roamed the room. "All right. You asked if I had any idea why he might have gone to Sophia's. I can't be sure, but . . . Tony had a weakness for women. Some people drink, some gamble, some have affairs. Tony had affairs. He may have arranged to meet someone there, to break off an affair or to . . ."

"Do you know who he might have been involved with?"

"No, I stopped looking a long time ago. But there was someone. He knew who'd called Rene that night, I'm sure of it. And he seemed edgy at the party. That was unusual for Tony. He was rarely ruffled. He was a bit rude to David Cutter, and not as sociable as was his habit. I think, looking back, he was in some sort of trouble. I don't know. I didn't want to know so I didn't do anything about it. If I had . . . I can't know if it would have made a difference. That's painful."

Claremont rose. "We appreciate your cooperation, Mrs. Avano. We'd like to speak with the other members of the family now, Mr. Cutter and any members of the staff who were here during the party."

He specifically wanted to question Sophia again. He took her alone, while his partner took David Cutter. "You didn't mention that you and your father had a heated argument on the night he was killed."

"No, I didn't, because you didn't ask. Now that you do, I'd have to qualify. An argument is between two people over a point of disagreement. There was no argument."

"Then how would you qualify it?"

"Hard words. Hard words that were a long time coming. It's difficult for me, Detective, to know they're the last words I'll ever say to him. Even though they were true, even though I meant them, it's difficult. I was angry. He'd been married hours after the divorce from my mother was final. He hadn't bothered to tell me of his plans, hadn't bothered to give my mother the courtesy of informing her, and he came to a family event with his new wife on his arm. It was careless and insensitive, and just like him. I told him so."

"My information is you threatened him."

“Did I? I might have. I was furious, hurt, embarrassed. Rene had cornered my mother and attacked her—verbally. There was no call for it; she had what she wanted. He let it happen. My father was brilliant at letting things happen and remaining somehow oblivious to the damage done.”

Wordspread. Across the country, and across the Atlantic. Donato sat in the office on the first floor of his home, drank brandy and considered. The house was finally quiet, though he expected the baby would be up squalling for its breast before long.

Gina was sleeping, and if it wasn't for that habitual middle-of-the-night circus, he could have slipped out and spent a relaxing hour with his mistress.

Best not to risk it.

Tony Avano was dead.

The meeting scheduled with Margaret Bowers the next morning would and should be postponed. That would buy him time. He'd preferred keeping his business dealings with Tony. He'd known just where he stood with Tony Avano.

Now Tony was dead, and there would be a great upheaval. There would be talk, gossip, delays, snags. He could use that to his advantage.

He must go back to California, of course. He would have to offer his support and his sympathies to Pilar and Sophia. And assure *La Signora* that he would do whatever she required him to do in order to maintain Giambelli's production.

Since it was only two days before Christmas, he would convince Gina that she must remain at home and not upset the children. Yes, that was good. And he could take his pretty lady along for company.

No one would know the difference.

Yes, this would give him time to figure out what had to be done, and how to do it.

Poor Tony, he thought, and lifted his brandy. Rest in peace.

Jeremy DeMorney turned down the volume on the evening news and removed his dinner jacket. He was glad he'd made it an early night. It was better to be home, alone, when the news hit, than out in public.

Tony Avano, the worthless bastard, was dead.

Almost a pity in a way. The current climate had made Avano ripe for picking. And Jerry had waited a good long time for it.

Leaving behind a sorrowful ex-wife, he imagined, a merry widow and a grieving daughter. All more than he'd deserved.

As he undressed, Jerry considered flying back out to California to attend whatever memorial service the Giambellis planned. Then dismissed the idea.

It was a bit too well known that the late, unlamented Avano had slept with Jeremy's wife.

Oh, they'd handled it like civilized people, of course. Not counting the split lip Jerry had given his adulterous wife as a parting gift. Divorce, financial settlement and a pretense of manners in public.

Well, Jerry thought, they'd all excelled at pretenses.

He'd send a personal message to the family expressing his sympathy and regrets. Best, all around, he decided, to keep his distance from the family for the time being.

He'd make his move there when he was ready.

For the moment, he'd have a little wake of his own. Damned if he wasn't going to open a bottle of champagne and celebrate murder.

Sophia spent nearly a week handling her father's murder like a business assignment. With emotions on hold, she made calls, made arrangements, asked questions, answered them and watched her mother like a hawk.

When she ran into a wall, and she ran into plenty, she did what she could to scale over or tunnel under. The police gave her nothing but the same repetitive line. The investigation was ongoing. All leads were being actively pursued.

They treated her resentfully, she thought, no differently than they did a reporter. Or a suspect.

Rene refused to take her calls, and she grew weary of leaving dozens of messages on the machine. Sympathetic messages, concerned messages, polite ones, angry ones, bitter ones.

Her father *would* have a memorial service. With or without his widow's input or cooperation.

She made excuses to her mother, citing a few problems at her San Francisco office that needed her attention, and prepared to drive to the city.

Tyler was pulling up in the drive as she stepped out of the house.

"Where're you going?"

"I have business."

"Where?"

She tried to move by him toward the garage, only to have him step into her path. "Look, I'm in a hurry. Go prune a vine."

"Where?"

Nerves wanted to snap, and that couldn't be allowed. "I need to run into the city. I have some work."

"Fine. We'll take my car."

"I don't need you today."

"Teamwork, remember?" He knew a woman who was teetering on a thin wire, and he wasn't letting her drive.

"I can handle this, MacMillan." Why the hell hadn't she said she was going shopping?

"Yeah, you can handle anything." He put one hand on her arm, opened the car door with the other. "Get in."

"Did it ever occur to you I'd rather be alone?"

"Did it ever occur to you I don't care?" To solve the problem he simply picked her up and plopped her on the seat. "Strap in," he ordered, and slammed the door.

She considered kicking the door open, then kicking him. But she was afraid she'd never stop. There was such a rage inside her, such a burning, raging grief. And she reminded herself, as she'd promised she would, that he had been there for her at the worst moment.

He slid behind the wheel. Maybe it was because he'd known her more than half his life. Maybe it was because he'd paid more attention to her over the past few weeks than he had over the last twenty years. Either way, Ty thought, he knew that face almost too well. And the composure on it was no real mask, at least not at the moment.

"So." He turned the car on, glanced toward her. "Where are you really going?"

"To see the police. I can't get any answers on the phone."

"Okay." He shifted into first and headed down the drive.

"I don't need a guard dog, Ty, or a big, broad shoulder or an emotional pillow."

"Okay." He just kept driving. "For the record, I'd just as soon you didn't need a punching bag, either."

As an answer, she folded her arms, stared straight ahead. The mountains were shrouded with mist, laced with snow, like a soft-focused photograph. The staggering view did nothing to cheer her. In her mind all she could see was the torn-out sheet from an industry magazine that had come in her mail the day before.

The photograph of her, her grandmother, her mother that had been published months before had been defiled, as the Giambelli angels had been. Red pen had been used this time, slashing bloody ink over their faces, branding them murdering bitches this time.

Was it the answer to her repeated calls to Rene? Sophia wondered. Did the woman think such a childish trick would frighten her? She wouldn't let it frighten her. And as she'd burned it in the flames of the fireplace, Sophia had felt disgust, anger, but not fear.

Yet still, a day later, she couldn't get it out of her mind.

"Did Eli ask you to baby-sit me?" she demanded of Tyler.

"No."

"My grandmother?"

"No."

"Then who?"

"Here's the deal, Sophia. I take orders in business when I have to. I don't take them in my personal life. This is personal. Clear?"

"No." She looked away from the mountains now, studied his equally compelling profile. "You didn't even like my father, and you're not that crazy about me."

"I didn't like your father." He said it simply, without apology and without pleasure. And for that reason alone it didn't sting. "Jury's still out on you. But I do like your mother, and I really don't like Rene, or the fact that she tried to sic the cops on Pilar, and maybe on you, over this."

"Then you'll be thrilled to know my second stop today is Rene. I need to go a round or two with her about a memorial service."

"Boy, won't that be fun? Do you think there'll be hair pulling and biting involved?"

“You men really get off on that kind of thing, don’t you? It’s just sick.”

“Yeah.” He sighed, heavy and wistful, and made her laugh, the first easy, genuine laugh in days.

It occurred to Sophia that she’d never been in an actual police station. Her idea of one had been fictionally generated so that she’d expected dark, dank corridors with worn linoleum; noisy, cramped offices; surly-eyed, snarling characters and the stench of bad coffee served in paper cups.

Secretly, she’d been looking forward to the experience.

Instead she found an office atmosphere with clean floors and wide hallways that smelled faintly of Lysol. She wouldn’t have said it was quiet as a tomb, but when she walked toward the detectives’ division with Ty, she could hear her heels click on the floor.

The detectives’ area was scattered with desks, utilitarian, but not scarred and dented as had been her hope. There was the scent of coffee, but it smelled fresh and rich. She did see guns, so that was something. Strapped to belts or harnessed over shoulders. It seemed odd to see them in the well-lit room where the major sound was the clicking of computer keys.

As she scanned, she connected with Claremont. He glanced toward a door on the side of the room, then rose and walked toward them.

“Ms. Giambelli.”

“I need to talk to you about my father. About arrangements, and your investigation.”

“When I spoke to you on the phone—”

“I know what you told me on the phone, Detective. Basically nothing. I think I’m entitled to more information, and I’m certainly entitled to know when my father’s body will be released. I’m going to tell you my next step will go over your head. I’ll start using every connection I have. And believe me, my family has many connections.”

“I’m aware of that. Why don’t we use the lieutenant’s office.” He gestured, then cursed under his breath when the side door opened and his partner walked out with Rene.

She was magnificent in black. Pale of cheek, with her hair shining like the sun and coiled at the nape, she was the perfect picture of the society widow. Sophia imagined she’d studied the results carefully before stepping out and

she hadn't been able to resist relieving the black with a delicate diamond starburst brooch.

Sophia stared at the pin for a long moment, then snapped her attention to Rene.

"What's she doing here?" Rene demanded. "I told you she's been harassing me. Calling me constantly, threatening me." She clenched a handkerchief in her hand. "I want to file a restraining order on her. On all of them. They murdered my poor Tony."

"Have you been practicing that act long, Rene?" Sophia asked icily. "It still needs a little work."

"I want police protection. They had Tony killed because of me. They're Italian. They have connections to the Mafia."

Sophia started to laugh, a little bubble of sound at first that built and built until she couldn't stop. She staggered back and sat on the low bench along the wall. "Oh that's it, that's right. There's a hotbed of organized crime in my grandmother's house. It just took an ex-model, a social-climbing bimbo gold digger to ferret it out."

She wasn't aware her laughter had turned to weeping, that tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I want to bury my father, Rene. Let me do that. Let me have some part in doing that, then we'll never have to see or speak to each other again."

Rene tucked her handkerchief back in her purse. She crossed the room, a room that had gone very quiet. And waited until Sophia got to her feet again. "He belongs to me. And you'll have part of nothing."

"Rene." Sophia reached out, sucked in a breath when her hand was slapped sharply away.

"Mrs. Avano." Claremont's tone was a warning even as he took her arm.

"I won't have her touch me. If you or anyone in your *family* calls me again, you'll deal with my lawyers." Rene threw her chin up and strolled out of the room.

"For spite," Sophia murmured. "Just for spite."

"Ms. Giambelli." Maguire touched her arm. "Why don't you come sit down, let me get you some coffee."

"I don't want any coffee. Will you tell me if there's any progress in your investigation?"

"We have nothing new to tell you. I'm sorry."

"When will my father's body be released?"

"Your father's remains are being released this morning, to his next of kin."

"I see. I've wasted my time, and yours. Excuse me." She walked out and was already yanking her phone from her purse. She tried Helen Moore first, only to be told the judge was on the bench and unavailable.

"You think she can stop Rene?"

"I don't know. I have to try." She called James Moore's office next, frustrated to be told he was in a meeting. As a last ditch, she asked for Linc.

"Linc? It's Sophia. I need help."

Pilar sat on a stone bench in the garden. It was cold, but God, she needed the air. She felt trapped in the house in a way she never had before. Trapped by the walls and the windows, guarded by the people who loved her best.

Watched, she thought, as carefully as an invalid who might pass at any moment.

They thought she was grieving, and she let them think it. Was that the bigger of her sins? she wondered. To allow everyone to believe she was devastated by grief.

When she felt nothing. Could feel nothing.

Unless it was, horribly, the slightest twinge of relief.

There had been shock and sorrow and grief, but it had all passed so quickly. And her lack of feeling shamed her, so much so, she'd avoided her family as much as possible. So much so, she'd spent nearly the whole of Christmas in her rooms, unable to comfort her child for fear the child would see her mother's falseness.

How could a woman go from loving to not loving to callousness so quickly? Pilar wondered. Had the lack of passion and compassion been in her all along? And had that lack been what had sent Tony away from her? Or had what he'd done so carelessly throughout their marriage killed whatever capacity she'd had to feel?

It hardly mattered. He was dead, and she was empty.

She got to her feet, turned toward the house, then stopped when she saw David on the path.

"I didn't want to disturb you."

"That's all right."

"I've been trying to keep out of your way."

"That wasn't necessary."

"I thought it was. You look tired, Pilar." And lonely, he thought.

"I suppose we all are. I know you've pulled a lot of extra duty these past few days. I hope you know how much it's appreciated." She nearly stepped back when he walked toward her, but made herself hold still. "How was your Christmas?"

"It was busy. Let's just say I'll be glad when January rolls around and the kids start school. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, nothing, really." She intended to excuse herself, escape to her rooms. Again. But there was something about him. And looking at him, she heard words pouring out of her mouth. "I'm so useless here, David. I can't help Sophia. I know she's trying to take her mind off everything with work, and spending so much time trying to train me in the office here. I just bungle everything."

"That's a foolish thing to say."

"It's not. I do. I never really worked in an office, and the short time I did was over twenty-five years ago. Everything's changed. I can't make the damn computer work, and I don't know the language, even the purpose half the time. Instead of rapping my knuckles over my mistakes as she should, she's patting my head because she doesn't want to upset me. And she's the one who's upset, and I can't help her."

She pressed her fingers to her temple. "So I run away. I'm so goddamn good at running away. I'm out here right now so that I don't have to face her. She's making herself sick over Tony, trying to stop Rene from claiming his body. She can't grieve, won't let herself. There's no closure, and won't be any until the police . . . But she needs this rite, this ritual, and Rene won't have it."

"She needs to deal with it in her own way. You know that. Just as you need to deal with it in yours."

"I don't know what mine is. I should go in. I have to find the right words."

Unwilling to leave her alone, David walked with her toward the house. "Pilar, do you think Sophia doesn't know what she means to you?"

"She knows. Just as she knows what she didn't mean to her father. It's difficult for a child to live with that."

"I know it. But they do."

She stopped on the side terrace, turned to him. "Are you ever afraid you're not enough for them?"

"Every day."

She let out a half-laugh. "It's terrible of me, but it's a relief to hear you say that." She opened the side door to see Sophia on the sofa, her face stark white, with Linc Moore beside her, gripping her hand.

"What is it?" Pilar rushed across the room, crouched in front of her daughter. "Oh baby, what is it?"

"We were too late. Linc tried. He even got a temporary restraining order, but it was too late. She's had him cremated, Mama. She'd already arranged for it before . . ."

"I'm sorry." Still holding Sophia's hand, Linc reached out to Pilar. "She had him taken straight to the crematorium. It was already begun before we had the temporary restraining order."

"He's gone, Mama."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Over the long winter, the vines slept. The fields stretched, acre upon acre, drinking the rains, hardening under frosts, softening again with the quick and teasing warm snaps.

For a farmer, for a crop, the year was a circle to be repeated over and over, with the variations and surprises, the pleasures and the tragedies absorbed into the whole.

Life was a continuing spiral running round.

Toward February, heavy rains delayed the pruning cycle and brought both frustration and that wet winter promise of a good harvest. The fields and mountains smoked with mists.

February was for waiting. For some, it seemed the waiting had already lasted forever.

On the third floor of Villa Giambelli, Tereza kept her office. She preferred the third floor, away from the hive of the house. And she loved her lofty view from the windows of all that was hers.

Every day she climbed the steps, a good discipline for the body, and worked there for three hours. Never less, and rarely these days, more. The room was comfortable. She believed comfortable surroundings increased productivity. She also believed in indulging herself where it mattered to her.

The desk had been her father's. It was old, the oak dark and the drawers deep. That was tradition. On it sat a two-line phone and a high-powered computer. That was progress.

Beneath it, old Sally snored quietly. That was home.

She believed, absolutely, in all three.

Because she did, her office was now occupied by her husband and his grandson, her daughter and granddaughter and David Cutter and Paulo Borelli.

The old and the new, she thought.

She waited while coffee was served and the rain beat like soft fists on the roof and windows.

"Thank you, Maria." That signaled the end of the social interlude and the beginning of business. Tereza folded her hands as the housekeeper slipped out, shutting the door.

"I'm sorry," she began, "we've been unable to meet in total before this. The loss of Sophia's father, and the circumstances of his death, postponed certain areas of business. And Eli's recent illness prevented holding this meeting."

She glanced toward him now. He still looked a bit frail to her. The cold had turned so quickly into fever and chills, she'd been frightened.

"I'm fine," he said, more to reassure her than the rest. "A little shaky on my pins yet, but coming 'round. A man doesn't have any choice but to come around when he's got so many nurses pecking at him."

She smiled, because he wanted her to, but she heard the faint wheeze in his chest. "While Eli was recuperating, I've kept him as current as possible on the movements of business. Sophia, I have your report, and your projections regarding the centennial campaign. While we'll also discuss this individually, I'd like you to bring everyone up to date."

"Of course." Sophia got to her feet, opened a portfolio that contained mock-ups of the ads, along with full target reports on message, consumer statistics and the venues selected.

"Phase one of the campaign will begin in June with advertising placed as indicated in your packets," she began as she passed the packets around. "We've created a three-pronged campaign, targeting our high-end consumer, our middle line and the most elusive, the young, casual wine drinker on a limited budget."

While she spoke, Tyler tuned her out. He'd heard the pitch before. Had, God help him, been in on various stages of its development. The exposure had taught him the value of what she did, but he couldn't drum up any real interest in it.

Long-range weather reports forecasted a warming trend. Too much, too soon would tease some of the grape varieties out of dormancy. He needed to keep a keen eye out for that, for the telltale signs of that slight movement in the buds, for the soft bleeding at the pruning cuts.

An early break meant the danger of frost damage.

He was prepared to deal with that, when the time came, but . . .

"I see we're keeping Tyler awake," Sophia said sweetly, and snapped him back.

"No, you're not. But since you interrupted my nap, the second phase deals with public participation. Wine tastings, vineyard tours, social events, auctions, galas—both here and in Italy—which generate publicity."

He rose to get more coffee from the cart. "Sophia knows what she's doing. I don't think anyone here's going to argue that."

"And in the fields?" Tereza asked. "Does Sophia know what she's doing?"

He took his time, sipped his coffee. "She's all right, for an apprentice field hand."

"Please, Ty, you'll embarrass me with all those fulsome compliments."

"Very well," Tereza murmured. "David? Comments on the campaign?"

"Clever, classy, thorough. My only concern, as a father of teenagers, is that the ads targeting the twenty-one to thirty market make wine look like a hell of a good time."

"Which it is," Sophia pointed out.

"And which we want to project it to be," he agreed. "But I'm wary about making the ads so slick and appealing to a young audience that those still too young will be influenced. That's the father talking," he admitted. "But I was also a boy who if and when I wanted to drink myself sick, did so without any marketing influence whatsoever."

Pilar made a little sound, then subsided. But as David sat beside her, had made certain he sat beside her, he heard it. "Pilar? Thoughts?"

"No, I was just . . . well, actually, I think the campaign's wonderful, and I know how hard Sophie's worked on it—and Ty, of course, and her team. But I think David has a valid point about this, well, third prong. It's difficult to market something that appeals to the young market group without luring the inappropriate ages in. If we could do some sort of disclaimer . . ."

"Disclaimers are boring and dilute the message," Sophia began, but she pursed her lips as she sat again. "Unless we make it fun, witty, responsible and something that blends with the message. Let me think about it."

"Good. Now, Paulie."

Now it was Sophia who tuned out while the foreman spoke of the vines, of various vintages being tested in the casks and tanks.

Age, she thought. Age. Vintage. Ripeness. Perfection. She needed the

hook. Patience. Good wine takes patience to make. Rewards. Age, rewards, patience. She'd find it.

Her fingers itched to get out her pen and scribble. She worked better if she set words down, saw them on paper. She got up for more coffee and, with her back to the room, scrawled quickly on a napkin.

Paulie was excused and David called up. Instead of the marketing projections, the cost analyses, the forecasts and numbers Sophia had expected, her grandmother set his written report aside.

"We'll deal with this later. At the moment I'd like your evaluation of our key people here."

"You have my written reports on that as well, *La Signora*."

"I do," she agreed, and simply lifted her eyebrows.

"All right. Tyler doesn't need me in the vineyards, and he knows it. The fact that it's my job to oversee them and I'm another competent pair of hands hasn't yet taken the edge off his resistance. A resistance I can't blame him for, but that does get in the way of efficiency. Other than that, the MacMillan vineyards are as well run as any I've ever been associated with. As are Giambelli's. Adjustments are still being made, but his work on merging the operations, coordinating crews is excellent.

"Sophia does well enough in the vineyard, though it's not her strength. Just as the marketing and promotion isn't Tyler's. The fact that she carries the weight there, as he does in the field, results in a reasonably good and surprisingly interesting blend. However, there are some difficulties in the offices in San Francisco."

"I'm aware of the difficulties," Sophia said. "I'm handling them."

"Her," David corrected. "Sophia, you have a difficult, angry, uncooperative employee who's been trying for several weeks to undermine your authority."

"I have a meeting set up with her tomorrow afternoon. I know my people, David. I know how to deal with this."

"Are you interested in how I know just how difficult, angry and uncooperative Kristin Drake's been?" He waited a beat. "She's been talking to other companies. Her résumé's landed on half a dozen desks in the last two weeks. One of my sources at La Coeur tells me she's making a number of claims and accusations, with you her favorite target, when she thinks she has the right ear."

Sophia absorbed the betrayal, the disappointment, and nodded. "I'll deal with her."

"See that you do," Tereza advised. "If an employee can't be loyal, at least she must be dignified. We won't tolerate a staff member using gossip or innuendo as a bargaining chip for a position with another company. And Pilar?"

"She's learning," David said. "Business isn't her strong suit. I think you misuse her, *La Signora*."

"I beg your pardon?"

"In my opinion, your daughter would be more suited as a spokesperson, a liaison for the company where her charm and her elegance wouldn't be wasted as they are working at a keyboard. I wonder that you don't ask Pilar to help with the tours and the tastings, where visitors could be treated to her company and have the extra benefit of personal contact with a member of the family. She's an excellent hostess, *La Signora*. She is not an excellent clerk."

"You're saying I've made a mistake expecting my daughter to learn the business of the company?"

"Yes," David said easily and made Eli fall into a fit of coughing.

"Sorry, sorry." He waved a hand as Tyler leaped up to pour him a glass of water. "Tried to suck down that laugh. Shouldn't. Christ, Tereza, he's right and you know it." He took the glass from Tyler, sipped carefully until the pressure in his chest eased. "Hates to be wrong, and hardly ever is. Sophia? How's your mama working out as your assistant here?"

"She's hardly had time to . . . She's terrible," Sophia admitted and burst out laughing. "Oh, Mama, I'm so sorry, but you're just the worst office assistant ever created. I couldn't send you into the city to work with my team in a million years. You have ideas," she added, concerned when her mother said nothing. "Just like today, about the disclaimer. But you won't mention them unless you're pinned, and even then you don't know how to implement. More than all of that, you hate every minute you're stuck in my office."

"I'm trying. And obviously failing," she said as she got to her feet.

"Mama—"

"No, that's all right. I'd rather you be honest than patronize me. Let me make this easier on everyone involved. I quit. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll

go find something to do that I'm good at. Like, sit somewhere looking elegant and charming."

"I'll go talk to her," Sophia began.

"You won't." Tereza lifted a hand. "She's a grown woman, not a child to be placated. Sit. We'll finish the meeting."

It was, Tereza thought as she lifted her coffee, encouraging to see her daughter show a snap of temper and a hint of spine.

Finally.

He didn't have time to smooth ruffled feathers, but since he felt he'd had some part in the ruffling, David sought Pilar out. Over the past weeks, Maria had become one of his conduits of news and family dynamics. With her help, he tracked Pilar down in the greenhouse.

He found her there wearing gardening gloves and an apron, repotting seedlings she'd started from cuttings.

"Got a minute?"

"I have all the time in the world," she said without sparing him a glance or an ounce of warmth. "I don't do anything."

"You don't do anything in an office that satisfies you or accomplishes a goal. That's different. I'm sorry my evaluation hurt your feelings, but—"

"But it's business." She looked at him now, dead on.

"Yeah. It's business. You want to type and file, Pilar? To sit in on meetings about publicity campaigns and marketing strategies?"

"I want to feel useful." She tossed down her little spade. Did they think she was like the flowers she tended here? she wondered. Did she? Something that required a controlled climate and careful handling to do nothing but look attractive in a nice setting?

"I'm tired. Sick and tired of being made to feel as if I have nothing to offer. No skills, no talents, no brains."

"Then you weren't listening."

"Oh, I heard you." She yanked off her gloves, tossed them down as well. "I'm to be charming and elegant. Like some well-tailored doll that can be plunked down at the right time and the right place, and tucked away in the closet the rest of the time. Well, no thanks. I've been tucked away quite long enough."

She started to push by him, yanked her arm when he closed his hand

over it. Then stared in shock as he simply took her other arm and held her in place.

No one handled her. It simply wasn't done.

"Just hold on."

"Take your hands off me."

"In a minute. First, charm is a talent. Elegance is a skill. And it takes brains to know the right thing to say at the right time, and to make people feel welcome. You're good at those things, so why not use them? Second, if you think handling tourists and accounts at tastings and tours is fluff work, you'll find out different if you work up the guts to try it."

"I don't need you to tell me—"

"Apparently you do."

She nearly gaped when he cut her off. It was something else rarely done. And she remembered just how he'd dealt with Tony the night of the party. He was using that same cold, clean slice with her now.

"I'll remind you, I don't work for you."

"I'll remind you," he countered, "essentially you do. Unless you're going to stalk off like a spoiled child, you'll continue to work for me."

"Va' al diavolo."

"I don't have time for a trip to hell just now," he said equably. "I'm suggesting you put your talents in the proper arena. You need to know the business to handle the winery tours, have the patience to answer questions you'll hear over and over again. To push the product without appearing to push it. To be gracious, informative and entertaining. And before you start, you have to take a good, hard look at yourself and stop seeing the discarded wife of a man who didn't value anything as much as himself."

Her mouth fell open and her lips trembled before she could form words. "What a hideous thing to say."

"Maybe. But it's time somebody said it. Waste bothers me. You've let yourself be wasted, and it's starting to piss me off."

"You have no right to say these things to me. Your position with Giambelli doesn't give you a license to be cruel."

"My position with the company doesn't give me the right to speak the truth as I see it. It doesn't give me the right for this, either," he added and jerked her against him. "But this time it's personal."

She was too shocked to stop him, to manage even the slightest protest. And when his mouth was on hers, hard and angry, she could do nothing but feel.

A man's mouth—hot, firm. A man's hands—demanding and strong. The jolt of having her body pressed up to his, to feel that heat, those lines. The sexual threat.

The blood rushed into her head, one long tidal wave of power. And her body, her heart, starved, leaped into the flood of pleasure.

On a low moan, she threw her arms around him. They bumped her worktable, sent pots tumbling. Clay cracked against clay with a sound like swords clashing. Nerves, needs, so long deadened, snapped into life to sizzle through her system. Everything seemed to waken at once, threatening overload as her knees went weak and her mouth went wild under his.

"What?" She was breathless, managed only a gasp as he lifted her off her feet and plunked her down on the bench. "What are we doing?"

"We'll think about it later."

He had to touch her, had to feel her flesh under his hands. Already he was tugging at her sweater, fueled by a sexual rush that made him feel like a teenager in the back of a Chevy.

Rain slapped against the glass walls, and the air was warm and moist, fragrant with flowers, with soil, with the scent of her. She was quaking against him, quick, hard trembles. Delicious little sounds were humming in her throat.

He wanted to gulp her down, swallow her whole and worry about the fine points later. He couldn't remember when he'd last had this ferocious urge to mate plunging inside of him.

"Pilar. Let me . . ." He fought with the button of her slacks.

If he hadn't said her name, she would have forgotten it. Forgotten everything and simply surrendered to the demands of her own body. But the sound of it jolted her back. And brought the first flutter of panic.

"Wait. This is—we can't."

She pushed against him, even as her head fell back and her system shivered at the scrape of his teeth on her throat. "David. No. Wait. Stop."

"Pilar." He couldn't catch his breath, find his balance. "I want you."

How many years had it been since she'd heard those words? How many years had it been since she'd seen them in a man's eyes? So many, Pilar thought, that she couldn't trust herself to think or act rationally when she did.

"David. I'm not ready for this."

He still had his hands on her, cupped at her waist just under her sweater where her skin was warm and still quivering. "Could've fooled me."

"I wasn't expecting . . ." He had such strong hands, she thought. Strong and hard at the palm. So unlike . . . "Please, could you step back?"

He stayed exactly where he was. "I wanted you the first minute I saw you. The minute you opened the front door."

Pleasure sprinted into her, chased by panic, and puzzlement. "I'm—" "Don't." He spoke curtly. "Don't say you're flattered."

"Of course I am. You're very attractive, and—" And she couldn't *think* straight when he was touching her. "Please. Would you step back?"

"All right." But it cost him. "You know what happened here doesn't happen every time, with everyone."

"I think we took each other by surprise," she began and cautiously slid down from the bench.

"Pilar, we're not children."

"No, we're not." It flustered her to have to straighten her sweater, to remember how it had felt to have his hands under it. On her. "Which is one of the points. I'm forty-eight years old, David, and you're . . . well, you're not."

He hadn't thought anything in the situation would make him laugh. But that did. "You're not going to use a handful of years as an excuse."

"It's not an excuse. It's a fact. Another is that we've only known each other for a short time."

"Eight weeks and two days. And that's how long I've imagined getting my hands on you." He trailed his fingers over her hair while she stared at him. "I didn't plan on jumping you in your greenhouse and tearing off your clothes in the middle of your peat pots. But it worked for me at the time. You want something more conventional? I'll pick you up at seven for dinner."

"David. My husband's been dead only a few weeks."

"Ex-husband," he said icily. "Don't put him between us, Pilar. I won't tolerate that."

"Nearly thirty years can't be dismissed overnight, no matter what the circumstances."

He took her by the shoulders, lifted her up to her toes before she realized just how angry he was. "Tony Avano stopped being your safety zone, Pilar. Deal with it. And deal with me."

He kissed her again, hard and long, then let her go. "Seven o'clock," he said, and stalked out into the rain.

Worthless son of a bitch was *not* going to complicate his life, or Pilar's, from the grave, David determined. His strides were long, his shoulders hunched, and the fury bubbled just under his skin.

He wasn't going to allow it. There was going to be some straight talk, with all the secrets and shadows shoved into the light. Very soon.

Because he was scowling at his feet, and Sophia was looking down as she jogged through the rain, they ran hard into each other on the path.

"Oops," she managed, and slapped a hand on the hat she'd tossed on to protect her from the worst of the wet. "I thought you'd gone home."

"I had something to do first. I just tried to seduce your mother in the greenhouse. Do you have a problem with that?"

Sophia's hand fell to her side. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I'm attracted to your mother, and I just acted on it. I fully intend to act on it again as soon as possible. Is that a problem for you?"

"Ah . . ."

"No quick spin? No clever comeback?"

Even through the daze of shock, she could recognize a furious and frustrated male. "No, sorry. Processing."

"Well, when you've finished, send me a goddamn memo."

As he stormed off, Sophia could almost see steam rising off him. Torn between shock and concern, she slapped a hand to the hat again and sprinted to the greenhouse.

When she burst in, Pilar was standing, staring at her workbench. Pots were scattered, tipped over, and several seedlings were crushed beyond redemption.

It gave Sophia a very good idea just what had gone on, and where. "Mama?"

Pilar jumped, then quickly grabbed her gardening gloves. "Yes?"

Slowly now, Sophia walked forward. Her mother's cheeks were flushed, her hair mussed the way a woman's hair was when a man's hands had run through it.

"I just saw David."

Pilar dropped the gloves from fingers that had gone numb, hastily bent to retrieve them. "Oh?"

"He said he tried to seduce you."

"He what?" It wasn't panic now but full-blown horror that snapped into Pilar's throat.

"And from the look of you, he got a good start on it."

"It was just a . . ." Unnerved, Pilar snatched up her apron, but couldn't quite remember how to put it on. "We had a disagreement, and he was annoyed. It's really not worth talking about."

"Mama." Gently, Sophia took the gloves, then the apron, set them down. "Do you have feelings for David?"

"Really, Sophia, what a question."

One you're not answering, she thought. "Let's try this. Are you attracted to him?"

"He's an attractive man."

"Agreed."

"We're not—that is, I'm not . . ." At wits' end, Pilar braced her hands on the bench. "I'm too old for this."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're a beautiful woman in the prime of her life. Why shouldn't you have a romance?"

"I'm not looking for romance."

"Sex, then."

"Sophie!"

"Mama!" Sophia said in the same horrified tone, then threw her arms around her mother. "I started out here afraid I'd hurt your feelings and that you'd be upset. Instead I find you flushed and ruffled after what I assume was a delightful bit of manhandling by our new and very sexy COO. It's wonderful."

"It's not wonderful, and it's not going to happen again. Sophia, I was married for nearly three decades. I can hardly just pick myself up and jump into another man's arms at this point in my life."

"Dad's gone, Mama." Sophia kept her arms tight around Pilar, but her voice softened. "It's hard for me to accept that, to live with how it happened, and to adjust to being denied even the chance to say goodbye. It's hard, even knowing he really didn't love me."

"Oh, Sophie, he did."

"No." She drew back now. "Not the way I wanted, or needed or looked for. You did, always. He wasn't there for me. And he wasn't there for you. It wasn't in him to be. Now you have a chance to enjoy someone who'll pay attention to you."

"Oh, baby." Pilar reached out to stroke her daughter's cheek.

"I want that for you. And I'd be so sad, so angry if I thought you'd push

that chance away because of something that never really existed. I love you. I want you happy.”

“I know.” Pilar kissed both of Sophia’s cheeks. “I know. It takes time to adjust. And oh, *cara*, it’s not just your father and what happened to us, what happened to him that’s an issue. It’s me. I don’t know how to be with someone else, or if I want to be with anyone.”

“How will you know if you don’t try?” Sophia started to boost herself onto the bench, then thought better of it. Under the circumstances. “You like him, don’t you?”

“Well, of course I do.” Like? she thought. A woman didn’t nearly roll naked in potting soil with a man she liked. “He’s a very nice man,” she managed. “A good father.”

“And you’re attracted to him. He’s got a terrific ass.”

“Sophia.”

“If you tell me you haven’t noticed, I’m going to have to break a commandment and call my mother a liar. Then there’s that smile. That fast grin.”

“He has kind eyes,” Pilar murmured, forgetting herself and making her daughter sigh.

“Yes, he does. Are you going out with him?”

Pilar got busy tidying pots. “I don’t know.”

“Go. Explore a little. See what it feels like. And take one of the condoms in my nightstand.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.”

“On second thought, don’t take one.” Sophia wrapped an arm around Pilar’s waist and giggled. “Take two.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maddy eyed her father shrewdly as he knotted his tie. It was his First Date tie, the gray with the navy blue stripes. She knew he'd *said* he and Ms. Giambelli were just going out to dinner so she and Theo would think it was a business kind of thing. But the tie was a dead giveaway.

She had to think about how she felt about it.

But at the moment, she was entertaining herself by pushing his parent buttons.

"It's a symbol of self-expression."

"It's unsanitary."

"It's an ancient tradition."

"It's not a Cutter family ancient tradition. You're not getting your nose pierced, Madeline. That's it."

She sighed and put on a good sulk. Actually, she had no desire to get her nose pierced but she did want a third piercing in her left earlobe. Working down to it, or over to it, from the nose was good strategy. The kind, she thought, her father would appreciate if he knew about it.

"It's my body."

"Not until you're eighteen, it's not. Until that happy day, it's mine. Go nag your brother."

"I can't. I'm not speaking to him."

She rolled onto her back on her father's bed, lifted her legs to the ceiling. They were clad in her usual black, but she was starting to get sort of tired of it. "Can I get a tattoo instead?"

"Oh sure. We'll all go get one this weekend." He turned. "How do I look?"

Maddy cocked her head, considered. "Better than average."

"You're such a comfort to me, Maddy."

"If I get an A on my science report, can I get my nose pierced?"

"If Theo gets an A on anything, I might consider letting him get his nose pierced."

Since both ends of the statement were equally far-fetched, she laughed. "Come on, Dad."

"Gotta go." He scooped her off the bed, carting her from the room with his arm around her waist and her feet dangling off the floor.

The habit, as old as she could remember, never failed to bring a bubble of happiness to her chest. "If I can't do the nose, could I just do another in my left ear? For a little stud?"

"If you're bound and determined to put more holes in yourself, I'll think about it." He paused by Theo's door, knocked with his free hand.

"Get lost, creep."

David looked down at Maddy. "I assume he means you." He pushed open the door to see his son stretched out on the bed, the phone at his ear, rather than sitting at his desk with his homework.

David felt twin pulls. Annoyance that the assignments were certainly not done, and pleased relief that Theo had already made new friends at school to interfere with his studies.

"Call you back," Theo muttered and hung up. "I was just taking a break."

"Yeah, for the entire month," Maddy commented.

"There's plenty of stuff you can nuke for dinner. I left the number of the restaurant on the pad by the phone, and you've got my cell number. Don't call unless you have to. No fighting, no naked strangers in the house, no touching the alcoholic beverages. Finish your homework, no phone or TV until it's done, and don't set fire to the house. Did I leave anything out?"

"No blood on the carpet," Maddy put in.

"Right. If you have to bleed, bleed on the tiles."

He kissed the top of Maddy's head, then dropped her to her feet. "I should be home by midnight."

"Dad, I need a car."

"Uh-huh. And I need a villa in the south of France. Go figure. Lights out at eleven," he added as he turned away.

"I've *got* to have wheels," Theo called after him, and swore under his

breath as he heard his father walk down the stairs. "You might as well be dead out here without wheels." He flopped back on the bed to brood up at the ceiling.

Maddy just shook her head. "You're such a moron, Theo."

"You're so ugly, Maddy."

"You're never going to get a car if you nag him. If I help you get a car, you have to drive me to the mall twelve times, without being mean about it."

"How are you going to help me get a car, you little geek?" But he was already considering. She almost always got what she wanted.

She sauntered into the room, made herself at home. "First the deal. Then we discuss."

Tereza was not of the opinion that a parent stepped back at a certain point in a child's life and watched the proceedings in silence. After all, would a mother stand on shore and watch a child, whatever her age, bob helplessly in the sea without diving in?

Motherhood didn't end when a child reached her majority. In Tereza's opinion, it never ended. Whether the child liked it or not.

The fact that Pilar was a grown woman with a grown daughter of her own didn't stop Tereza from going to her room. And it certainly didn't stop her from speaking her mind as she watched Pilar dress for her evening out.

Her evening out with David Cutter.

"People will talk."

Pilar fumbled with her earrings. Every stage of the basic act of dressing had taken on enormous proportions.

"It's only dinner." With a man. An attractive man who'd made it perfectly clear he wanted to sleep with her. *Dio*.

"People find fuel for gossip in a thought. They'll run their engines for some time over you and David socializing together."

Pilar picked up her pearls. Were pearls too formal? Too old-fashioned? "Does that trouble you, Mama?"

"Does it trouble you?"

"Why should it? I haven't done anything to interest anyone." With fingers that seemed to have grown oversized and clumsy, she fought with the clasp.

"You're Giambelli." Tereza crossed the room, took the strand from Pilar's

hand and hooked the clasp. "That alone is enough. Do you think because you chose to make a home and raise a daughter you've done nothing of interest?"

"You made a home, raised a daughter and ran an empire. Comparatively, I fall very short. That was made clear today."

"You're being foolish."

"Am I, Mama?" She turned. "Just over two months ago you tossed me into the business, and it's taken me no time at all to prove I have no talent for it."

"I shouldn't have waited so long to do so. If I hadn't tossed you in, you'd have proven nothing. Years ago, I came here with specific goals in mind. I would run Giambelli and see it was the best in the world. I would marry and raise children, watch them grow happy and healthy."

Automatically she began to rearrange the bottles and pots on Pilar's vanity. "One day I would pass what I'd helped build into their hands. The many children I dreamed of weren't to be. I'm sorry for that, but not that you're my child. You may be sorry that your goals of marriage and children didn't come to be. But are you sorry, Pilar, that Sophia is yours?"

"Of course not."

"You think I'm disappointed in you." Her eyes met Pilar's in the mirror, and were level, clear. "And I was. I was disappointed that you allowed a man to rule your life, that you allowed him to make you feel less than you were. And because you did nothing to change it."

"I loved him for a long time. That may have been my mistake, but you can't dictate to your own heart."

"You think not?" Tereza asked. "In any case, nothing I said to you could sway you. And, in looking back, my mistake was in making it too easy for you to stay adrift the way you did. That's over now, and you're too young not to make new goals. I want you to take part in your heritage, to be part of what was passed to me. I insist on it."

"Even you can't make me a businesswoman."

"Then make yourself something else," Tereza said impatiently as she turned to face Pilar directly. "Stop thinking of yourself as a reflection of what a man saw in you, and *be*. I asked you if it bothered you that people will talk. I wish you'd said the hell with people. Let them talk. It's time you gave them something to talk about."

Surprised, Pilar shook her head. "You sound like Sophie."

"Then listen. If you want David Cutter, even for the moment, take. A woman who sits and waits to be given usually ends up empty-handed."

"It's only dinner," Pilar began, then broke off as Maria came to the door.

"Mr. Cutter is downstairs."

"Thank you, Maria. Tell him Miss Pilar will be right down." Tereza turned back to her daughter, recognized, even approved of, the slight panic she saw in Pilar's eyes. "You had that same look on your face when you were sixteen and a young man waited for you in the parlor. It's good to see it again." She leaned forward, brushed her lips over Pilar's cheek. "Enjoy your evening."

Alone, Pilar took a moment to settle. She wasn't sixteen, and it was only dinner, she reminded herself as she started out. It would be simple, it would be civilized and it would most probably be quite pleasant. That was all.

Nervous, she opened her bag at the top of the stairs to make certain she'd remembered everything. She blinked in shock as she dipped her fingers in and closed them over two packs of Trojans.

Sophia, she thought as she hastily shut the bag again. For God's sake! The laugh that tickled her throat was young and foolish. When she let it come she felt ridiculously relieved.

She went downstairs to see what happened next.

It was a date. There was no other word for it, Pilar admitted. Nothing else brought this rosy glow to an evening or put this giddiness in the belly. It might have been decades since she'd had a date, but it was coming back to her, loud and clear.

She might have forgotten what it was like to sit across a candlelit table from a man and talk. Just talk. More, to have that man listen, to have *attention* paid. To watch his lips curve at something she said. But remembering it, experiencing it again, was like being offered a cool sip of water before you'd realized how desperately thirsty you'd become.

Not that she intended to let anything come of it but, well, friendship. Every time she let herself think of what her own daughter had slipped into her purse, Pilar's palms went damp.

But a friendship with an attractive, interesting man would be lovely.

"Pilar! How wonderful to see you."

Pilar recognized the cloud of scent and the cheerful bite of the voice be-

fore she looked up. "Susan." She was already fixing on her social smile. "Don't you look wonderful. Susan Manley, David Cutter."

"No, don't get up, don't get up." Susan, glowingly blond and just out of recovery from her latest face-lift, fluttered a hand at David. "I was just on my way back to my table from powdering my nose, and saw you here. Charlie and I are here with some out-of-town clients of his. Dead bores, too," she said with a wink. "I was just saying to Laura the other day how we should get together. It's been so long. I'm glad to see you out, and looking so well, honey. I know what a horrible time this has been for you. Such a shock to everyone."

"Yes." Pilar felt the quick sting of the prick, and the slow deflate of the pleasure of the evening. "I appreciated your note."

"I only wish I could have done more. Well, we don't want to talk about sad things, do we." She gave Pilar's arm a little squeeze, even as she sized up her dinner companion. "I hope your mother's well."

"Very, thank you."

"I have to get along. Can't leave poor Charlie floundering with those two. So nice to meet you, Mr. Cutter. Pilar, I'm going to call you next week. We'll have lunch."

"I'll count on it," Pilar replied, then picked up her wine as Susan glided off. "I'm sorry. The Valley's not much more than a small town in some ways. It's hard to go anywhere without running into people you know."

"Then why apologize for it?"

"It's awkward." She set down her wine again, left her fingers on the stem to run up and down. "And as my mother predicted, people will talk."

"Really?" He took her hand from the glass. "Then let's give them something to talk about." He brought her hand to his lips, nibbled lightly on the knuckles. "I like Susan," David said as Pilar stared at him. "She gave me the opening to do this. What," he wondered aloud, "do you suppose she'll say to Laura tomorrow when she calls her?"

"I can only imagine. David." There were thrills rocketing up her arm. Even when she slid her hand from his they shivered along the skin. "I'm not looking for . . . anything."

"That's funny, neither was I. Until I saw you." He leaned forward, intimately. "Let's do something sinful."

The blood rushed to her head. "What?"

"Let's"—his voice dropped into a seductive whisper—"order dessert."

The breath that had clogged in her lungs came out in a laughing whoosh. “Perfect.”

And it was perfect, the drive home in the night under chilly stars and a cold white moon. Music playing softly on the radio as they debated, with some heat, a book they’d both recently read. Later, she’d think how odd it was to have felt so relaxed and so stimulated all at once.

She nearly sighed as she saw the lights of the villa. Nearly home, she thought. She’d started out the evening almost swallowed by her own nerves, and was ending it with regret that it couldn’t have lasted longer.

“Kids are still up,” David commented, noting the guest house was lit up like a Vegas casino. “I’ll have to kill them.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed what a terrifying and brutal father you are. And how your children fear you.”

He slanted her a look. “I wouldn’t mind seeing the occasional tremble out of them.”

“I think it’s way too late for that. You’ve gone and raised two happy, well-adjusted kids.”

“Still working on it.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Theo got into some trouble back in New York. Shoplifting, sneaking out of the apartment. His grades, never stellar, plummeted.”

“I’m sorry, David. The teenage years can be hard on everyone. Harder still when you’re a single parent. I could tell you some hair-raising stories about Sophia at that age. Your son is a nice young man. I imagine that sort of behavior was just normal acting out.”

“Gave me the jolt I suppose I needed. I was letting him run just a little too free because it was easier. Not enough hours in the day, not enough energy left at the end of it. It was harder on Maddy than Theo when their mother left, so I compensated more with her than him.”

“Second guesses,” she said. “I know all about them.”

“I was into third guesses with Theo and Maddy. Anyway, that’s one of the reasons I opted to buy the van and drive cross-country instead of dumping us all in a plane. It gave us some time. Nothing like a three-thousand-mile drive in an enclosed vehicle to cement a family unit—if you live through it.”

“It was very brave of you.”

“You want to talk courage?” He drove easily up the lane to the villa. “I’ve been chief taste-tester on this wine experiment Maddy’s conducting. It’s brutal.”

She chuckled. "Be sure to let us know if we've got a competitor in the making." She started to reach for the door handle, but his hand came to her shoulder, stopped her.

"I'll come around. Let's finish the evening off right."

Nerves rolled back. Just exactly what did he mean by that? she wondered as he walked around the van. Was she supposed to ask him in so they could neck in the parlor? Surely not. It was out of the question.

He'd just walk her to the door. They could say good night, perhaps exchange a casual—very casual—kiss. Between friends, she reminded herself and geared back up as he opened her door.

"Thanks. It was a lovely dinner, a lovely evening."

"For me, too." He took her hand, not surprised to find it chilled. He'd seen the wariness come back into her eyes when he'd opened the door. And didn't mind it, not a bit. He wasn't above getting an ego boost from knowing he unnerved a woman.

"I want to see you again, Pilar."

"Oh. Well, of course. We're—"

"Not in company," he said, turning her toward him when they stood on the veranda. "Not for business. Alone." He drew her closer. "And for very personal reasons."

"David—"

But his mouth was on hers again. Gently, this time. Persuasively. Not with that abrupt and shocking flash of heat that had rudely slapped all those sleeping urges awake, but with a slow and simmering warmth that patiently unknotted every snag of tension inside her. Loosened her until her bones felt like wax melting.

When he drew back, his hands were on her face, fingers skimming over her cheekbones, then down, trailing lightly over her throat. "I'll call you."

She nodded, reached blindly behind her for the door. "Good night, David."

She stepped inside, closed the door. No matter how foolish she told herself she was, she knew she floated all the way upstairs.

The caves always made Sophia think of a smuggler's paradise. All those big, echoing spaces filled with huge casks of aging wine. She'd always enjoyed spending time there, and even when she was a child one of the

winemakers would let her sit at a little table and sample a small glass from one of the casks.

She'd learned, very young, to tell the difference, through sight, through scent, through palate, between a premium vintage and an ordinary one. To understand the subtleties that lifted one wine over another.

If it had spoiled her for the ordinary, what was the harm in that? She looked for, recognized and demanded quality because she'd been taught to tolerate nothing less.

It wasn't wine she was thinking of now, though the wines had been drawn from the aging vats, and glasses were set out for sampling. It was men she had on her mind.

She'd made a study of them as well, she liked to think. She knew an inferior blend, recognized one who was likely to leave a bitter aftertaste and one who would prove himself over time.

That was why, she believed, she'd had no long-term, no serious relationship with a man herself. None of the ones she'd sampled had the right flavor, the proper bouquet, as it were, to convince her she'd be content with only one variety.

Though she was perfectly confident in her ability to make the right choices for herself, and to be able to enjoy without consequences the tasting flights, she wasn't so confident about her mother's skill in the same area.

"It's their third date in two weeks."

"Mmm." Ty held a glass of claret to an open fire to check its color. He, like his grandfather, like *La Signora*, stuck firm with the old and traditional methods. He rated it a two for both color and clarity, and noted down the superior marks on his chart.

"My mother and David." To get his attention, Sophia punched him lightly on the arm.

"What about them?"

"They're going out again tonight. Third time in two weeks."

"And that's my business because?"

She heaved out a breath. "She's vulnerable. I can't say I don't like him, because I do. And I didn't particularly want to. I even encouraged her initially when he showed some interest in her, but I thought it was just a little fling coming around."

"Sophia, it may surprise you, but I'm working here, and I really don't want to talk about your mother's personal business."

He swirled the wine gently, stuck his nose in the glass and inhaled. His concentration was completely focused.

“They haven’t had sex.”

He winced visibly and lost the wine’s bouquet. “Damn it, Sophie.”

“If they’d had sex by now, I wouldn’t have to worry. That would mean it was just a nice little physical attraction instead of a thing. I think it’s becoming a thing. And how much do we know about David really? Other than from a professional standpoint. He’s divorced and we don’t know why. He might be a womanizer, or an opportunist. When you think about it, he started after my mother right after my father . . .”

Tyler nosed the wine again, noted down his numbers. “Which sounds like you’re saying your mother wouldn’t appeal to him on her own.”

“I certainly am not.” Insulted, Sophia snatched up a glass of Merlot, scowled through it into the light. “She’s beautiful, intelligent, charming and everything a man could want in a woman.”

But not what her father had wanted, she remembered. In disgust, for herself, she marked the sample down for cloudiness. “I wouldn’t worry about it if she’d talk to me. But all she’ll say is she and David enjoy each other’s company.”

“Gee, you think?”

“Oh, shut up!” She nosed her wine, noted down her opinion, then sipping, letting the wine rest inside her lower gum, touched it with the tip of her tongue to register the sweetness first before moving it to the sides, to the rear of her mouth to judge its acidity and tannic content.

She swished it around, allowing the various taste elements to blend, then spat it out.

“It’s immature yet.”

Tyler tested it himself and found he agreed with her. “We’ll let it age a bit. A lot of things become what they’re meant to if you leave them alone awhile.”

“Is that philosophy I hear?”

“You want an opinion, or just somebody to agree with you?”

“I guess wanting both was expecting too much.”

“There you go.” He picked up the next glass, held it to the light. But he was looking at Sophia. It was hard not to, he admitted. Not to look, not to wonder. Here they were in a cool, damp cave, a fire snapping, the smells of smoke and wood and earth surrounding them, shadows dipping, dancing.

Some people would have said it was romantic. He was doing his best not

to be one of them. Just as he'd been doing his best for some time not to think of her as a person, much less as a woman. She was, he reminded himself, a partner at best. And one he could have done without.

And right now his partner was worried. Maybe he thought she was borrowing trouble, or sticking her pretty nose where it didn't belong, but if he knew absolutely one thing about Sophia, it was that she loved her mother unreservedly.

"His ex-wife dumped him and the kids."

Sophia's gaze lifted from the wine she held, met his. "Dumped?"

"Yeah, decided there was a big old world out there, and she was entitled to it. Couldn't explore it or herself with a couple of kids and a husband hanging on. So she left."

"How do you know this?"

"Maddy talks to me." And he felt guilty for repeating things he'd been told. The kid didn't say much about her home life, but enough to give him a clear view. "She doesn't blab about it or anything, just lets stuff drop now and again. From what I gather, the mother doesn't contact them often, and Cutter's been running the show since she took off. Theo got in a little trouble, and Cutter took the position out here to get him out of the city."

"So he's a good father." She knew all too well what it was to be dumped by a parent. "That doesn't mean he's good for my mother."

"That's for her to decide, isn't it? You look for flaws in every man you see and you're going to find them."

"That's not what I do."

"It's exactly what you do."

"I don't have to look very deep with you." She offered in a sugary voice, "They're all so obvious."

"Lucky for both of us."

"Which is a step up from your pattern. You barely look at all. Easier to keep yourself wrapped up in the vines than risk getting wrapped up in a human being."

"Are we talking about my sex life? I must've missed a step."

"You don't have one."

"Not compared to yours." He set down the glass to make his notes. "Then again, who does? You go through men like a knife through cheese. A long, slow slice, a nibble, discard. You're making a mistake thinking you can set those standards for Pilar."

"I see." Hurt rippled through her. He'd made her sound cheap again. Like her father. Needing to punish him for it, she moved closer. "I haven't gone through you yet, have I, Ty? Haven't even managed the first cut. Is it because you're afraid to try on a woman who's able to think about sex the way a man does?"

"I don't want to try on a woman who thinks about anything the way a man does. I'm narrow-minded that way."

"Why don't you expand your horizons?" She tipped her face up, invited. "Dare you," she teased.

"I'm not interested."

Still testing, she wound her arms around his neck, tightening them when he lifted his arms to pull them away. "Which one of us is bluffing?"

Her eyes were dark, fiery. The scent of her slid around him, into him. She brushed her lips over his, one seductive stroke.

"Why don't you sample me?" she asked softly.

It was a mistake, but it wouldn't be his first. He gripped her hips and ran his hands up her sides.

The scent of her was both ripe and elusive. A deliberate and effective torment for a man.

"Look at me," he ordered, and took the mouth she offered.

Took what and how he wanted. Long, slow, deep. And he let the taste of her slide over his tongue, as he would with a fine wine, then slip almost lazily, certainly pleurably, into his system.

His lips rubbed over hers, turning her inside out. Somehow he'd flipped it all around on her, and the tempted had become the tempter. Knowing it, she couldn't resist.

There was so much more here than she'd imagined. More than she'd ever offered, or had accepted.

He watched her, intensely. Even as he toyed with her mouth, sent her head spinning and her body churning, he watched her with all the patience of a cat. That alone was a fresh and shocking thrill.

He ran his hands down her sides again, those wide hands just brushing her breasts. And drew her away.

"You push my buttons, Sophia. I don't like it."

He turned away to take a pull from the bottle of water used to cleanse the palate.

“A vintner’s also a scientist.” The air felt thick as she drew in a breath. “You’ve heard of chemical reactions.”

He turned, held the bottle out to her. “Yeah. And a good vintner always takes his time, because some chemical reactions leave nothing but a mess.”

The little stab disappointed as much as it stung. “Can’t you just say you want me?”

“Yeah, I can say it. I want you, enough that it sometimes hurts to breathe when you’re too close.”

Like now, he thought, when the taste of her was alive inside him.

“But when I get you into bed, you’re going to look at me the way you looked at me just now. It’s not going to be just another time, just another man. It’s going to be me, and you’re going to know it.”

There was a ripple along her skin. She had to force herself not to rub her hands over her arms to chase it away again. “Why do you make that sound like a threat?”

“Because it is.” Moving away from her, he picked up the next glass of wine and went back to work.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Claremont studied the Avano file. He spent a great deal of what he could eke out as spare time studying the data, the evidence, the crime scene and medical examiner reports. He could nearly recite the statements and interviews by rote.

After nearly eight weeks it was considered by most to be a dead end. No viable suspects, no tangible leads, no easy answers.

It stuck in his craw.

He didn't believe in perfect crimes but in missed opportunities.

What was he missing?

"Alex." Maguire stopped by his desk, sat on the corner. She already wore her coat against the misery that was February in San Francisco. Her youngest had a history project due the next day, her husband was fighting off a cold and they were having leftover meat loaf for dinner.

Nobody was going to be happy at her house, but she needed to be there.

"Go home," she told him.

"There's always a loose end," he complained.

"Yeah, but you're not always able to tie it off. Avano stays open, and it looks like it's going to stay that way unless we get lucky and something falls in our laps."

"I don't like luck."

"Yeah, well, I live for it."

"He uses the daughter's apartment for a meet," Claremont began and ignored his partner's long-suffering sigh. "Nobody sees him go in, nobody hears the gunshots, nobody sees anyone else go in or out."

"Because it was in the neighborhood of three in the morning. The neighbors were asleep and, used to city noises, didn't hear the pop of a twenty-five-caliber."

"Pissant gun. Woman's gun."

"Excuse me." She patted her own police-issue nine-millimeter.

"Civilian woman's gun," he corrected with what was nearly a smile. "Wine and cheese, late-night meet in an empty apartment. Sneaking out on the wife, apparently. Victim's a guy who liked to cheat on the wife. Smells like a woman. And maybe that's the angle. Maybe it was set to smell like a woman."

"We looked at men, too."

"Maybe we need to look again. The ex-Mrs. Avano, as opposed to the widow Avano, has been seen socializing in the company of one David Cutter."

"That tells me her taste in men has improved."

"She stays legally married to a philandering son of a bitch for nearly thirty years. Why?"

"Look, my husband doesn't run around and I love him like crazy. But sometimes I wonder why I stay legally married to him. She's Catholic," Maguire finished with another sigh, knowing she wasn't getting home anytime soon. "Italian Catholic and practicing. Divorce wouldn't come easy."

"She gave him one when he asked."

"She didn't stand in his way. Different thing."

"Yeah, and as a divorced Catholic she wouldn't be able to remarry, would she? Or snuggle up with another man with the approval of the Church."

"So she kills him to clear the way? Reaching, Alex. On the Catholic sin-o-meter, murder edges out divorce."

"Or somebody does it for her. Cutter's brought in to the company, *over* Avano. Got to cause some friction. Cutter likes the look of Avano's estranged and soon-to-be-divorced wife."

"We ran Cutter up, down and sideways. He's squeaky."

"Maybe, or maybe he didn't have a good reason to get his hands dirty before. Look, we found out Avano was in financial trouble. Unless the widow's an Oscar-caliber actress, I'd say that came as a big, unpleasant surprise to her. So, going with the theory that Avano was keeping his money problems to himself, and wasn't the type to do without his *beluga* for long, where would he go for a fix? Not one of his society friends," Claremont con-

tinued. “Wouldn’t be able to show his face at the next charity ball. He goes to Giambelli, where he’s been bailed out periodically for years. To the ex-wife, maybe.”

“And following your line, if she agreed, Cutter got steamed over it. If she didn’t, and Avano got nasty, Cutter got steamed over it. It’s a long way from steamed to putting three bullets in a man.”

Still, she considered. It was something to chew on, and there’d been precious little so far. “I guess we’re chatting with David Cutter tomorrow.”

David juggled the hours of his workday between the San Francisco offices, his home office, the vineyards and the winery. With two teenagers to raise and a demanding job, he often put in fourteen-hour days.

He’d never been happier in his life.

With La Coeur he’d spent most of his time behind a desk. Had occasionally traveled to sit on the other side of someone else’s desk. He’d worked in an area that interested him and had earned him respect and a good salary.

And he’d been bored brainless.

The hands-on approach he was not only allowed but expected to use with Giambelli-MacMillan made each day a little adventure. He was dipping his fingers into areas of the wine business that had been only theory or paperwork before.

Distribution, bottling, shipping, marketing. And above all, the grape itself. From vine to table.

And what vines. To be able to see them, stretching, stretching, wrapped in the fogs and mists of the valley. The linear and the insubstantial that mingled light and shadow. And when the frost shimmered on them at dawn, or the cold moonlight drizzled down at midnight, there was magic there.

When he walked through the rows, breathing in the mystery of that damp air, and the wispy arms of the vines surrounded him, it was like living in a painting. One he could, and would, mark with his own brush strokes.

There was a romance in that romance he’d forgotten locked behind steel and glass in New York.

His home life still had bumps. Theo pushed and shoved against the rules on a daily basis. It seemed to David the boy was grounded as often as not.

Like father like son, he often thought. But it wasn’t much of a comfort when he was in the middle of the combat zone. He began to wonder why

his own father, faced with such a surly, hardheaded, argumentative offspring, hadn't simply locked him in the attic until he'd turned twenty-one.

Maddy wasn't any easier. She appeared to have given up on the nose ring. Now she was campaigning to have her hair streaked. It baffled him constantly how a sensible girl could forever be pining to do weird things to her body.

He had no idea how to get inside the mind of a fourteen-year-old girl. And wasn't entirely sure he wanted to.

But they were settling in. They were making friends. They were finding a rhythm.

He found it odd neither of them had commented on his relationship with Pilar. Normally they teased him mercilessly about his dates. He thought perhaps they assumed it was business. Which was just as well.

He caught himself daydreaming, as he often did when his mind drifted to Pilar. He shook his head, shifted in his chair. This wasn't the time to indulge himself. He had a meeting with department heads in twenty minutes and needed to review his notes.

Because time was short, he wasn't pleased to be interrupted by the police.

"Detectives. What can I do for you?"

"A few minutes of your time," Claremont told him, while Maguire scanned the office and got the lay of the land.

"A few minutes is exactly what I can spare. Have a seat."

Big, cushy leather seats, Maguire noted. In a big, cushy corner office with a kick-ass view of San Francisco through the wide windows. A thoroughbred of offices for a desk jockey, and totally masculine with its biscuit-and-burgundy color scheme and glossy mahogany desk.

She wondered if the office was tailored to suit the man, or vice versa.

"I assume this has to do with Anthony Avano," David began. "Is there any progress in the investigation?"

"The case is still open, Mr. Cutter. How would you describe your relationship with Mr. Avano?"

"We didn't have one, Detective Claremont," David replied matter-of-factly.

"You were both executives for the same company, both worked primarily out of this building."

"Very briefly. I'd been with Giambelli less than two weeks before Avano was killed."

"In a couple of weeks, you'd have formed an impression," Maguire put in. "Had meetings, discussed business."

"You'd think, wouldn't you? But I'd yet to have a meeting with him, and we had only one discussion, which took place at the party the evening before his murder. It was the only time I met him face-to-face, and there really wasn't time to talk much business."

Didn't mention his impression, Claremont noted. But they'd get to that. "Why hadn't you met with him?"

"Scheduling conflicts." The tone was bland.

"Yours or his?"

David sat back. He didn't care for the direction of the questioning, or the implication. "His, apparently. Several attempts to reach him proved unsuccessful. In the time between my arrival and his death, Avano didn't come to the office, at least not when I was here, nor did he return my calls."

"Must've annoyed you."

"It did." David nodded at Maguire. "Which I dealt with during our brief conversation at the winery. I made it clear that I expected him to make time to meet with me during business hours. Obviously, that never happened."

"Did you meet with him outside of business hours?"

"No. Detectives, I didn't know the man. Had no real reason to like or dislike him or think about him particularly."

David kept his voice even, edging toward dismissive, as he would when winding up a tedious business meeting. "While I understand you have to explore every avenue in your investigation, I'd think you're scraping bottom if you're looking at me as a murder suspect."

"You're dating his ex-wife."

David felt the jolt in the belly, but his face stayed passive as he leaned forward again. Slowly. "That's right. His ex-wife, who was already his ex when he was murdered, already his ex when we began seeing each other socially. I don't believe that crosses any legal or moral line."

"Our information is that the ex-Mrs. Avano wasn't in the habit of seeing men socially, until very recently."

"That," David said to Maguire, "might be because she hadn't met a man she cared to see socially, until very recently. I find that flattering, but not a reason to murder."

"Being dumped for a younger woman often is," Maguire said easily and watched cool eyes flare. Not just seeing her socially, she concluded. Seriously hung up.

"Which is it?" David demanded. "Pilar killed him because he wanted

another woman, or she's heartless because she's interested in another man so soon after her ex-husband is murdered? How do you bend that premise both ways?"

Furious, Maguire thought, but controlled. Just the sort of makeup that could calmly sip wine and put bullets in a man.

"We're not accusing anyone," she continued. "We're just trying to get a clear picture."

"Let me help you out. Avano lived his own life his own way for twenty years. Pilar Giambelli lived hers, a great deal more admirably. Whatever business Avano might have had that night was his own, and nothing to do with her. My socializing with Ms. Giambelli, at this point, is completely our business."

"You assume Avano had business that night. Why?"

"I assume nothing." David inclined his head toward Claremont as he got to his feet. "I leave that to you. I have a meeting."

Claremont stayed where he was. "Were you aware Mr. Avano was having financial difficulties?"

"Avano's finances weren't my problem, or my concern."

"They would have been, if they connected to Giambelli. Weren't you curious as to why Mr. Avano was dodging you?"

"I'd been brought in from the outside. Some resentment was expected."

"He resented you."

"He may have. We never got around to discussing it."

"Now who's dodging?" Claremont got to his feet. "Do you own a handgun, Mr. Cutter?"

"No, I don't. I have two teenage children. There are no guns of any kind in my house, and never have been. On the night Avano was murdered, I was at home with my children."

"They can verify that."

David's hands curled into fists. "They'd know if I'd left the house." He wasn't having his kids interrogated by the police. Not over a worthless excuse of humanity like Avano. "That's all we're going to discuss until I consult an attorney."

"That's your right." Maguire rose and played what she banked was her trump card. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Cutter. We'll question Ms. Giambelli about her ex-husband's finances."

"I'd think his widow would know more."

Maguire continued. "Pilar Giambelli was married to him a lot longer, and part of the business for which he worked."

David slipped his hands into his pockets. "She knows less about the business than either of you." And thinking of her, David made his choice. "Avano had been, for the last three years, systematically embezzling money from Giambelli. Padded expense accounts, inflated sales figures, travel vouchers for trips not taken or taken but for personal reasons. Never a great deal at a time, and he picked various pockets so that it went unnoticed. In his position, professionally and personally, no one would have, and no one did, question his figures."

Claremont nodded. "But you did."

"I did. I caught some of it the day of the party and, in double-checking it, began to see the pattern. It was clear to me he'd been dipping for some time under his name, under Pilar's and under his daughter's. He didn't trouble to forge their signatures on the vouchers, just signed them. To a total of just over six hundred thousand in the last three years."

"And when you confronted him . . ." Maguire prompted.

"I never did. I intended to, and believe I made that intention clear during our conversation at the party. My impression was he understood I knew something. It was business, Detective, and would have been handled through the business. I reported the problem to Tereza Giambelli and Eli MacMillan the day after the party. The conclusion was that I would handle it, do what could be done to arrange for Avano to pay the money back. He would resign from the company. If he refused any of the stipulations outlined, the Giambellis would take legal action."

"Why was this information withheld?"

"It was the wish of the senior Ms. Giambelli that her granddaughter not be humiliated by her father's behavior becoming public. I was asked to say nothing, unless directly asked by the police. At this point, *La Signora*, Eli MacMillan and myself are the only people who know. Avano's dead, and it seemed unnecessary to add to the scandal by painting him as a thief as well as a philanderer."

"Mr. Cutter," Claremont said. "When it's murder, nothing's unnecessary."

David had barely closed the door at the cops' back and taken a breath to steady himself when it opened again. Sophia didn't knock, didn't think to.

“What did they want?”

He had to adjust quickly and folded his concern and anger together, tucked them away. “We’re both running late for the meeting.” He scooped up his notes, slid them with the reports, the graphs, the memos into his briefcase.

“David.” Sophia simply stayed with her back to the door. “I could’ve gone after the cops and tried to get answers I haven’t been able to get from them. I hoped that you’d be more understanding.”

“They had questions, Sophia. Follow-ups, I suppose you call them.”

“Why you and not me or several other people in this building? You barely knew my father, had never worked with him or as far as I’m aware spent any time with him. What could you tell the police about him, or his murder, that they haven’t already been told?”

“Little to nothing. I’m sorry, Sophia, but we’ll need to table this, at least for now. People are waiting.”

“David. Give me some credit. They came directly to your office, and stayed in here long enough for there to have been something. Word travels,” she finished. “I have a right to know.”

He said nothing for a moment, but studied her face. Yes, she had a right to know, he decided. And he had no right to take that away from her.

He picked up his phone. “Ms. Giambelli and I will be a few minutes late for the meeting,” he told his assistant. He nodded to a chair as he hung up. “Sit down.”

“I’ll stand. You may have noticed, I’m not delicate.”

“I’ve noticed you handle yourself. The police had some questions that sprang, at least in part, from the fact that I’m seeing your mother.”

“I see. Do they have some theory that you and Mama have been engaged in some long, secret affair? That could have been put to rest easily enough by the fact that until a couple of months ago you lived a country apart. Added to the fact that my father had been living openly with another woman for several years, a few dinner dates is very small potatoes.”

“I’m sure they’re covering all angles.”

“Do they suspect you or Mama?”

“I’d say they suspect everyone. It’s part of their job description. You’ve been careful not to comment, to me in any case, on how you feel about my relationship with your mother.”

“I haven’t decided how I feel about it, precisely. When I do, I’ll let you know.”

“Fair enough,” he said equably. “I know how I feel about it, so I’ll tell you. I care very much about Pilar. I don’t intend to cause her trouble or upset. I’d be sorry to cause you any, either, first because she loves you and second because I like you. But I was just in the position of choosing between causing you both some upset or having my kids interrogated and doing nothing to stop the investigation from wandering down a dead end.”

She wanted to sit down now. Something told her she’d need to. Because of it, pride kept her on her feet. “What did you tell the police that’s going to upset me?”

Truth, he thought, like medicine, was better given in one fast dose. “Your father had been embezzling from the company for several years. The amounts were spread out, and relatively moderate, which is one reason they went undetected as long as they did.”

The color drained out of her face, but she didn’t flinch. Didn’t flinch even as the fist of betrayal slammed hard into her heart. “There’s no mistake?” she began, then waved him off before he could answer. “No, of course there isn’t. You wouldn’t make one.” There was a light lick of bitterness in the statement. She couldn’t stop it. “How long have you known?”

“I confirmed it the day of the party. I intended to meet with your father within the next couple of days to discuss—”

“To fire him,” she corrected.

“To ask for his resignation. As per your grandparents’ instructions. I reported the embezzlement to them the day after the party. He would have been given the opportunity to pay back the funds and resign. They did that for you—for your mother, too, for the company, but mostly for you. I’m sorry.”

She nodded, turning away as she rubbed her hands over her arms. “Yes, of course. I appreciate your being honest with me now.”

“Sophia—”

“Please, don’t.” She closed in as he stepped forward. “Don’t apologize again. I’m not going to fall apart. I already knew he was a thief. I saw one of my mother’s heirloom brooches on Rene’s lapel. It was to come to me, so I know my mother didn’t give it to him. I knew when I saw her wearing it, on her widow’s black, that he’d stolen it. Not that he’d have thought of it that way. Any more than he’d have thought of the money he siphoned from the company as stealing. Pilar, he’d think, has so many trinkets. She wouldn’t mind. The company, he’d tell himself, can afford to lend me a bit more capital. Yes, he was a champ at rationalizing his pathetic behavior.”

“If you’d rather go home than attend the meeting, I can make your excuses.”

“I have no intention of missing the meeting.” She turned back. “Isn’t it odd? I knew what he did to Mama all those years—I saw it for myself. But I managed to forgive him, or to tell myself it was just what he was, and make it, if not all right, somehow marginally acceptable. Now he’s stolen money and jewelry, so much less important than stealing a person’s dignity and self-respect as he did with my mother. But it took this for me to face fully that he was worthless as a human being. It took this for me to stop bleeding for him. I wonder why that is? Well, I’ll see you at the meeting.”

“Take a few minutes.”

“No. He’s already had more of my time than he was entitled to.”

Yes, he thought as she walked out of his office. Very much like her grandmother.

Since it was Sophia’s turn to drive, Tyler rode back from the city in silence. Unless, he thought, you counted the blast of the radio. He’d turned it down twice, only to have her snap the volume back up again. Departmental meetings gave him a headache and so did the opera currently screaming out of the speakers, but he decided to let it go. It certainly prevented any pretext of conversation.

She didn’t look to be in the mood for conversation. He wasn’t sure just what she looked in the mood for, but it sure as hell wasn’t talk.

She drove too fast, but he’d gotten used to that. And even with whatever storm was brewing inside her, she wasn’t careless as she swung around the curves and slopes of the road.

Still, he nearly sighed when he spotted the rooftops of home. He was about to get there, in one piece, where he could shrug out of his city clothes and fall into blessed silence and solitude.

Even with her mouth so firmly shut, he thought, the woman just wore him out.

But when she stopped at the end of the drive, she turned off the engine and was out of the car before he was.

“What’re you doing?”

“Coming in,” she called over her shoulder, adding a brief, glittering look to her words.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t feel like going home.”

He jangled his keys in his hand. “It’s been a long day.”

“Hasn’t it just?”

“I’ve got things to do.”

“That’s handy. I’m looking for things to do. Be a pal, MacMillan. Buy me a drink.”

Resigned, he jabbed his key in the lock. “Buy your own drink. You know where everything is.”

“Gracious to the last. That’s what I like about you.” She strolled in and headed straight to the great room and the wine rack. “With you, Ty, there are no pretenses, no games. You are what you are. Surly, rude, predictable.”

She chose a bottle at random. Variety and vintage didn’t matter at the moment. While she uncorked it, she looked around the room. Stone and wood—hard materials, expertly and cleanly worked into a dignified setting for big, simple furnishings and plain colors.

No flowers, she thought, no soft edges, no polish. “Take this place, for example. No frills, no fuss. A manly man lives here, it says, who doesn’t have time for appearances. Don’t give a flying fuck about appearances, do you, Ty?”

“Not particularly.”

“That’s so damn stalwart of you. You’re a stalwart individual.” She poured out two glasses. “Some people live and die by appearances, you know. They’re what matter most. Me, I’m more of a happy-medium type. You can’t trust someone who has appearances as his religion, and the ones who don’t give that flying fuck, you end up trusting too much.”

“If you’re going to drink my wine and take up my space, you might as well tell me what’s put you in this mood and get it over with.”

“Oh, I have many moods.” She drank the wine, too quickly for pleasure, and poured a second glass for herself. “I’m a multifaceted woman, Tyler. You haven’t seen the half of me.”

She crossed to him, slowly. A kind of sexual gunfighter’s swagger. “Would you like to see more?”

“No.”

“Oh now, don’t disappoint me and lie. No games, no pretenses, remember.” She trailed a fingertip up his shirt. “You really want to get your hands on me, and conveniently, I really want to be handled.”

"You want to get drunk and get laid? Sorry, doesn't suit my plans for the evening." He plucked the glass out of her hand.

"What's the matter? Want me to buy you dinner first?"

He set the glass down. "I think more of myself than that. And surprise, more of you."

"Fine. I'll just find someone who isn't so picky." She took three strides toward the door when he grabbed her arm. "Let go. You had your chance."

"I'm taking you home."

"I'm not going home."

"You're going where I take you."

"I said let go!" She whirled. She was prepared to scratch and claw and slap, could already feel the release of it gush through her. And was more surprised than he when she grabbed on hard and collapsed into tears.

"Shit. Okay." He did the only thing that came to mind. He picked her up, carried her to a chair and sat with her on his lap. "Get it all out, and we'll both feel better."

While she wept, the phone rang from somewhere under the sofa cushion where he'd lost it the last time. And the old mantel clock began to bong the hour.

She wasn't ashamed of tears. They were, after all, just another form of passion. But she preferred other methods of release. When she'd cried herself dry, she stayed where she was, curled warm against him and comforted more than she'd imagined.

He didn't pat and stroke, didn't rock or murmur all those foolish and reassuring words people tended to use to sop up tears. He simply let her hold on and purge herself.

As a result, she was more grateful than she'd imagined as well.

"Sorry."

"Yeah, that makes two of us."

The response made her relax. She drew a long breath, breathing in the scent of him, holding it in, as she held on to him. Then letting go.

"If you'd taken me up on the jungle sex, I wouldn't have blubbered all over you."

"Well, if I'd known my choices at the time . . ."

She laughed, and let her head rest on his shoulder just a moment before

she climbed out of his lap. "We're probably better off this way. My father stole from the company."

Before he could decide how to respond, she took a step toward him. "You knew."

"No."

"But you're not surprised."

He got to his feet, sincerely hoping this wasn't the start of another battle. "No, I'm not surprised."

"I see." She looked away from him, stared hard into the hearth where last night's fire had burned to ashes. Apt, she thought. She felt just like that—cold and empty. "All right. Well." She stiffened her spine, wiped away the last traces of tears. "I pay my debts. I'll fix you dinner."

He started to protest. Then weighed the options of solitude against a hot meal. The woman could cook, he recalled. "You know where the kitchen is."

"Yes, I do." She stepped closer, rose on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Down payment," she told him, and shrugged out of her jacket as she left the room.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“You didn’t call me back.”

Margaret tracked Tyler down in the MacMillan winery. She’d had several satisfying and successful meetings since her return from Venice. Her career was advancing well, she was certain she looked her best after two carefully outlined shopping forays before her return to California. She was developing the polish she’d always believed international travel sheened on a woman.

There was one last goal she intended to achieve while she was stateside. Bagging Tyler MacMillan.

“Sorry. I’ve been swamped.” February was a slow month in winemaking, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t work. Sophia had scheduled a wine-tasting party that evening on his turf. While he wasn’t particularly pleased about it, he understood the value. And knew the importance of making certain everything was in place.

“I can imagine. I looked over the plans for the centennial campaign. You’ve done a terrific job.”

“Sophia has.”

Margaret wandered with him as he moved into the tasting room. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Ty. When are you coming over to take a look at the operation in Italy? I think you’d be impressed and pleased.”

“There’re noises about it. I don’t have time now.”

“When you do, I’ll show you the area. Buy you some pasta at this terrific little trattoria I found. They’re serving our wine there now, and I’m negotiating with some of the top hotels to spotlight our label this summer.”

"Sounds like you've been busy, too."

"I love it. There's still a little resistance with some of the accounts that were used to Tony Avano and his style of business. But I'm bringing them around. Do the police have any more on what happened to him?"

"Not that I've heard." How soon, Tyler wondered, would word of the embezzlement leak?

"It's terrible. He was a very popular guy with the accounts. And they loved him in Italy. They're not as open to sitting around drinking grappa and smoking cigars with me."

He stopped, smiled at her. "That's a picture."

"I know how to play with the boys. I have to head back end of the week, make several stops here in the States on my way. I was hoping we could get together. I'll fix you dinner."

What was with women offering to cook for him? Did he look hungry? "That's—" He broke off as he saw Maddy come in. The kid always lifted his spirits. "Hey. It's the mad scientist."

Secretly delighted, Maddy sneered at him. "I've got my secret formula." She held up two peanut butter jars filled with dark liquid.

"Looks pretty scary." Ty took it, tipped the one she held out to him side to side and watched it swish.

"Maybe you could try it at your tasting tonight. See what people say."

"Hmmm." He could only imagine the comments of the wine snobs after a sip of Maddy's kitchen wine. And because he could, he began to grin. "It's a thought."

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?" It wasn't that Margaret didn't like children, mostly at a safe distance. But she was trying to make some time here.

"Oh, sorry. Margaret Bowers, Maddy Cutter."

"Oh, you must be David's little girl. Your father and I had some meetings today."

"No kidding." Resentment at being called a little girl simmered. "Me, too. Can I stay for some of the tasting?" She turned to Ty, ignoring Margaret. "I'm going to do this whole report on the wine, so I want to, like, observe and stuff."

"Sure." He opened the jar, nosed it. Amusement gleamed in his eyes. "I'd like to observe this one myself."

"Ty? How about tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Dinner." Margaret kept her voice casual. "There's a lot regarding the Italian operation I'd like to discuss with you. I'm hoping you can educate me a bit, pump up my weak areas. There are some aspects I'm cloudy on, and I think talking to an expert vintner who has English as his primary language would really help."

"Sure." He was much more interested in Maddy's wine at the moment, and moved behind the bar to get a glass.

"Seven? I've got a lovely Merlot I brought back with me."

"Great." The liquid Ty poured into the glass would never be a lovely anything.

"See you then. Nice to have met you, Maddy."

"Okay." She gave a quick snort when Margaret went out. "You're such a dork."

"Excuse me?"

"She was hitting on you and you're, like, oblivious."

"She wasn't hitting on me and you're not supposed to talk that way."

"Was too." Maddy slid onto a stool at the bar. "Women know these things."

"Maybe, but you don't qualify as a woman."

"I've had my period."

He'd started to drink, had to set the glass back down as he winced. "Please."

"It's a biological function. And when a female is physically able to conceive, she is, physically, a woman."

"Fine. Great." It wasn't a debate he wanted to enter into. "Shut up." He let the wine, such as it was, lie on his tongue. It was unsophisticated to say the least, highly acidic and oversweet thanks to the sugar she must have added.

Still, she'd succeeded in making wine in a kitchen bowl. Bad wine, but that wasn't the point.

"Did you drink any of this?"

"Maybe." She set the second jar on the counter. "Here's the miracle wine. No additives. I read about how sometimes they add ox blood for color and body. I didn't know where to get any. Besides, it sounds disgusting."

"We don't approve of that kind of practice. A little calcium carbonate would deacidify it some, but we'll just let it stand on its own. Altogether, it's not a complete failure as a jug wine. You pulled it off, kid. Nice going."

A brave man, he poured a swallow of the miracle wine, examined, nosed, sipped. "Interesting. Cloudy, immature and biting, but it's wine."

"Will you read my report and check my charts when I'm done?"

"Sure."

"Good." She fluttered her lashes. "I'll fix you dinner."

God, she tickled him. "Smart-ass."

"At last," David said as he came in. "Someone who agrees with me." He walked over, hooked an arm around his daughter's neck. "Five minutes, remember?"

"We got distracted. Ty said I could come to the tasting."

"Maddy—"

"Please. He's going to put my wine in."

David glanced over. "You're a brave man, MacMillan."

"You never spent an evening chugging any Run, Walk and Fall Down?"

With a grin, David covered Maddy's ears. "Once or twice, and fortunately I lived to regret it. Your wine club might object to the addition."

"Yeah." The thought of that tickled Ty, too. "It'll broaden their outlook."

"Or poison them."

"Please, Dad. It's for science."

"That's what you said about the rotten eggs you kept in your bedroom. We didn't really leave New York for professional reasons," he said to Ty. "The new tenants are probably still fumigating. Okay, but you turn into a pumpkin at ten. Let's go. Theo's in the van. He's driving us back."

"We'll all die," Maddy said solemnly.

"Scram. I'll be right out."

He plucked her off the stool, gave her a light whack on the butt to send her along.

"I just wanted to say I appreciate your letting her hang around."

"She doesn't get in the way."

"Sure she does."

Tyler set the glasses in the sink under the bar. "Okay, she does. But I don't mind."

"If I thought you did, I'd've herded her off. I also realize you're more comfortable with her than you are with me. I get in your way, and you do mind."

"I don't need a supervisor."

"No, you don't. But the company needed, and needs, fresh blood. An outsider. Someone who can look at the big picture from all angles and suggest a different way when it's viable."

"You got suggestions for me, Cutter?"

"The first might be taking the chip from your shoulder and the stick from your ass, then we can build a campfire with them and have a couple of beers."

Tyler said nothing for a moment as he tried to judge if he was amused or annoyed. "Add yours and we could have a hell of a blaze."

"There's an idea. I'll bring Maddy back around later. I'll come back at ten to pick her up."

"I can drop her home, save you a trip."

"Appreciate it." David headed toward the door, paused. "Listen, would you let me know if she gets . . . if she starts to get a crush on you. It's probably normal, but I'd like to head it off if it veers that way."

"It's not like that. I think I'm more big brother, maybe uncle material. But your boy's got a champion crush on Sophie."

David stared. Blinked. Then rubbed his hands over his face. "Missed that one. I thought it came and went the first week. Hell."

"She can handle it. Nothing she does better than handle the male of the species. She won't bruise him."

"He manages to bruise himself." He thought of Pilar, and winced.

"Hard to fault his taste, huh? Under the circumstances?"

David shot back a bland look. "Another smart-ass," he muttered and walked out.

Pilar chose a simple cocktail suit, thinking the sage green with satin lapels was midway between professional and celebratory. Perfect, she hoped, for hosting the wine tasting.

She'd taken on the role to prove herself—to her family, to David and even to herself. She'd spent a week assisting with tours, being trained—delicately, she thought now. Staff members treated family members with kid gloves.

It had jarred her to realize just how little she knew about the winery, about the vineyards, about the process and about the public areas and retail venue. It would take more than a week and some subtle education to learn

how to handle any of those areas on her own. But by God, she could handle a group at a wine tasting.

And was determined to prove it.

She was going to learn how to handle a great many things, including her own life. Part of that life included sex. So, good for her.

And on that thought, she lowered to the edge of her bed. The idea of moving toward an intimate relationship with David terrified her. The fact that it did, irritated her. And terrified and irritated, she had made herself, she admitted, a nervous wreck.

The knock on her door had her springing to her feet again, grabbing her brush and fixing what she hoped was a confident and casual expression on her face. "Yes? Come in."

She sighed hugely and gave up the pretense when she saw Helen. "Thank God it's you. I'm so tired of pretending to be a twenty-first-century woman."

"You look like one. Fabulous dress."

"Under it, I'm quaking. I'm glad you and James are here for the tasting."

"We dragged Linc along. His current honey is working tonight."

"Still the intern?"

"Yeah." Helen sat on the curvy velvet chaise, made herself at home. "I'm starting to think he's getting serious about her."

"And?"

"I don't know. She's a nice girl, raised well. Focused, which he could use, and independent, which I appreciate."

"But he's your baby."

"But he's my baby," Helen agreed. "I miss the little boy sometimes, with the scabbed knees and loose shoelaces. Still see him in that tall, gorgeous lawyer in the three-piece suit that strolls in and out of my life now. And Jesus," she said with a sigh. "I'm old. How's your baby holding up?"

Pilar set down her brush. "You already know about what Tony did."

"Your mother thought it best that I know, so that I can cover any legalities that might come up. I'm sorry, Pilar."

"So am I. It was so unnecessary." She turned. "And so like him. That's what you're thinking."

"It doesn't matter what I think. Unless I see you start blaming yourself."

"No, not this time. And I hope never again. But it's rough, very rough on Sophia."

"She'll get through it. Our babies turned into strong, capable adults while we weren't looking, Pilar."

"I know. When did we blink? And still, we can't help worrying about them, can we?"

"The job never ends. Sophia was just heading over to MacMillan's as we came in. Drafted Linc to go with her in case there was any heavy lifting involved in the setup. He'll keep her mind occupied."

"It's always good to see them together, almost like brother and sister."

"Mmm. Now, sit down." Helen patted the chaise. "Catch your breath and tell me all about your romance with David Cutter. With nearly thirty years of marriage under my belt, I have to live vicariously."

"It's not really . . . we're enjoying each other's company."

"No sex yet, huh?"

"Helen." Giving up, Pilar dropped onto the chaise. "How can I have sex with him?"

"If you've forgotten how it works, there are a number of very good books on the subject. Videos. Internet sites." Behind her lenses, her eyes danced. "I'll give you a list."

"I'm serious."

"Me too. Some very hot stuff in there."

"Stop it." But she laughed. "David's been very patient, but I'm not stupid. He wants sex, and he's not going to keep settling for necking on the porch or—"

"Necking? Come on, Pilar. Details, all the details."

"Let's just say he has a very creative mouth, and when he uses it, I remember what it's like to be twenty."

"Oh." Helen fanned a hand in front of her face. "Yes."

"But I'm *not* twenty. And my body sure as hell isn't twenty. How can I possibly let him see me naked, Helen? My breasts are heading to Mexico."

"Honey, mine landed in Argentina three years ago. James doesn't seem to mind."

"But that's the point. You've been together for nearly thirty years. You've gone through the changes together. Worse, David's younger than I am."

"Worse? I can think of a lot worse than that."

"Try to be on my side here. He's a forty-three-year-old man. I'm a forty-eight-year-old woman. There's a huge difference there. A man his age most

usually dates younger women. Often much younger women with tight bodies that don't sag."

"Often paired with empty heads that don't think," Helen finished. "Pilar, the fact is, he's dating you. And if you're so self-conscious about your body, though that irritates me when I think of what's become of mine in comparison, make sure it's dark the first time you jump him."

"You're a big help."

"Yes, I am, because if he's put off by breasts that aren't twenty-two years old and perky, then he's not worth your time. Better to find out than to speculate and project. Do you want to sleep with him? Just yes or no," Helen added before Pilar could respond. "Gut instinct, primal urge. No qualifiers."

"Yes."

"Then buy yourself some incredible underwear and go for it."

Pilar bit her lip. "I already bought the underwear."

"Hot damn. Let's see."

Nearly twenty-four hours after the tasting, and Tyler could still form a picture in his mind that made him laugh. Two dozen snooty, slick-faced club members had gotten the shock of their narrow lives with a sample of what he was calling Vin de Madeline.

"Unsophisticated," he said, cracking himself up again, "but nubile.' Jesus, where do they get that stuff? Nubile."

"Try to contain your hilarity." Sophia sat behind the desk in her office in the villa and continued to study the models Kris had chosen for the ads. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd warn me the next time you decide to add a mystery vintage to the selection."

"Last-minute candidate. And it was in the name of science."

"The tastings are in the name of tradition, reputation and promotion." She glanced up briefly, gave up when he just grinned at her. "Okay, it was funny, and we'll be able to turn it into an interesting, lighthearted article for the newsletter. Maybe even get a little human-interest and anecdotal press out of it."

"Does your blood run on publicity?"

"You betcha. Which is fortunate for all involved, as some members would've been very offended if I hadn't been there to spin it."

“Some members are pompous, tight-assed idiots.”

“Yes, and those pompous, tight-assed idiots buy a great deal of our wine and talk it up at social events. As the winemaker is as unsophisticated and nubile as her wine, we can play it to our advantage.” She made another note, weighed it down with the silly green glass frog Ty had given her for Christmas. “Next time you want to experiment, give me some warning.”

He stretched out his legs. “Loosen up, Giambelli.”

“That, from the king of the party animals.” She picked up an eight-by-ten glossy, held it out to him. “What do you think of her?”

He took the picture, studied the sloe-eyed blonde. “Does this come with her phone number?”

“That’s what I thought. She’s too sexy. I told Kris I wanted wholesome.” Sophia scowled into middle distance. “I have to fire her. She’s not even trying to adjust to the changes. Worse, she’s ignoring direct orders, giving the rest of the team grief.” She sighed. “My spies tell me she had a meeting with Jerry DeMorney from La Coeur just the other day.”

“If she’s causing trouble, why are you worried about axing her? Don’t give me the line about not being able to replace her during the campaign or the reorganization.”

“All right. I hesitate because she’s good, and I hate to lose her. And she has intimate knowledge of the campaign, of my long-range plans, and could very well lure some other members of the staff away with her. I hesitate, on a personal level, because I think she was involved with my father, and firing her might push her to make that public. Whatever I do, it’s going to cause trouble. But it can’t be put off any longer. I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

“I could do it.”

Sophia closed the file folder. “That’s actually very nice of you. But it should come from me. I should warn you that cutting her loose is going to mean more work for the rest of us. Especially since my mother isn’t going to be doing, or trying to do, any of the grunt work.”

“That sure cheers me up.”

“I was thinking about asking Theo if he wanted a part-time job. We could use a gofer a couple afternoons a week.”

“Great. Then he can hang around here mooning over you on a regular basis.”

“The more he’s around me, the quicker he’ll get over it. Daily contact’ll take the edge off his hormones.”

"You think?" Ty murmured.

"Why, Tyler, was that a twisted sort of compliment, or just your cranky way of saying I make you edgy?"

"Neither." He studied the glossy again. "I go for sleepy-eyed blondes with full, pouty lips."

"Peroxide and collagen."

"So?"

"God, I love men." She got up from the desk, walked to him, cupped his face in her hands and gave him a smacking kiss on the mouth. "You're just so cute."

One hard tug on her hand had her tumbling into his lap. An instant later her quick laugh was cut off, and her heart pounding.

He hadn't kissed her this way before, with impatience and heat and hunger all mixed together in a near brutal assault. He hadn't kissed her as if he couldn't get enough. Would never get enough. Her body quivered once—in surprise, in defense, in response. Then her fingers raked through his hair, fisted there.

More, she thought. She wanted more of this edge, this recklessness, even the reluctant need.

When he would have drawn away, she went with him, sliding up against the hard lines of him even as he broke the kiss.

She scraped her bottom lip with her teeth, slowly. Deliberately. And watched his gaze lower to follow the movement. "What was that for?"

"I felt like it."

"Good enough. Do it again."

He hadn't meant to do it the first time. But now his appetite for her was stirred, and not quite sated. "Why the hell not?"

Her lips curved as he took them. Not quite as desperate now, not quite as rough. He could imagine, too well, what it would be like to slide into her. Into all that soft heat. But he wasn't sure how a man could get free again, or walk away whole.

Even as he thought it, he was flipping open the buttons of her shirt. Even as he thought it, she was pulling him to the floor.

"Hurry." Breathless, she arched when his hands closed over her.

Fast. He could imagine it fast, and hard and furious. A mindless coupling, all heat and no light. It was what she wanted. What they both

wanted. He dragged her up, clamped his mouth over hers again. His belly tightened, desire and anticipation, as she tugged at his belt.

The office door swung open. “Ty, I need to—” Eli stopped in mid-stride as he stared at his grandson, at the girl he thought of as his granddaughter, tangled together on the floor. Color flooded his cheeks as he stumbled back.

“Excuse me.”

When the door slammed, Tyler was already rocking back on his heels. Mind swimming, body churning, he rubbed his hands over his face. “Oh perfect. Just perfect.”

“Oops.”

At Sophia’s response, Tyler spread his fingers and stared at her through them. “Oops?”

“My brain’s a little impaired. It’s the best I can do. Oh, God.” She sat up, pulled her shirt together. “Not your typical family moment.” Giving up, she dropped her head to her knees. “Jesus. How do we handle this?”

“I don’t know. I guess I have to talk to him.”

She lifted her head slightly. “I could do it.”

“You fire unsatisfactory staff members; I talk to shocked grandfathers.”

“Fair enough.” She lowered her knees, stared down as she buttoned her shirt again. “Ty, I’m really sorry. I’d never do anything to upset Eli, or to cause trouble between the two of you.”

“I know.” He pushed to his feet and after a brief hesitation held out his hand to help her up.

“I want to make love with you.”

His already jangled system suffered. “I think what we both want’s pretty clear. I just don’t know what we’re going to do about it. I have to go after him.”

“Yes.”

When he hurried out, she walked to the windows, crossed her arms. And very much wished she had something equally vital and specific to do. All that was left for her was to think.

Tyler found his grandfather walking toward the vineyards, Sally faithfully at his heels. He didn’t speak, hadn’t worked out what he would say once he did. He merely fell into step beside Eli and began to walk through the rows.

“Going to have to keep a frost watch,” Eli commented. “Warm snap’s teased the vines.”

“Yeah, I’m on it. Ah . . . it’s nearly disking time.”

“Hope the rain doesn’t slow that down.” Like his grandson, Eli studied the canes and racked his brain for the right words. “. . . should’ve knocked.”

“No, I shouldn’t have . . .” Stalling, Ty leaned down, ruffled Sally’s fur. “It just happened.”

“Well.” Eli cleared his throat. He didn’t have to talk to Tyler about the ways and means of sex. Thank Christ. He’d done that deed years before. His grandson was a grown man, who knew about the birds and bees, and about responsibility. But . . .

“Holy hell, Ty. You and Sophie.”

“It just happened,” he said again. “I guess it shouldn’t have, and I guess I should tell you it won’t happen again.”

“Not my business. It’s just the two of you—hell, Ty, you were almost raised together. I know you’ve got no blood tie, and there’s nothing stopping either of you from such a thing. Just a shock, is all.”

“All around,” Tyler agreed.

Eli walked a little farther. “Do you love her?”

Inside his gut, Tyler felt the slippery knots of guilt tighten. “Grandpa, it’s not always about love.”

Now Eli stopped, turned and faced Tyler. “My equipment may be older than yours, boy, but it works the same way. I know it’s not always about love. I was just asking.”

“We’ve got this heat going on, that’s all. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not go into that end of things.”

“Oh, it’s all the same to me. You’re both adults and you got two working brains between you. Both of you were raised right, so what you do is your own business. Next time, though, lock the damn door first.”

It was nearly six when Tyler got home. He was worn out, worked up and irritated with himself. He thought a cold beer and a hot shower might help smooth him back out. Reaching for the refrigerator handle, he saw the note he’d stuck there the night before as a reminder.

Dinner at M's—7.

“Shit.” He lowered his forehead to the appliance. He could just make it, he supposed, if he busted his ass. But he just didn’t have it in him. He wasn’t in any mood to discuss business, even if it included a decent meal and good company.

He’d never make good company himself that night.

He reached for the phone, only to find he’d misplaced it again. Swearing, he yanked open the fridge, intending to pop the top on the beer before starting to search. And there was the phone, tucked between a bottle of Corona and a carton of milk.

He’d make it up to Margaret, he thought, as he looked up her phone number. Take her out to dinner, or lunch. Whatever, before she left the city.

She didn’t hear the phone ring. Her head was under the shower and she was singing. She’d looked forward to the evening all day, shuffling meetings, writing reports, making calls. And finally stopping on the way home for a man-sized steak and a couple of enormous Idaho potatoes. She’d bought an apple pie at the bakery and fully intended to pass it off as her own.

A man didn’t have to know everything.

It was, she knew, just the sort of meal Ty would appreciate.

She’d already set the table, arranged candles, chosen music, had the outfit she’d selected lying on her bed. And the bed itself was plumped with pillows and made with fresh sheets.

They’d had two or three dates before. Not that she fooled herself into believing Ty had thought of them as dates. But she hoped to change that after tonight.

She stepped out of the shower and began to prepare herself.

It was always exciting to groom yourself for a man. Part of the anticipation. Margaret’s feminist beliefs didn’t deny her the pleasure of that sort of ritual, but helped her celebrate the female rite of it.

She creamed, scented, slid into silk and imagined seducing Tyler MacMillan over apple pie.

She’d always had a yen for him, she supposed as she checked the apartment to see that everything was in place. The promotion, the travel, the ex-

citement of her new responsibilities had, in a very real way, she decided, given her the confidence to make him fully aware of that yen.

She took out the wine she'd earmarked for the evening. And noticed the message light blinking on her kitchen machine.

"Margaret. It's Ty. Listen, I'm going to have to take a rain check on dinner. I should have called sooner but . . . something came up at the office. Sorry. I'll call you tomorrow. If you don't have plans, I'll take you out and we can go over business. Really sorry I didn't get back to you sooner."

She stared at the machine, imagined herself ripping it out of the wall and heaving it. Of course that wouldn't change anything, and she was too practical a woman to indulge in useless tantrums.

Too practical, she thought, struggling against tears of disappointment, to let food and wine go to waste because some idiot, inconsiderate *man* stood her up.

The hell with him. There were plenty more where he came from. Plenty, she reminded herself as she yanked her broiler open and prepared to cook the steak. She'd had a number of interesting offers in Italy. When she got back, she might just take one of them and see where it led.

But for now, she was opening the goddamn wine and getting good and drunk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pilar approached the guest house by the back door. It was a friendly habit. She felt she had become friends with Theo. He was an interesting, and interested, young man once you chipped through the surface. A boy, she thought, who needed the softening influence of a mother.

She was touched that he seemed to enjoy rather than resent her company when he came by the villa to use the pool. She'd managed to lure him up to the music room and have him play—or at least play around with—the piano. It had been an easy step from there to open up a dialogue, and a debate, over music.

She hoped he was as entertained by them as she was.

Maddy was a different matter. The girl was polite but consistently cool. And watched, Pilar thought, everything and everyone. It wasn't resentment so much as a measuring. A measuring, Pilar knew, that was directly connected to her relationship with Maddy's father.

That aspect appeared to have gone straight over Theo's head. But Pilar recognized the female-to-female judgment in Maddy's eyes. So far, she hadn't come up to snuff.

Pilar wondered if David was as unaware as his son that Maddy was guarding her territory.

She hitched her shoulder bag as she started up the back walk. The contents weren't bribes, she assured herself. Just tokens. And she wouldn't stay any longer than was comfortable for all of them. Though part of her hoped they'd want her to stay awhile. Fix them lunch, listen to their chatter.

She so missed having someone to mother.

If fate had dealt her another hand, she'd have had a houseful of children, a big messy dog, ripped seams to sew, spats to referee.

Instead she'd produced one bright and beautiful daughter who'd needed so little tending. And at forty-eight was reduced to nurturing flowers instead of the children she'd longed for.

And self-pity, Pilar reminded herself, was unattractive. She knocked briskly on the kitchen door and had her smile ready.

It wobbled a bit when David answered. He wore a work shirt and jeans, and held a cup of coffee. "Now this is handy." He took her hand to draw her inside. "I was just thinking about you."

"I didn't expect you to be home."

"Working out of here today." Because he wanted to, and because he knew it would fluster her, he kept her hand firm in his as he leaned down to kiss her.

"Oh, well. When I didn't see the van—"

"Theo and Maddy ganged up on me. Professional day, no school. Every parent's nightmare. We solved it by letting them nag me into giving Theo the keys and driving off to the mall and the movies for the day. Which is why your visit's perfectly timed."

"Really?" She tugged her hand free, fiddled with the strap of her bag. "It is?"

"Keeps me from sitting here imagining all the trouble they could get into. Want some coffee?"

"No, I really should . . . I just stopped by to drop off a couple of things for the kids." It flustered her to be in the house alone with him. In all the time he'd been there, she'd managed to avoid that single event. "Maddy's so interested in the whole winemaking process, I thought she'd like to read about the history of Giambelli, California."

Pilar tugged the book she'd picked up at the winery gift shop out of the bag.

"Right up her alley. She'll appreciate it and pound Ty and me with brand-new questions."

"She has an active mind."

"Tell me about it."

"I brought this sheet music along for Theo. He's so into the techno-rock business, but I thought he might get a kick out of trying some of the classics."

“Sergeant Pepper.” David studied the sheet. “Where’d you dig this up?”

“I used to play it and drive my mother crazy. It was my job.”

“Did you wear love beads and bell-bottoms?” he teased.

“Naturally. I made a terrific pair out of paisley when I was Maddy’s age.”

“Made? So many hidden talents.” He maneuvered her—it was simply a matter of shifting closer—until her back was to the kitchen counter. “You didn’t bring me a present.”

“I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“And now that I am?” He edged closer, laying his palms on the counter on either side of her. “Got anything in your bag for me?”

“Sorry.” She tried to laugh, to keep it light, but it was hard when she was strangling. “Next time. I really should get back to the winery. I’m helping with a tour this afternoon.”

“What time?”

“Four-thirty.”

“Mmm.” He glanced at the kitchen clock. “An hour and a half. I wonder what we could do with ninety minutes?”

“I could fix you lunch.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” And with his hands at her waist, he circled her slowly toward the inside door.

“David.”

“Nobody home but you and me,” he said, nibbling at her jaw, her throat, her mouth as he guided her out of the kitchen. “You know what I was thinking the other day?”

“No.” How could she? She didn’t know what she was thinking right now.

“That it’s a complex business. My girlfriend lives with her mother.”

She did laugh now, at the idea of being called anyone’s girlfriend.

“And I live with my kids. No place to go to do all the things I’ve imagined doing with you. Do you know the things I’ve imagined doing with you?”

“I’m getting the picture. David, it’s the middle of the day.”

“The middle of the day.” He paused at the base of the steps. “And an opportunity. I hate wasted opportunities, don’t you?”

She was walking up the steps with him, which seemed a miraculous feat to her, since her knees were knocking and her heart laboring as if she’d already scaled a mountain. “I wasn’t expecting . . .” Her words kept becoming muffled against his mouth. “I’m not prepared.”

“Sweetheart, I’ll take care of that.”

Take care of it? How could he arrange for her to be wearing sexy underwear, or turn the merciless daylight into the soft, flattering shadows of night? How could he . . .

Then it struck her that he meant protection and made her feel giddy and foolish.

“No, I didn’t mean . . . David, I’m not young.”

“Neither am I.” He eased back slightly at his bedroom door. Sweeping her inside wasn’t the right way. She needed words, and maybe, he realized, so did he. “Pilar, I have a lot of complicated feelings for you. One that isn’t complicated, for me, is that it’s you I want. All there is of you.”

Nerves were swimming now, in a stream of heat. “David, you need to know. Tony was my first. And he was my last. It’s been a very long time. And I’m . . . God. I’m so out of practice.”

“Knowing there hasn’t been anyone else flatters me, Pilar.” He brushed his lips over hers. “It humbles me.” And again. “It excites me.” His mouth came back to hers a third time in a kiss that trembled on the edge between seduction and demand.

“Come to my bed.” He guided her toward it, fascinated by the way their hearts hammered together. “Let me touch you. Touch me.”

“I can’t get my breath.” She struggled to gulp in air as he slipped her jacket off. “I know I’m tense, I’m sorry. I can’t seem to relax.”

“I don’t want you relaxed.” He kept his eyes on hers as he unbuttoned her blouse, while his fingers whispered along exposed flesh. “Not this time. Put your hands on my shoulders, Pilar. Step out of your shoes.”

She was trembling, and so was he. Like the first time, he thought. For her. For him. And just as terrifying and tremendous.

The late winter sun was a white wash of light through the windows. In the silence of the house he could hear every catch of her breath. When he skimmed his fingers lightly over her, she was all soft skin and quivers.

“Smooth. Warm. Beautiful.”

He was making her believe his words. And if her fingers shook as she unbuttoned his shirt, he didn’t seem to mind. If she jerked stupidly when his knuckles brushed her midriff, when he unhooked her trousers, he didn’t sneer impatiently.

And best of all, he didn’t stop.

His hands stroked her, slow and firm. It made her want to weep to be

touched again. To feel again that gathering of heat in the belly, the long, liquid pulls that followed it. It seemed natural to lie back on the bed, to have his body, the hard weight of it, press down on hers.

It seemed natural, and glorious, to finally give herself again.

She forgot about the sunlight, and all the flaws it would reveal. And she reveled in the sensation of taking a mate.

He didn't want to rush. But her hesitation had become eagerness. She moved under him, hips arching, hands touching with quick little bites and scrapes of her nails that aroused him beyond belief.

He forgot about patience, and all the doubts he wanted to assuage. And feasted.

Their fingers linked as they rolled over the bed, then broke apart to find new secrets to explore. His mouth closed over her breast, thrilling both of them. As the wave of pleasure swamped her, she crooned out his name, then moaned when his teeth tugged at her.

The whip of power slashed through her, locked her on that glorious edge between excitement and release where the blood rages and the body yearns. She shuddered there, helplessly, and let the glory of every ache, every burn batter her.

When his hand stroked down to find her, she was already hot, already wet.

She exploded under him, too stunned to be embarrassed by the quick-trigger response, too shocked to resist the wild plunging of her own body. Her world went bright, blindingly, and she surrendered herself to the sudden urgency of his hands and mouth.

Mine. The soft, damp skin that smelled of spring, the subtle curves, the eager and open response. He wanted to take all that was his now. To give all that he had. She moved with him, as if they'd come together, just this way, a thousand times. Reached for him as if her arms had always held him warm and close.

There was more, so much more he wanted to show her, to take from her in this first exploration. But the need pumped madly through both of them and pounded at control.

She watched him as he ranged himself over her again.

Once more, her arms lifted, opened. And holding, she took him in.

Arched to him, in welcome, closed around him in acceptance.

They moved together in the sunlight, a pace that quickened, a need that pulsed, then plunged.

She cried out, muffling the sound against the side of his throat. Tasted him there as her heart took the final leap.

The sun was shining in San Francisco, too, but it only added dimension to Sophia's headache. She faced Kris across her desk. The worst of it was, in Sophia's opinion, the woman hadn't seen the termination coming. How she could have missed it, with all the warnings and directives, only added fuel to the fire that had brought them to this point.

"You don't want to be here, Kris. You've made that clear."

"I've done better work in this office than anyone else in the company. You know it, I know it. And you don't like it."

"On the contrary, I've always respected your work."

"That's bullshit."

Sophia took a steadying breath, ordered herself to remain calm, to stay professional. "You have a great deal of talent, which I admire. What I don't admire, and what can no longer be tolerated or overlooked, is your deliberate rejection of company policy and your attitude toward authority."

"You mean my attitude toward you."

"Here's a bulletin for you. I am authority."

"Because your name's Giambelli."

"Whether or not that's the case isn't the issue, or any of your concern."

"If Tony was still alive, you wouldn't be sitting behind that desk. I would."

Sophia swallowed the bitterness that rose in her throat. "Is that how he got you into bed?" she said with a twist of amusement in her tone. "Promising you my job? That was clever of him, foolish of you. My father didn't run this company and had no weight here."

"You saw to that. All three Giambelli women."

"No, he saw to it. But that's beside the point. The fact is I'm head of this department, and you no longer work for me. You'll be given the standard termination package, including the full two weeks' salary. I want your office cleared of your personal property by the end of business today."

They both got to their feet. Sophia had the impression that without the desk between them, Kris would have taken more than a verbal shot. It only showed how far their relationship had deteriorated that Sophia was sorry they couldn't go a couple of rounds.

“That’s fine. I have other offers. Everyone in the business knows who’s the real power here, the creative power.”

“I hope you get just what you deserve at La Coeur,” Sophia replied and watched Kris’s jaw drop in surprise. “There are no secrets. But I’ll warn you to remember the confidentiality clause you signed when you joined this firm. If you pass information about Giambelli to a competitor, you open yourself up for a lawsuit.”

“I don’t need to pass anything on. Your upcoming campaign’s ill-conceived and trite. It’s an embarrassment.”

“Isn’t it lucky, then, that you won’t have to be associated with it anymore?” Sophia came around the desk now, passing close to Kris, almost hoping she’d strike out. When Sophia reached the door, she opened it. “I think we’ve said all we have to say to each other.”

“This department’s going to sink because when I go, others will go with me. Let’s see how far you and the farmer go on your own.” Kris sauntered toward the door, paused for one smirk. “Tony and I had a good laugh over the two of you.”

“I’m shocked you took the time for humor or conversation.”

“He respected me,” Kris shot back. “He knew who really ran this department. We had some interesting conversations about you. Bitch number three.”

Sophia’s hand clamped down on Kris’s arm. “So it was you. Petty vandalism, anonymous letters. You’re lucky I don’t have you arrested as well as fired.”

“Call a cop . . . then try to prove it. That’ll give me one last laugh.” She yanked her arm free, strolled away.

Leaving her door open, Sophia went straight back to her desk and called security. She wanted Kris escorted from the building. Now that the first slap of temper had passed, she wasn’t surprised that it had been Kris who’d defaced the heirlooms and sent the photograph.

But it disgusted.

Nothing she could do about it. Just as she couldn’t do anything about files Kris might have already copied and taken out, but she could make certain there wasn’t a last-minute foray.

Far from satisfied, she sent for both P.J. and Trace.

While she waited, she paced. While she paced, Tyler walked in.

“I saw Kris steam down the hall,” he commented, and dropped com-

fortably into a chair. “She called me a brain-dead, pussy-whipped farmer. I assume you’re the pussy with the whip.”

“Shows what she knows. Your brain’s alive and well, and so far you’ve been pretty damn resistant to the whip. God! I’m so pissed.”

“I figured it didn’t go so well when I saw the tongues of fire shooting out of her ears.”

“I kept hoping she’d take a punch at me so I could flatten her. I’d feel a lot better right now if she had. She called me bitch number three. I’d like to show her what a genuine Italian bitch can do when pushed. Smearing nail polish on our angels, sending me anonymous mail.”

“Whoa, back up. What mail?”

“Nothing.” She waved a hand in the air, kept pacing.

He snagged her hand, tugged it down. “What mail?”

“Just a photo from a few months back—my mother, grandmother and me. She used a red pen this time, but the sentiment was the same as on the Giambelli angels.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because the envelope was addressed to me, because it pissed me off and because I wasn’t giving the person who sent it the satisfaction of discussing it.”

“You get another, I want to know about it. Clear?”

“Fine, great, you’re first in line.” Too angry to stay put, she pulled away. “She said my father was going to help her land my job. I imagine he promised her that, had no qualms about promising her what was mine any more than he had qualms about taking my mother’s jewelry for Rene.”

And it stung, he thought, watching her face. Even now Avano managed to prick through the shell of defense and nick her heart. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re thinking they deserved each other. So am I. Gotta calm down, gotta calm down,” she repeated like a mantra. “It’s over and done, and stewing over it won’t help. We have to go forward. I have to talk to P.J. and Trace to start, and I have to be calm. I have to be composed.”

“You want me to take off?”

“No. This would be better as a team.” She dragged her top drawer open, rooted out her aspirin. “I should have fired her weeks ago. You were right about that. I was wrong.”

“I need to write this down. Can I borrow a pencil?”

“Shut up.” Grateful that his easy calm steadied her, she heaved a breath,

then twisted open a bottle of water. "Tell me straight out, Ty, what you think of the centennial campaign."

"How many times do I have to tell you, this isn't my area."

"As a consumer, damn it." She tossed three extra-strength Tylenol back and took a long pull from the water bottle. "You have a goddamn opinion on everything else in the world, don't you?"

"That's calm and composed," he commented. "I think it's smart. What else do you want?"

"That's enough." Drained, she sat on the corner of her desk. "She got to me. I hate knowing that." She glanced at her watch. "I need to get this dealt with, then we have a meeting with Margaret."

The little tug of guilt had him shifting in his chair. "I was supposed to meet with her myself last night; had to postpone. I haven't been able to get in touch with her today."

"She should be up on six."

"Oh well." Hell. "Mind if I use your phone?"

Sophia gestured and stepped out to ask her assistant to get some coffee.

"She's not there," Ty said when Sophia came back in. "Missed two morning meetings."

"That's not like Margaret. Let's try her at home again," she began, then switched gears as P.J. and Trace came to her door.

"Come on in. Sit." She gestured, then quietly closed the door. "I need you to know," she said as she crossed back to her desk, "that I've had to let Kris go."

P.J. and Trace exchanged quick, sidelong looks.

"Which I see comes as no surprise to either of you." When there was no response, Sophia decided to lay her cards on the table. "I'm going to say I hope both of you know how much I value you, hope you know how important you are to this department and to the company and to me personally. I understand there may be some continued dissatisfaction over the changes made late last year, and if either of you has specific problems or comments, I'm open to discussion."

"How about a question?" Trace said.

"Questions, then."

"Who's taking over for Kris?"

"No one."

"You don't intend to bring in someone to fill her position?"

"I'd prefer if the two of you share her work, her title and her authority."

"Dibs on her office," P.J. announced.

"Damn it." Trace hissed out a breath.

"Okay, let's backtrack." Sophia moved to the door, opening it at her assistant's knock so the coffee could be passed around. "Not only not surprised by the recent turn of events, but unless I miss my mark, not particularly upset or disappointed."

"It's rude to speak of the recently terminated." P.J. studied her coffee, then gazed at Sophia. "But . . . you're not in the office every day. Never have been because that's not how you work. You do a lot of the travel, the outside meetings. And since December, you work at home at least three days a week. We're here."

"And?"

"What Peej is trying to say without risking a trip to hell for bitchiness is that Kris is hard to work with. Harder to work for," Trace added. "Which is how she saw things when you weren't around. She figured she was in charge and we, along with everybody else in the department, were her minions. I was getting pretty sick of being a minion. I've been looking around for another job."

"You could have talked to me. Damn it, Trace."

"I was going to. Before I made any decision. Now, well, problem solved. Except I think P.J. and I should flip for Kris's office."

"I called dibs. Snooze, lose. Sophia, she's been trying to work people up around here. Kind of a corporate mutiny or whatever. She might have gotten some supporters. You may lose some good people when she goes."

"All right. I'll set up a full staff meeting this afternoon. Do damage control. I'm sorry I haven't been on top of this. When it all shakes down, I'd like recommendations. People you think should be considered for promotion or reassignment. As of now, you're co-managers. I'll put through the paperwork."

"Cool." P.J. leaped up. "I'm going to go draw up how I'll rearrange my new office." She turned to Ty. "I'd just like to say that being the strong, silent type doesn't make you pussy-whipped. It makes you interesting. Kris was really steamed that you didn't try to muscle your way in and end up falling on your ass. Instead you don't say anything unless you've got something to say. And when you do, it makes sense."

"Suck up," Trace said under his breath.

"I don't have to suck up, I've got the big office." With a flutter of her lashes, she walked out.

"I like working here. I like working with you. I'd've been bummed if things had worked out differently." With that said he walked out whistling.

"Feel better?" Tyler asked.

"Considerably. A little angry with myself for letting things go this far and this long, but otherwise considerably better."

"Good. Why don't you go set up that staff meeting deal, and I'll try to track down Margaret. You up for a dinner meeting thing if she wants to?"

"Sure, but that's not going to make her happy. She has the hots for you."

"Get out."

"Buy a clue," Sophia said lightly, and stepped out again to arrange for the meeting with her assistant.

Women, Tyler thought as he hunted up Margaret's home number in Sophia's Rolodex. And they said men always had sex on the brain. Just because he and Margaret got along, had gone out once or twice, didn't mean—

He shifted his thoughts when a man answered on the third ring. "I'm trying to reach Margaret Bowers."

"Who's calling?"

"Tyler MacMillan."

"Mr. MacMillan." There was the briefest pause. "This is Detective Claremont."

"Claremont? Sorry, I must've dialed the wrong number."

"No, you didn't. I'm in Ms. Bowers's apartment. She's dead."



PART THREE

The Blooming

Flowers are lovely; love is flower-like;
Friendship is a sheltering tree.

— SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

March roared across the valley on a raw and galloping wind. It hardened the ground and rattled the naked fingers of the vines. The dawn mists had a bite that chewed through the bones. There would be worries about damage and loss until the true warmth of spring arrived.

There would be worries about many things.

Sophia stopped at the vineyards first, and was disappointed that Tyler wasn't stalking down the rows examining the canes for early growth. She knew the disking phase was about to begin, weather permitting. Men with disk harrows would pulverize and aerate the soil, breaking up the crusted earth, turning the mustard plants and their nitrogen into the ground.

For the vintner, the quiet of February blew into the busy and critical month of March.

Winter, a fickle white witch, held the valley. And gave those who lived there too much time to think.

He'd be brooding, of course. Sitting up in his office, she imagined as she changed directions for the house. Going over his charts and logs and records. Making some notes in his vintner's journal. But brooding all the same.

Time to put a stop to it.

She started to knock on the door. No, she decided, when you knocked it was too easy to be told to go away. Instead she opened the door, pulling off her jacket as she stepped inside.

"Ty?" She tossed the jacket over the newel post and, following instinct, headed for his office.

"I've got work to do here." He didn't bother to look up.

Until moments before he'd been at the window. He'd seen her walking through the rows, changing her angle to aim for the house. He'd even thought about going down and locking the door. But it had seemed both petty and useless.

He'd known her too long to believe a lock would keep her out.

She sat across from his desk, leaned back and waited until the silence irked him enough to speak. "What?"

"You look like hell."

"Thanks."

"No word from the police yet?"

"You're just as likely to hear as I am."

True enough, she mused. And the wait was making her edgy. It had been nearly a week since Margaret's body had been found. On the floor by a table set for two, with an untouched steak on the platter, candles guttered out and an empty bottle of Merlot.

It was that, she knew, that continued to prey on Tyler's mind. The other place had been set for him.

"I spoke with her parents today. They're going to take her back to Columbus for the funeral. It's hard for them. For you."

"If I hadn't canceled—"

"You don't know if it would have made any difference or not." She got up to go to him. Standing behind him, she began to rub his shoulders. "If she had a heart condition no one knew about, she could have become ill anytime."

"If I'd been there—"

"If. Maybe." Feeling for him, she brushed a kiss on the top of his head. "Take it from me, those two words will make you crazy."

"She was too young for a goddamn heart attack. And don't give me the line of statistics. The cops are looking into it, and not passing on information. That means something."

"All it means right now is that it was an unattended death, and that she was connected, through Giambelli, to my father. It's just routine, Ty. Until we know differently, it's just routine."

"You said she had feelings for me."

If she could go back, Sophia decided, she'd bite off her tongue before uttering that single, careless remark. "I was just razzing you."

"No, you weren't." Giving up, he closed his vintner's log. "You know what they say about hindsight. I didn't see it. She didn't interest me that way, so I didn't want to see it."

"That's not your fault, and picking at that isn't helping anything. I'm sorry this happened. I liked her." Without thinking, she hooked her arms around his shoulders, rested her cheek on his head.

"So did I."

"Come downstairs. I'll fix soup."

"Why?"

"Because it'll give us both something to do besides think. And wait." She swiveled his chair around until he faced her. "Besides, I have gossip, and no one to share it with."

"I don't like gossip."

"Too bad." She pulled at his hand, pleased when he let her tug him to his feet. "My mother slept with David."

"Ah, damn it, Sophie. Why do you tell me things like that?"

She smiled a little, hooking her arm through his. "Because you can't spread gossip like that outside of the family, and I don't think it's an appropriate subject for *Nonna* and I to discuss over breakfast."

"But it's appropriate to discuss with me over soup." He just couldn't understand the female mind. "How do you know, anyway?"

"Really, Ty," she exclaimed as they started downstairs. "In the first place, I know Mama, and one look at her was enough. In the second, I saw the two of them together yesterday, and it showed."

He didn't ask how it showed. She was too likely to tell him, and he wouldn't understand anyway. "How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know. Part of me is delighted. Good for you, Mama! Another is standing back with her jaw on the ground thinking my mother isn't supposed to have sex. That's the immature part. I'm working on it."

He stopped at the base of the steps, turned her. "You're a good daughter." With a casual tap of his finger, he tipped up her chin. "And not a half-bad person, as people go."

"Oh, I can be bad. If he hurts her, David's going to find out just how bad I can be."

"I'll hold him down, you skin him."

"That's a deal." Her eyes changed as he continued to look into them.

And her blood began to move. “Ty.” She lifted a hand to his face as he leaned toward her.

And the knock on the door had her cursing. “For God’s sake! What is wrong with our timing? I want you to remember where we were. I really want you to remember it.”

“I think I’ve got it bookmarked.” No less irritated by the interruption than she, he stalked to the door, yanked it open. And felt a clench in his gut.

“Mr. MacMillan.” Claremont stood beside Maguire in the chilly air. “Can we come in?”

They moved into the living room where the atmosphere was masculine and messy. He hadn’t thought to light a fire that morning, so the hearth was cold. A newspaper, several days old, was still piled on the coffee table. A paperback book peeked up from under it. Maguire couldn’t quite make out the title.

He didn’t bother to pick up, as a lot of people did, she noted. And he didn’t look as if he particularly wanted to sit down. But when he dropped into a chair, Sophia edged onto the arm of it beside him. And made them a unit.

Claremont took out his notepad and set the rhythm. “You said you and Margaret Bowers dated.”

“No, I didn’t. I said we went out a couple of times.”

“That’s generally interpreted as dating.”

“I didn’t interpret it that way. I interpreted it as we went out a couple of times.”

“You were supposed to have dinner with her on the night she died.”

“Yeah.” There’d be no expression and no condemnation in Claremont’s voice. But it still stung. “As I told you before, I got hung up here, called her somewhere around six. I got her machine and left a message that I couldn’t make it.”

“Didn’t give her much notice,” Maguire put in.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Just what hung you up?”

“Work.”

“At the villa?”

“That’s what I said the last time you asked. It still goes. Basically, I lost track of time and forgot about dinner until I got home.”

“You called her at six, so you still had an hour. You could’ve made it.” Maguire tilted her head. “Or called and told her you’d be a bit late.”

"I could've. I didn't. I didn't feel like driving into the city. Is that a problem?"

"Ms. Bowers died with the table still set for two. That's a problem."

"Detective Claremont?" Sophia interrupted, her tone pleasant. "Ty isn't being specific because, I imagine, he feels it might embarrass me. We had a moment in the office in the villa that evening."

"Sophia."

"Ty," she said equably, "I believe the detectives will understand that you might not have been in the mood to drive down to San Francisco and have dinner with one woman when you'd very shortly before been rolling around on the office floor with another. We had a moment," she continued. "Unplanned and impromptu and very likely inappropriate, and were interrupted when Tyler's grandfather stepped into the room."

To emphasize her point, she ran her fingers through Ty's hair. "Mr. MacMillan senior can verify that if you feel it necessary to ask him if we were indeed groping each other during working hours. Under those circumstances, I think it's understandable that Ty might have been a bit frazzled and not in the mood to drive to the city for a business dinner with Margaret. But the main point is, unless I'm just stupid, that he didn't go in the first place and so is unconnected to what happened to her."

Claremont listened patiently, nodded, then looked back at Tyler. It was, he supposed, a step to have his impression of the two of them verified. And another to note that MacMillan looked uncomfortable, and the Giambelli woman amused.

"Have you ever had dinner in Ms. Bowers's apartment before?"

"No. I've been there. Picked her up once for a business deal at the Four Seasons. We went together. That was about a year ago."

"Why don't you just ask if he's ever slept with her?" Sophia suggested. "Ty, did you and Margaret ever—"

"No." Torn between irritation and embarrassment, he shot her a fulminating look. "Jesus, Sophie."

Before he could gather his composure, she patted his shoulder and took over. "She was attracted to him, and he was oblivious. Men often are, and Ty's a bit more dense about that sort of thing than most. I've been trying to get him in bed for—"

"Will you stop it?" He had to struggle not to simply lower his head into his hands. "Listen, I'm sorry about what happened to Margaret. She was a

nice woman. I liked her. And maybe if I hadn't canceled I could've called nine-one-one when she had the heart attack. But I don't see what these questions have to do with anything."

"Did you ever give Ms. Bowers a bottle of wine?"

Tyler dragged his hand through his hair. "I don't know. Probably. I give a lot of people, and business associates, bottles of wine. Kind of goes with the territory."

"Wine carrying the Giambelli label, the Italian label?"

"No, I use my own. Why?"

"Ms. Bowers consumed nearly an entire bottle of Castello di Giambelli Merlot on the evening you were to dine with her. The bottle contained digitalis."

"I don't get it." Even as Tyler reared up in his seat, Sophia was clamping a hand on his shoulder.

"She was murdered?" Sophia demanded. "Poisoned? Margaret was . . . If you'd been there. If you'd had the wine . . ."

"It's possible that if more than one person had shared the bottle, the dosage wouldn't have been lethal," Claremont stated. "But Ms. Bowers consumed nearly the entire bottle, in what was certainly one sitting. Do you have any idea how digitalis found its way into a bottle of Italian Merlot, and into Ms. Bowers's apartment?"

"I have to call my grandmother." Sophia sprang to her feet. "If there's been product tampering, we have to deal with it quickly. I need all the information on that bottle. The vintage. I have to have a copy of the label to run it down."

"Your grandmother's been informed," Maguire told her. "As have the proper Italian authorities. Product tampering is a possibility, but at this point we have no idea when Ms. Bowers obtained the bottle, or if it was given to her. We can't confirm she didn't add the dose to the wine herself."

"Kill herself? That's ridiculous." Ty got to his feet. "She wasn't suicidal. She was doing great when I talked to her, happy with her job, excited about the new responsibilities, the travel."

"Do you have any enemies, Mr. MacMillan? Someone who might have known your plans with Ms. Bowers that evening?"

"No. And I'm not a target. In the first place, if the wine was tampered with, I'd have known it. I'd have nosed it or tasted it. It's what I do."

"Exactly," Maguire concurred.

Sophia felt her hackles rise. “Ty, you’ve answered enough questions. We’re going to call a lawyer.”

“I don’t need a goddamn lawyer.”

“We’re calling Uncle James. Now.”

“That’s your right.” Claremont got to his feet. “A question for you, Ms. Giambelli. Do you know anything about the relationship between Ms. Bowers and your father?”

Her blood iced over. “As far as I know, they didn’t have one outside of business.”

“I see. Well, thank you for your time.”

“My father and Margaret.”

“It’s just as likely he was pulling your chain.”

But Sophia worried on the nugget—chewing it, measuring its texture. “If there was something between them, and their deaths are connected—”

“Don’t rush it, Sophie.” He put a hand over hers briefly, then downshifted to turn into the villa. He knew how shaken she was. She hadn’t voiced the slightest objection when he’d gotten behind the wheel of her car to drive them.

“If there’s been tampering. If there’s a chance, the slightest chance there are other bottles—”

“Don’t rush it,” he said again. He stopped the car, shifted to her. He took her hand now, held it. “We’ll have to check it out. Every step, every detail. We can’t panic. Because if there has been tampering, Sophie, that’s just what whoever did it wants. Panic, chaos, scandal.”

“I know. The scandal’s my job. I can handle it. I’ll think of something to turn the publicity. But . . . my father and Margaret, Ty. If there was something there—” She tightened her grip on his hand when he started to shake his head. “I *have* to think of it. If there was, did he know about the tampering? How many times a year did he travel to Italy? Eight, ten, twelve?”

“Don’t go there, Sophia.”

“Why? You have. You think I can’t see it? You have, others will. So I have to get there first. I don’t want to believe this of him. I have to accept all the rest, but I don’t want to believe this.”

“You’re making too big a leap, too fast. Slow down. Facts, Soph. Let’s start with facts.”

“The facts are two people are dead.” Because her hand wanted to tremble, she drew it from his and pushed out of the car. “Margaret took over most of my father’s accounts and responsibilities. Whether or not there was a personal relationship between them, that’s a connection.”

“Okay.” He wanted to offer her something, but it seemed all she wanted was cold logic. “We’ll look at that connection and see where it takes us. First we deal with the wine,” he said as they started up the stairs. “Then with the fallout.”

The family was in the front parlor, with David standing by the window talking on the phone. Tereza sat, soldier-straight, sipping coffee. She nodded when Ty and Sophia came in, and merely gestured to chairs.

“James is on his way.” Eli paced back and forth in front of the fire. The strain seemed to have weight, and caused his face to sag. “David’s talking to Italy now, getting damage control started.”

“Let me get you some coffee,” Pilar began.

“Mama. Sit.”

“I need to do something.”

“Mama.” Sophia rose and walked to the coffee cart to stand beside Pilar. “Dad and Margaret?”

“I don’t know.” Her hands were steady on the pot, even as her insides shivered. “I just don’t. I would’ve thought— It was my impression Rene kept him on a short leash.”

“Not short enough.” Sophia kept her voice quiet. “He was involved with a woman at my office.”

“Oh.” It was a kind of sigh. “I wish I could tell you, Sophie. But I just don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Understand this.” Sophia turned at her grandmother’s voice. Waited. “If there was something between Tony Avano and Margaret Bowers, the police will speculate that any of us, any of us who are connected to them, might have had a part in their deaths. We’re family here. We’ll stand by each other, and for each other until this is done.”

She glanced toward David when he lowered the phone. “So?”

“We’re tracking it,” he began. “We’ll recall all bottles of Merlot of that vintage. We should, very shortly, be able to determine which cask the bottle was drawn from. I’ll leave in the morning.”

“No. Eli and I will leave in the morning.” Tereza lifted a hand, closed her fingers around Eli’s when he gripped it. “This is for me. I leave it to you to

see that the California operation is secure. That there's no breach. You and Tyler must make certain of it."

"Paulie and I can start with the wineries," Tyler suggested. "David can look at the bottling."

David nodded. "We'll go over the personnel files, one by one. You know the crews better than I do. It's most likely the problem's contained in Italy, but we'll make certain California's secure."

Sophia already had her memo pad in her lap. "I'll have press releases, both English and Italian, ready in an hour. I'll need all the details on the recall. We'll want a story on how exacting the winemaking process is for Giambelli-MacMillan. How safe, how secure. We'll certainly take some hits in Italy, but we may be able to keep it below crisis point here. We'll need to allow camera crews in the vineyards, and the wineries both here and overseas. *Nonna*, with you and Eli going over, we'll be able to show that Giambelli is family-run, and that *La Signora* continues to take a personal interest."

"It is family-run," Tereza said flatly. "And I take a very personal interest."

"I know that." Sophia lowered her book. "It's important to make sure the press and the consumer know it. Believe it. Are impressed by it. We'll need to use Mama here—Mama, Ty, me. We'll show the roots, the family involvement and concern. A hundred years of tradition, excellence *and* responsibility. I know how to do this."

"She's right." No one was more surprised than Sophia when Tyler spoke. "Mostly I don't give a damn about publicity or perception, which," he added, "is why the two of you dumped me into it. And I'd as soon have a plague of locusts in my winery as reporters. I still mostly don't give a damn, but I know a little more about it. Enough to be sure Sophia will find a way to spin this around to damp down the worst of the damage, and probably find one to turn it around to benefit the company. She'll find the way because she cares more than anybody."

"Agreed. So, we each do what we do best." Tereza looked at Eli, and something passed between them in that beat of silence. "But we do nothing else until we meet with James Moore. It's not only the reputation of the company that must be protected, but the company itself. Sophia, draft your release. David will help you with the details. Then we'll let the lawyers look at it. And everything else."

It was a blow to the pride. That, Tereza thought as she stood at her office window, was the hardest to accept. What was hers had been violated, threatened. The work of a lifetime besmirched by one tainted bottle of wine.

Now, in so many ways, she had to trust others to save her legacy.

“We’ll handle this, Tereza.”

“Yes.” She lifted a hand to cover the one Eli laid on her shoulder. “I was remembering when I was a young girl and my grandfather walked with me down the rows back home. He said to me that it wasn’t enough to plant. That what was planted must be tended, protected, cherished and disciplined. The vines were his children. They became mine.”

“You’ve raised them well.”

“And paid the price. I was less of a wife to the man I married here so long ago than I might have been, less of a mother to the daughter I birthed. I had the responsibility passed to me, and the ambition, Eli. Such ambition.”

It lived in her still, and she didn’t regret it.

“Would there have been more children if I hadn’t wished so desperately for my vines to be fertile? Would my child have made the choices she made if I had been more her mother?”

“Things happen as they’re meant to happen.”

“That’s the practical Scot. We Italians, we tend to believe more in chance. And retribution.”

“What’s happened isn’t retribution, Tereza. It’s either a terrible accident or a criminal act. You’re not responsible either way.”

“I took responsibility the day I took Giambelli.” Her eyes scanned the vines, the sleeping promise of them. “Aren’t I responsible for pushing Sophia and Tyler together? Thinking of the company, never imagining what might happen between them on another level.”

“Tereza.” He turned her to face him. “Realigning so that they work together doesn’t trickle down and make you the trigger for shooting those two very healthy young people onto the office floor.”

She sighed. “No, but it proves I didn’t take their health into account. We’re passing our heritage into their hands. I expected them to fight. We both did. But sex can make enemies of people. And that I didn’t anticipate. God, that makes me feel old.”

“Tereza.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “We *are* old.”

He said it to make her laugh, and she obliged him. “Well. We didn’t become enemies. We can hope each of them took something from us.”

“I love you, Tereza.”

“I know. I didn’t marry you for love, Eli.”

“I know, my dear.”

“For business,” she said, stepping back from him. “A merger. A wise business move. I respected you. I liked you a great deal and enjoyed your company. Instead of being punished for such calculation, I was rewarded. I love you very much. I hope you know that, too.”

“I do. We’ll weather this, Tereza.”

“I don’t need you by my side. But I want you there. Very much want you there. That, I think, says more. Means more.”

He took the hand she held out to him. “We’ll go down. James should be here soon.”

James looked over Sophia’s proposed release, nodded. “Good.” He slipped off his reading glasses. “Clear, calm, with a personal touch. I wouldn’t change a thing, from a legal standpoint.”

“Then I’ll go up, finalize it, alert the troops and get it out.”

“Take Linc with you.” James winked at her. “He’s a good general dog-sbody.”

He waited until they’d left the room. “Tereza, Eli, I’ll be consulting with your lawyers in Italy. At this point you’re handling the problem quickly and decisively. This should cut down on any potential legal actions against the company. You may be looking at some suits here. You need to be prepared for that. I’ll get what I can from the police. Unless it’s substantiated that the chemical was in the wine prior to it being opened, you’ve nothing to worry about other than damaging publicity. If Giambelli is found liable through negligence, we’ll deal with it.”

“Negligence isn’t my concern, James. If the wine was tainted before it was opened, it wasn’t negligence but murder.”

“Right now that’s speculation. From the questions the police asked you, and you, Tyler, they’re speculating as well. They don’t know when the digitalis was added to the wine. From a legal standpoint, this keeps Giambelli one very vital step back from the problem.”

"The problem," Tyler said, "is a woman's dead."

"That's a problem for the police. And while you may not like it, I'm going to advise you not to answer any more questions from them without counsel present. It's their job to build a case. It's not yours to help them."

"I knew her."

"That's right. And she had prepared a cozy and romantic dinner for two on the night she died. A dinner you didn't attend. Right now the police wonder just how well you knew her. Let them wonder. And while they're wondering, we'll look into Margaret Bowers. Who she was, who she knew, what she wanted."

"Hell of a mess, huh?"

Sophia glanced up at Linc. "I have a feeling we're going to be sweeping it up for a long time."

"Plenty of brooms. You've got Dad, so you've got the best. And no way Mom'll stay out of it. Then you've got me."

She managed a smile. "A triple threat."

"Damn right. Moore, Moore and Moore. Who could ask for anything—"

"Stop. I'll have to hit you." She finished proofing the release on her screen, then faxed it to P.J. "Better if this comes out of the San Francisco office than here. I want it personal, but I don't want it to look like a family cover-up. I've started these follow-ups and story pitches. Why don't you take a look, put your legal mind to them and see if I've covered my ass."

"Sure. Always liked your ass."

"Ha ha." She got up to let him take her place at the desk. "How's the doctor?"

"Cruising right along. You ought to snag a date and meet us some night. We could hit some hot spots, have a few laughs. You look like you could use a few laughs."

"More than a few. My social life doesn't exist these days, and that looks to be the pattern for the foreseeable future."

"This from the party queen?"

"The party queen's lost her crown." Since he was using her computer, she grabbed the phone to check in with P.J.

"You ask me, you could use a little break, Sophie. You're edgy. Were

edgy,” he added when she shot him a look, “before this last flurry of crap hit. All work and no play and yadda-yadda.”

“I don’t have time to play,” she snapped. “I don’t have time to think past the next move, or take a breath without worrying what’s going to jump in my face next. I’ve been putting in twelve-hour days, minimum, for nearly three months. I have calluses on my damn hands, had to fire a top staff member, and I haven’t had sex for six goddamn months.”

“Whoa. Ouch. And I didn’t mean the calluses. I’d offer to help you out there, but the doctor’s liable to object.”

She blew out a breath. “I think I’m going to take up yoga.” She dragged open her desk drawer, pulled out her aspirin as P.J. came on the line. “Fax come through?” She listened, nodded as she worked off the top of the bottle. “Get it out on the wire ASAP, then . . . What? Christ, when? All right, all right. Get the release out. Get me the information, word for word. I’ll work up a response. Don’t give any comments, just use the release. See that all department heads, all key personnel have a copy of it. That’s the company line until further notice. Keep me updated.”

She hung up, stared over at Linc. “It’s out. It’s already leaked.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GIABELLI-MACMILLAN, THE GIANT OF THE WINE INDUSTRY, HAS SUFFERED ANOTHER CRISIS. IT HAS BEEN CONFIRMED THAT A TAINTED BOTTLE OF WINE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATH OF MARGARET BOWERS, AN EXECUTIVE WITH THE COMPANY. POLICE ARE INVESTIGATING. THE POSSIBILITY OF PRODUCT TAMPERING IS BEING CONSIDERED, AND GIABELLI-MACMILLAN IS RECALLING BOTTLES OF CASTELLO DI GIABELLI MERLOT, 1992. SINCE THE MERGER OF THE GIABELLI-MACMILLAN WINERIES LAST DECEMBER . . .

Perfect, Jerry thought as he watched the evening newscast. Absolutely perfect. They'd scramble, of course. Already were scrambling. But what would the public hear?

Giambelli. Death. Wine.

Bottles would be poured down the sink. More would sit unsold on the shelf. It would sting quite a bit and for quite some time. It would cut into profits, short- and long-term. Profits La Coeur would reap.

That alone was a great satisfaction. Professionally and personally. Very personally.

It was true a couple of people had died. But that wasn't his fault. He had nothing to do with it—directly. And when the police caught the one who did, the damage to Giambelli would only be compounded.

He'd wait awhile. Bide his time. Watch the show. Then, if it seemed advantageous, there could be another anonymous call.

Not to the media this time. But to the police.

“*Digitalis comes from* foxglove.” Maddy knew. She’d looked it up.

“What?” Distracted, David looked over briefly. He had a mountain of paperwork on his desk. In Italian. He was much better at speaking it than reading it.

“Would they have grown foxglove near the vines?” Maddy demanded. “Like they grow mustard plants between the rows here? For nitrogen. I don’t think they would because they’d know foxglove had digitalis. But maybe they made a mistake. Could it infect the grapes if the plants were grown there, and turned into the soil?”

“I don’t know. Maddy, this isn’t for you to worry about.”

“Why? You’re worried.”

“It’s my job to worry.”

“I could help.”

“Honey, if you want to help, you could give me a little space here. Do your homework.”

Her lips began to pout. A sure sign of personal insult, but David was too distracted to notice.

“I’ve done my homework.”

“Well, help Theo with his. Or something.”

“But if the digitalis—”

“Maddy.” At his wits’ end, he snapped at her. “This isn’t a story or a project. It’s a very real problem, and I have to deal with it. Go find something to do.”

“Fine.” She shut the door of his office and let the resentment burn as she stomped away. He never wanted her to help when it was something important.

Do your homework, talk to Theo, clean up your room. He always fell back on those crappy deals when she wanted to do something that mattered.

She bet he wouldn’t have told Pilar Giambelli to find something to do. And she didn’t know squat about science. Music and art and looking pretty, that’s all *she* knew. Girl things. Not important things.

She stalked to Theo’s room. He was sprawled on the bed, his music blaring, his guitar lying on his belly, and the phone at his ear. From the dopey look on his face it was a girl on the other end.

Men were so lame.

“Dad wants you to do your homework.”

“Beat it.” He crossed his ankles. “Nah. It’s nothing. Just my idiot sister.”

The phone knocked hard against his jaw when Maddy launched herself at him. In seconds Theo was dealing with the shock of pain, the squeals in his ear and the pummels and kicks of a furious Maddy.

“Ow! Wait! Damn it, Maddy. Call you back.” He managed to drop the phone, and in the nick of time protect his privates from a knee jab. “What the hell?”

After a long, sweaty minute, he managed to flip her—she didn’t fight like a girl, but he still outweighed her—and pin her down. “Cut it out, you crazy little bitch. What’s your problem?”

“I’m not *nothing!*” She spat it at him and made a valiant attempt with her knee again.

“No, you’re just nutzoid.” He licked the corner of his mouth, cursed at the unmistakable taste. “I’m bleeding. When I tell Dad—”

“You can’t tell him anything. He doesn’t listen to anybody except her.”

“Her, who?”

“You know who. Get off me, you big, fat jerk. You’re just as bad as he is, making gooey noises to some girl, and not listening to anybody.”

“I was having a conversation,” he said with great dignity to counter the gooey snipe. “And if you hit me again, I’m hitting you back. Even if Dad grounds me for it. Now what’s your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem. It’s the men in this house making asses of themselves over the women in the villa that’s the problem. It’s disgusting. It’s embarrassing.”

Watching her, Theo wiped the blood from his mouth. He had a very creative fantasy life going where Sophia was concerned. And his baby sister wasn’t going to spoil it for him.

He shook back his mop of curly hair. Yawned. “You’re just jealous.”

“I am not.”

“Sure you are. ’Cause you’re skinny and flat-chested.”

“I’d rather have brains than breasts.”

“Good thing. I don’t know why you’re having a snit-fit because Dad’s hanging with Pilar. He’s hung with women before.”

“You’re so stupid.” Every dreg of disgust gathered in her voice. “He’s not hanging out with her, putz-face. He’s in love with her.”

“Get out. What do you know?” But his stomach did a funny little jump as he dragged a bag of chips off his dresser. “Man.”

“It’s going to change everything. That’s the way it works.” There was a terrible pressure in her chest, but she got to her feet. “Nothing’s ever going to be the same again, and that sucks out loud.”

“Nothing’s been the same. Not since Mom took off.”

“It got *better*.” The tears wanted to escape, but rather than let them fall in front of him, she stormed out of the room.

“Yeah,” Theo muttered. “But it didn’t stay the same.”

Sophia heaved air, cold and clear, would blow some of the clouds from her mind. She had to think, and think precisely. She was spinning as quickly as she could, but the newscast had caused some damage. Too often the first impression was all people ever remembered.

Now her job was to shift that impression. To show the public that while Giambelli had been violated, the company had done nothing to violate the public. That took more than words, she knew, more even than placement and delivery. It took tangible action.

If her grandparents weren’t even now packed for Italy, she would have urged them to do so. To be visible at the source of the problem. Not to fall back on the safety of “no comment” but to comment often and to comment specifically. Use the company name again and again, she thought, making mental notes. Make it personal, make the company breathe.

But . . . they had to tread carefully around Margaret Bowers. Sympathy, of course, but not so much it implied responsibility.

To do that, to help them do that, Sophia had to stop thinking of Margaret as a person.

If that was cold, she would be cold. And deal with her conscience later.

She stood at the edge of the vineyard. It was guarded, she thought, against pests, disease, the vagaries of weather. Whatever threatened to invade or damage it was fought against. This was no different. She’d fight the war, and on her terms. She wouldn’t regret any act that won it.

She caught a shadow of movement. “Who’s there?” Her mind leaped toward trespasser, saboteur. Murderer. Without hesitation she charged, and found her arms full of struggling young girl.

“Let go! I can be here. I’m allowed.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry.” Sophia stepped back. “You scared me.”

She hadn’t looked scared, Maddy thought. But she had looked scary. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“I didn’t say you were. I said you scared me. I guess we’re all a little jumpy right now. Look . . .”

She caught the glimmer of tears on the girl’s cheeks. As she didn’t like having her own crying jags brought into issue, she gave Maddy the same consideration.

“I just came out to clear my head. Too much going on in there right now.” Sophia glanced back at the house.

“My father’s working.”

There was just enough defense in the statement to have Sophia speculating. “There’s a lot of pressure on him right now. On everybody. My grandparents are leaving for Italy first thing in the morning. I worry about them. They’re not young anymore.”

After her father’s rebuff, Sophia’s casual confidence soothed. Still cautious, Maddy fell into step beside her. “They don’t act old. Not, like, decrepit or anything.”

“No, they don’t, do they? But still. I wish I could go instead, but they need me here right now.”

Maddy’s lips trembled as she looked toward the lights of the guest house. Nobody, it seemed, needed her. Anywhere. “At least you’ve got something to do.”

“Yeah. Now if I could just figure out what to do next. So much going on.”

She slanted Maddy a look. The kid was wound up and sulking about something. Sophia remembered very well what it was like to be fourteen, wound up and sulking.

Life was full of immediacy and intense moments at fourteen, she thought, that made professional crises seem like paper cuts.

“I guess, on some level, we’re in the same boat. My mother,” she said when Maddy remained silent. “Your father. It’s a little weird.”

Maddy shrugged, then hunched her shoulders. “I gotta go.”

“All right, but I’d like to tell you something. Woman to woman, daughter to daughter, whatever. My mother’s gone a long time without someone, without a good man, to care about her. I don’t know what it’s been like for you, or your brother or your father. But for me, after the general strangeness

of it, it's nice to see her have a good man who makes her happy. I hope you'll give her a chance."

"It doesn't matter what I do. Or think. Or say."

Defiant misery, Sophia mused. Yes, she remembered that, too. "Yes, it matters. When someone loves us, what we think and what we do matters." She looked over at the sound of running feet. "From the looks of it, somebody loves you."

"Maddy!" Breathless, David plucked his daughter off her feet. He managed to embrace and shake her at the same time. "What are you doing? You can't go wandering off like that after dark."

"I just took a walk."

"And cost me a year of my life. You want to fight with your brother, be my guest, but you're not to leave the house again without permission. Clear?"

"Yes, sir." Though secretly pleased, she grimaced. "I didn't think you'd notice."

"Think again." He hooked his arm around her neck, a casual habit of affection Sophia had noticed. And envied. Her father had never touched her like that.

"Partly my fault," Sophia told him. "I kept her longer than I should have. She's a terrific sounding board. My mind was going off in too many directions."

"You should give it a rest. You're going to need all circuits up and working tomorrow. Is your mother free?"

He didn't notice the way Maddy stiffened, but Sophia did. "I imagine. Why?"

"I'm slogging through reports and memos, in Italian. It'd go faster with someone who reads it better than I do."

"I'll tell her." Sophia looked at Maddy now. "She'll want to help."

"Appreciate it. Now I'll just drag this baggage home and pound it awhile. See you at the briefing. Eight o'clock."

"I'll be ready. 'Night, Maddy." She watched them walk through the fields toward the guest house, their shadows close enough to merge into one form in the moonlight.

Hard to blame the kid for wanting to keep it that way. Hard to make room for changes. For people, when your life seemed just fine as it was.

But changes happened. It was smarter to be a part of them. Better yet, she decided, to initiate them.

Tyler kept the radio and the TV off. He ignored the phone. One thing he could control was his own reaction to the press, and the best way to control it was to ignore the press altogether. At least for a few hours.

He was working his way through his own files, his logs, every record he had available. He could, and would, ascertain that the MacMillan area of the company was secure.

What he couldn't seem to control were his own questions about Margaret. An accident, suicide or murder? None of the options was appealing. He eliminated suicide. She hadn't been the type, and he sure as hell didn't have the towering ego that suggested she'd killed herself in despair because he'd broken a dinner date.

Maybe she had been interested in him, and maybe he'd ignored the signals because he hadn't felt the same way. And hadn't wanted the complications. Life was complicated enough without tangling up business and personal relationships.

Plus, she just hadn't been his type.

He didn't go for the fast-track career woman with attitude and an agenda. That kind of woman just took too much energy.

Take Sophia.

Christ, he was beginning to think he'd explode if he didn't take Sophia. And wasn't that the point? he reminded himself as he roamed restlessly downstairs again. Thinking about her that way muddled up the mind, strained the body and complicated an already complex business association.

Now more than ever it was essential he keep his mind on his job. The current crisis was going to pull his time and energy away from the vineyards when he could least afford it. Long-range forecasts warned him that frost vigils would be necessary. Several casks of wine were on the point of being ready for bottling. Disking had already started.

He didn't have time to worry about police investigations, potential lawsuits. Or a woman. And of all of them, he was finding the woman the hardest to shove out of his mind.

Because she'd invaded his system, he thought. And she'd be stuck there,

irritating him, until he got her out again. So why didn't he just march over to the villa, storm up her terrace steps and deal with it. Finish it.

He knew exactly how pathetic and self-serving that was as rationalization. And decided he didn't give a damn.

He grabbed a jacket, strode to the front door and yanked it open.

And there she was, stalking up his steps.

"I don't like irritable, macho men," she told him as she slammed the door at her back.

"I don't like bossy, aggressive women."

They dove at each other. Even as their mouths began a mutual assault she boosted herself up, wrapped her legs around his hips. "I want a bed this time." Her breath already tattered, she tugged at his shirt. "We'll try out the floor later."

"I want you naked." He nipped his teeth into her throat and began to stagger up the steps. "I don't care where."

"God, you have this incredible taste." She raced her lips over his face, his neck. "It's so basic." Her breath caught when he rapped her back against the wall at the top of the steps. Her fingers fisted in his hair. "This is just sex, right?"

"Yeah, right, whatever." His mouth crushed down on hers. Using the wall to brace her, he began dragging her sweater over her head. "God. You're so built." He tossed her sweater aside, took his mouth over the soft swell of breast that rose above her bra. "We're not going to make the bed."

Her heart hammered as he used his teeth on her. "Okay. Next time."

Her feet hit the floor. At least she thought they did. It was hard to know where she was, who she was with as the geyser of greed erupted inside her. Hands were pulling at clothes; something ripped. Mouths ran hot over flesh. Everything blurred. Over the wild beat of blood she could hear her own whimpers, pleas, demands, a kind of mad chant that merged with his.

She was already wet, already aching when his fingers found her. The violent glory of the orgasm ripped through her, molten gold release, so strong, so welcome she might have melted bonelessly to the floor.

"Uh-uh. No you don't." He pressed her back against the wall and, riding on her thrill, continued to drive her. "I want you screaming. Go up again."

She couldn't have stopped herself. Welcoming the burn, craving it, she let him take, empty her out until her mind was filled with the dark and the feral.

And filled, she tore at him, whipped him past reason. She watched his eyes go opaque and knew it was she who blinded him. Heard his breath heave and tear, and thrilled that she could weaken him.

“Now.” Once more she anchored her hands in his hair and shuddered, shuddered as she poised on the next thin edge. “Now, now, now.”

When he plunged into her, she came again. Brutally. Her nails dug into the sweat-slicked slope of his shoulders as her hips pistoned. Lightning-fast. With his mouth fused to hers, he swallowed the small, greedy sounds she made. Fed on them as he hitched her up to give more. Take more.

Pleasure careened through him, left him shattered, stupefied.

He managed to hold on to her as both of them slid to the floor.

Sprawled over him, her heart still racing, Sophia began to laugh. “*Dio. Grazie a Dio.* Decanted at last. No real finesse, but a fine body and excellent staying power.”

“We’ll work on finesse when I’m not ready to howl at the moon.”

“Wasn’t complaining.” To prove it, she brushed her lips lightly over his chest. “I feel fabulous. At least I think I do.”

“I can verify that. You feel incredible.” He blew out a breath. “I’m winded.”

“That makes two of us.” She lifted her head, studied his face. “Are you finished?”

“Not hardly.”

“Oh, good, because neither am I.” She shifted, straddled him. “Ty?”

“Mmmm.” His hands were already stroking up her torso. She was so smooth, he thought. Smooth, dusky, exotic.

“We probably need to set guidelines.”

“Yeah.” She had a pretty little mole on the curve of her left hip. A kind of sexual punctuation.

“You want to get into that now?”

“No.”

“Good. Me either.” She braced her hands on either side of his head, leaned down. She brushed her lips at the corners of his mouth, teasing little sips. “Bed?” she whispered.

He reared up, wrapped his arms around her. “Next time.”

Sometime around midnight, she found herself facedown on his bed. The sheets were tangled and hot, and her bones were limp as water.

Even after so long a sexual drought it was hard for her to believe the human body could recharge as often, and at such intense power.

"Water," she croaked, afraid now that she'd satisfied one craving, thirst would kill her. "I need water. I'll give you anything—wild, sexual favors—if you'll just give me a bottle of water."

"You've already paid out the wild, sexual favors."

"Oh, right." She groped over, patted his shoulder blindly. "Be a pal, MacMillan."

"Okay, but where are we?"

"On the bed." She sighed gustily. "We finally made it."

"Right. Be right back." He staggered up, and since he'd been crossways on the bed, misjudged direction and rapped smartly into a chair.

Listening to his muttered curses, Sophia smiled into the sheet. God, he was cute. Funny. Smarter than she'd given him credit for. And incredible in bed. On the floor. Against the wall. She couldn't remember any man appealing to her on so many levels. Especially when you considered he was the type who had to be held at gunpoint to put on a suit and tie.

Which was, she supposed, why he always looked so sexy in them. The caveman temporarily civilized.

Lost for the moment in that thought, she yelped when Ty held the iced water to her bare shoulder. "Ha ha," she muttered, but was grateful enough to roll over, sit up and gulp down half the glass.

"Hey. I figured you'd share."

"I didn't say anything about sharing."

"Then I want more sexual favors."

"You couldn't possibly," she chuckled.

"You know how much I like proving you wrong."

She sighed as his hand snuck up her thigh. "That's true." Still she handed him the rest of the water. "I might have a few sexual favors left in me. But then I really have to go home. Early briefing tomorrow."

He drained the glass, set it aside. "We're not thinking about that now." He hooked an arm around her waist, then rolled until she was under him. "Let me tell you just what I have in mind."

It had been. Sophia mused, a very long time since she'd snuck into the house at two in the morning. Still, it was one of those skills, like riding a

bike or, well, sex, that came back to you. She dimmed her headlights before they flashed against the windows of the villa and eased the car gently, slowly around the bend and into the garage.

She crept out into the chilly night and stood just a moment under the brilliant wheel of stars. She felt outrageously tired, wonderfully used, and alive.

Tyler MacMillan, she decided, was a man just full of surprises, of secret pockets and marvelous, marvelous energy. She'd learned a great deal about him in the past few months. Aspects and angles she hadn't bothered to explore. And she was looking forward to continuing that exploration.

But for now, she'd better get in the house and get some sleep or she'd be useless the next day.

Odd, she thought as she walked quietly around the back, she'd wanted to stay with him. Sleep with him. All curled up against that long, warm body. Safe, cozy, secure.

She'd trained herself over the years to click off emotionally after sex. A man's way, she liked to think. Sleeping, and waking, in the same bed after the fun and games were over could be awkward. It could be intimate. Avoiding that, making certain she didn't need that, kept things from getting messy.

But she'd had to order herself to leave Tyler's bed. Because she was tired, she assured herself. Because it had been a difficult day. He wasn't really any different from anyone else she'd been with.

Perhaps she liked him more, she considered as she navigated through the shrubbery. And was more attracted to him than she'd expected to be. That didn't make him different. Just . . . new. After a while the polish would wear off the shiny excitement, and that would be that.

That, she thought, was always that.

If you looked for love and lifetimes, you were doomed to disappoint, or be disappointed. Better, much better, to seize the moment, wring it dry, then move on.

Because thinking was dulling her mood, she blocked out the questions. And rounding the last bend in the gardens, came face-to-face with her mother.

They stared at each other, the surprised breath each puffed out frosting into little clouds.

"Um. Nice night," Sophia commented.

“Yes. Very. I was just, ah . . . David . . .” Stumped, Pilar gestured vaguely toward the guest house. “He needed help with some translating.”

“I see.” A wild giggle tried to claw its way out of Sophia’s throat. “Is that what your generation calls it?” A small choking sound escaped. “If we’re going to sneak the rest of the way in, let’s do it. We could freeze out here trying to come up with reasonable excuses.”

“I *was* translating.” Pilar hurried to the door, fumbled with the knob. “There was a lot of—”

“Oh, Mama.” The laughter won. Sophia clutched her belly and stumbled inside. “Stop bragging.”

“I was merely . . .” Floundering, Pilar pushed at her hair. She had a very good idea how she looked—tumbled and flushed. Like a woman who’d just slid out of bed. Or in this case, off the living room sofa. Taking the offensive seemed to be the safest course. “You’re out late.”

“Yeah. I was translating. With Ty.”

“With . . . Oh. Oh.”

“I’m starving, how about you?” Enjoying herself, Sophia pulled open the refrigerator. “I never got around to dinner.” She spoke casually, with her head in the fridge. “Do you have a problem with me and Ty?”

“No—yes. No,” Pilar stuttered. “I don’t know. I absolutely don’t know how I’m supposed to handle this.”

“Let’s have pie.”

“Pie.”

Sophia pulled out what was left of a deep-dish apple. “You look wonderful, Mama.”

Pilar brushed at her hair again. “I couldn’t possibly.”

“Wonderful.” Sophia set the dish on the counter and reached up for plates. “I had a few emotional bumps about you and David. I wasn’t used to seeing you as—to seeing you, I suppose. But when I run into you sneaking into the house in the middle of the night, looking wonderful, I can’t help but see you.”

“I don’t have to sneak into my own house.”

“Oh.” Wielding a pie cutter, Sophia asked, “Then why were you?”

“I was just . . . Let’s have pie.”

“Good call.” Sophia cut two huge hunks, then smiled when Pilar stroked her hair. She leaned in, and for a moment the two of them stood in the bright kitchen light in silence. “It was a long, lousy day. It’s nice to end it well.”

"Yes. Though you gave me a hell of a shock outside."

"Me? Imagine my surprise, reliving my teenage years, then running into my mother."

"Reliving? Really?" Sophia carried the plates to the kitchen table while Pilar got forks.

"Oh well, why dwell on the past?" Grinning wickedly, Sophia licked pie from her thumb. "David's very hot."

"Sophie."

"Very hot. Great shoulders, that charmingly boyish face, that intelligent brain. Quite a package you've bagged there, Mama."

"He's not a trophy. And I certainly hope you don't think of Ty as one."

"He's got a terrific butt."

"I know."

"I meant Ty."

"I know," Pilar repeated. "What, am I blind?" With an unladylike snort, she plopped into a chair. "This is ridiculous, it's rude and it's—"

"Fun," Sophia finished and sat down to scoop up some pie. "We share an interest in fashion, and more recently in the business. Why shouldn't we share an interest in . . . *Nonna*."

"Well, of course we share an interest in . . ." Pilar dropped her fork with a clatter as she followed the direction of Sophia's blank stare. "Mama. What are you doing up?"

"You think I don't know when people come and go in my house?" Somehow elegant in a thick chenille robe and slippers, Tereza swept into the room. "What, no wine?"

"We were just . . . hungry," Sophia managed.

"Ha. No wonder. Sex is a laborious business if done properly. I'm hungry myself."

Sophia slapped a hand to her mouth, but it was too late. The burst of laughter erupted. "Go, Eli."

Tereza merely took the last piece of pie as her daughter stared down at her plate, shoulders shaking. "We'll have wine. I believe the occasion calls for it. I think this is surely the first time all three generations of Giambelli women have sat together in the kitchen after making love. You needn't look so stunned, Pilar. Sex is a natural function, after all. And since you've chosen a worthy partner this time, we'll have wine."

She chose a bottle of sauvignon blanc from the kitchen rack and uncorked it. “These are trying times. There have been others, and there will be more.” She poured three glasses. “It’s essential that we live while we move through them. I approve of David Cutter, if my approval matters.”

“Thank you. It does, of course.”

Sophia was biting her lip to hide a grin when Tereza turned toward her. “If you hurt Tyler, I’ll be both angry and disappointed in you. I love him very much.”

“Well, I like that.” Deflated, Sophia set her fork down. “Why would I?”

“Remember what I said. Tomorrow, we’ll fight for what we are, what we have. Tonight.” She lifted her glass. “Tonight, we celebrate it. *Salute.*”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was a war, waged on several fronts. Sophia fought her battles on the airwaves, in print and on the telephone. She spent hours updating press releases, giving interviews, reassuring accounts.

And every day she started over, beating back rumor, innuendo and speculation. Until the crisis passed, her time in the vineyards was over. That was Tyler's battlefield. She found herself resenting not being able to soldier there as well. To take part in the disking, the frost vigils, in the careful guarding of the emerging buds.

She worried about her grandparents, forging their front on the Italian line. Every day the reports came in. The recall was being implemented. And soon, bottle by bottle, the wine would be tested.

She couldn't think about the cost, short- or long-term. That, she left in David's hands.

When she needed to step back from the hype and spin, she stood at her office window and watched men with harrows work the earth. It would be a year of rare vintage, she promised herself.

They only had to survive it.

She jumped at the next ring of her phone, and buried the very real need to ignore it.

"Sophia Giambelli."

Ten minutes later she hung up, then released pent-up rage with a vicious stream of Italian curses.

"Does that help?" Pilar asked as she stood by the doorway.

"Not enough." Sophia pressed her fingers to her temples and wondered

how best to handle this next stage of combat. "I'm glad you're here. Can you come in, sit down a minute."

"Fifteen, actually. I've just finished up another tour." Pilar settled into a chair. "They're coming in droves. Curiosity seekers for the most part now. Some reporters, though that's down to a trickle since your press conference."

"It's likely to build again. I just got off the phone with a producer of *The Larry Mann Show*."

"Larry Mann." Pilar wrinkled her nose. "Trash television, at its worst. You aren't going to give them anything."

"They've already got something. They've got Rene." Unable to sit still, Sophia shoved away from her desk. "She's going to tape a show tomorrow revealing family secrets, supposedly, telling the true story of Dad's death. We're invited to participate. They want either you or me, or both of us, on the show to give our side of it."

"It won't do, Sophie. As satisfying as it might be to slap her back in public, it isn't the way. And that isn't the forum."

"Why do you think I was cursing?" She snatched up her frog paperweight, passed it restlessly from hand to hand. "We'll take the high road and ignore her. But God, how I'd love to wrestle in the mud with that bitch. She's been giving interviews right and left, and she's good enough at them to do considerable damage. I've talked to both Aunt Helen and Uncle James about legal action."

"Don't."

"She can't be allowed to use the family, to slander." Sophia scowled down at the frog. His cheerfully silly face usually lightened her mood. "I can't get down and dirty with her, which is a crying shame. But I can slap her back legally."

"Listen to me first," Pilar said, leaning forward. "I'm not being soft. I'm not being manipulated. Taking legal action, at least right now when we've so many other battles to fight, only gives some credence to her and what she's saying. I know your instincts are to fight, and mine are generally to retreat, but maybe, this time, we do neither. We just stand in place."

"I've thought of that. I've thought of it from both angles. But when it comes down to it, you fight fire with fire."

"Not always, honey. Sometimes you just drown it. We'll just drown her out, with good Giambelli wine."

Sophia inhaled, exhaled slowly as she sat back. She set the paperweight down again, turning it around and around while she considered. Behind her, the fax beeped and whined, but she ignored it while she figured the angles.

"That's good." Nodding, she looked at her mother again. "That's very good. Drown the flames with one good flood. We're going to have a party. Spring ball, black tie. How much time do you need to put it together?"

To her credit Pilar only blinked. "Three weeks."

"Good. Work up the guest list. Once we've got invitations out, I'll plant some items with reporters. Rene opts for trash, we'll opt for elegance."

"*A party?*" Tyler raised his voice over the rumble of disking. "Ever hear of Nero and his fiddle?"

"Rome's not burning. That's my point." Impatient, Sophia dragged him farther from the work. "Giambelli takes their responsibilities seriously, are cooperating with the authorities here and in Italy. *Merda!*" She swore as her cell phone rang. "Wait."

She pulled the phone from her pocket. "Sophia Giambelli. *Sì. Va bene.*" With an absent signal to Ty she paced a few feet away.

He stood, watched her move, issue what were undoubtedly orders in Italian.

Around them, the disking progressed. The noisy, systematic turning of earth and cover crop. Warmth teased the vines to bud, even as the breeze that shivered down from the mountains promised a night of chills.

In the middle of it all, in the center of the ageless cycle, was Sophia. The dynamo with the future at her fingertips.

The center of it, he thought again. Maybe she'd been there, always.

She strode down the row, up again, then down, her voice rising, a kind of fascinating foreign music.

He didn't bother to curse, didn't even bother to question when he felt that last lock snick open inside him.

He'd been expecting that.

He was crazy about her, he admitted. Gone. Over the line. And sooner or later, he'd have to figure out what to do about it.

She jammed the phone back in her pocket, blew at her bangs. "Italian publicity branch," she said to Ty. "A few snags that needed picking loose. Sorry for the interruption. Now where . . ."

She trailed off, staring up at him. "What are you grinning at?" she demanded.

"Am I? Maybe it's because you're not so hard to look at, even in fast-forward."

"Fast-forward's the only speed that works right now. Anyway, the party. We need to make a statement, and continue with the plans for the centennial. The first gala's midsummer. We do this more intimate gathering to show unity, responsibility and confidence."

She began ticking points off with her fingers. "The recall was initiated voluntarily, and at considerable expense, before it was a legal issue. *La Signora* and Mr. MacMillan have traveled to Italy personally to offer any assistance in the investigation. However," she continued, "and we need to get to the however soon, Giambelli is confident the problem is under control. The family, and that's what we have to emphasize, remains gracious, hospitable and involved with the community. We show our polish, while Rene digs in the muck."

"Polish." He studied the vines. He reminded himself to check the overhead sprinklers, again, should they be needed for frost protection overnight. "If we're going to be polished, how come I have to fool around with a TV crew and walk around in the mud?"

"To illustrate the dedication and hard work that goes into every bottle of wine produced. Don't be cranky, MacMillan. The last few days have been vicious."

"I'd be less cranky if outsiders would stay out of the way."

"Does that include me?"

He shifted his attention from the vines, looked at her beautiful face. "Doesn't seem to."

"Then why haven't you come sneaking through my terrace doors in the night?"

His lips quirked. "Thought about it."

"Think harder." When she leaned into him, and he stepped back, she asked, "What? Got a headache?"

"No, an audience. I'd as soon not advertise I'm sleeping with my co-operator."

"Sleeping with me has nothing to do with business." Her voice chilled several degrees, just the kind of cold snap that wrought damage. "But if you're ashamed of it—" She shrugged, turned and walked away.

He had to deal with the sting first, then the innate reluctance for public scenes. He caught up with her in five strides, grabbed her arm. "I'm not ashamed of anything. Just because I like keeping my personal life private—" Her sulky jerk back irritated him enough to tighten his grip and curl his fingers around her other arm. "There's enough gossip around here without adding to it. If I can't keep my mind on my work, I can't expect my men to. Ah, the hell with it."

He lifted her to her toes, pressed his mouth hard to hers.

There was a thrill in that, she thought. In that quick whip of strength and temper.

"Okay?" he demanded and dropped her flat on her feet again.

"Almost." She ran her hands up his chest, felt him tremble. A thrill, she thought, in knowing you were physically outmatched but still had power. She laid her lips on his, teasing until his hand took a fistful of the back of her sweater, until her hands were locked possessively around his neck and her own stomach muscles went loose.

"That," she murmured, "was just fine."

"Leave your terrace doors unlocked."

"They have been."

"I have to get back to work."

"Me too."

But they stayed as they were, mouths a breath apart. Something was happening inside her. A quivering, but not that lustful shiver in the belly. This was around her heart, and more ache than pleasure. Fascinated, she started to give in to it. And the phone in her pocket began to ring again.

"Well," she said a little unsteadily as she eased away. "Round two. I'll see you later."

She dragged her phone out as she hurried away. She'd think about Ty later. Think about a lot of things later. "Sophia Giambelli. *Nonna*, I'm glad you caught me. I tried to reach you earlier, but . . ."

She trailed off, alerted by her grandmother's tone. She stopped walking, stood at the edge of the vineyard. Despite the wash of sunlight, her skin chilled.

She was already running back as she broke the connection. "Ty!"

Alarmed, he whirled back, caught her on the fly. "What is it? What happened?"

"They found more. Two more bottles that were tainted."

“Damn it. Well, we were expecting it. We knew there had to be tampering.”

“There’s more. It could be worse. *Nonna*—she and Eli—” She had to stop, organize her thoughts. “There was an old man, he worked for *Nonna*’s grandfather. Started in the vineyard when he was just a boy. He retired, technically, over a year ago. And late last year he died. He had a bad heart.”

He was already following her, already feeling the dread. “Go on.”

“His granddaughter, the one who found him, says he’d been drinking our Merlot. She came to my grandmother after the news of the recall broke. They’re having his body exhumed.”

“His name was Bernardo Baptista.” Sophia had all the details in neatly typed notes, but she didn’t need them. She had every word in her head. “He was seventy-three. He died in December from an apparent heart attack while sitting in front of his own fire after a simple meal and several glasses of Castello di Giambelli Merlot, ’92.”

As Margaret Bowers had, David thought grimly. “You said Baptista had a weak heart.”

“He’d had some minor heart problems and was suffering from a lingering head cold at the time of his death. The cold adds another layer. Baptista was known for his nose. He’d worked wine for over sixty years. But as he was ill, it was unlikely he’d have detected any problem with the wine. His granddaughter swears he hadn’t opened it before that night. She’d seen it that afternoon when she’d visited him. He kept it, and a few other gifts from the company, on display. He was very proud of his association with Giambelli.”

“The wine had been a gift.”

“According to his granddaughter, yes.”

“From?”

“She doesn’t know. He was given a retirement party, and as is customary, Giambelli presents an employee with parting gifts. I’ve checked, and that particular wine was not on the gift list. He’d have been presented with a Cabernet, a white and a sparkling. First label. However, it’s not uncommon for an employee to be allowed to choose another selection, or to be given wine by other members of the company.”

“How soon will they know if the wine caused his death?” Pilar moved to the desk where Sophia sat, rubbed a hand over her daughter’s shoulder.

“A matter of days.”

“We do what we can to track the wine,” David decided. “Meanwhile, we continue as we have been. I’m going to suggest to *La Signora* and Eli that we hire an outside investigator.”

“I’ll work on a statement. It’s best if we announce the new finds, and Giambelli’s part in implementing the recall and the testing. I don’t want to have to chase the release again.”

“Let me know what I can do to help,” Pilar told her.

“Get that guest list together.”

“Honey, you can’t possibly want to hold a party now.”

“On the contrary.” The worry, the sadness over an old man she remembered with affection hardened into determination. “We’ll just twist the angle. We hold a gala here, for charity. We’ve done it before, and a great deal more for good causes. I want people to remember that. A thousand a plate. All food, wine and entertainment donated by Giambelli-MacMillan, with proceeds going to the homeless.”

She scribbled notes as she spoke, already drafting invitations, releases, responses in her head. “Our family wants to help yours be safe and secure. There are a lot of people who owe *La Signora* more than a grand for a fancy meal. If they need to be reminded of that, I’ll see to it.”

She cocked her head, waiting for David’s reaction.

“You’re the expert there,” he said after a moment. “It’s a shaky line to walk, but in my opinion, you have superior balance.”

“Thanks. Meanwhile, we have to pretend a cool disinterest in the press Rene is generating. There’ll be fallout from that, and it’ll be personal. What’s personal to Giambelli will, naturally, touch on business.”

Pilar slid into a discreet chair at a quiet table in the bar at the Four Seasons. She was sure if she’d mentioned her intentions to anyone, she’d have been told she was making a mistake.

She probably was.

But this was something she had to do, something she should have done long ago. She ordered a mineral water and prepared to wait. She had no doubt Rene would be late. Just as she’d had no doubt Rene would meet her. She wouldn’t have been able to resist making an entrance or having a confrontation with an enemy she perceived as weaker.

Pilar nursed her drink and sat patiently. She had a lot of experience with waiting.

Rene didn't disappoint. She swept in. She was, Pilar supposed, the kind of woman who liked to sweep into a room, trailing furs though the weather was too warm for them.

She looked well—fit, rested, glowing. Too often in the past, Pilar admitted, she'd studied this stunning and *younger* woman and felt inadequate in comparison.

A natural response, she imagined. But that didn't stop it from being foolish and useless.

It was easy to see why Tony had been attracted. Easier to understand why he'd been caught. Rene was no empty-headed Barbie, but a tough-minded female who would have known just how to get what she wanted, and to keep it.

"Pilar."

"Rene. Thanks for meeting me."

"Oh, how could I resist?" Rene dumped her fur and slid into her chair. "You're looking a little strained. Champagne cocktail," she told the waitress without glancing up.

Pilar's stomach didn't clench as it once would have. "You're not. You had a few weeks in Europe early this year. It must have agreed with you."

"Tony and I had planned on an extended vacation. He wouldn't have wanted me to sit home and brood." Rene angled herself, crossed long, silky legs. "That was always your job."

"Rene, I was never the other woman, and neither were you. I was out of the picture long before you and Tony met."

"You were never out of the picture. You and your family kept your hooks in Tony, and you made sure he never got what he deserved from Giambelli. Now he's dead, and you'll pay me what you should have paid him." She picked up her drink the minute it was served. "Did you think I'd let you drag his name, and mine by association, through the dirt?"

"Odd, I was going to ask you the same thing." Pilar folded her hands on the table. A small, tidy move that gave her a moment to gather herself. "Whatever else, Rene, he was my daughter's father. I never wanted to see his name sullied. I want, more than I can tell you, to know who killed him, and why."

"You did, one way or the other. By cutting him out of the company. He

wasn't meeting another woman that night. He wouldn't have dared. And I was enough for him, the way you never were."

Pilar thought about mentioning Kris, but knew it wasn't worth the effort. "No, I was never enough for him. I don't know who he was meeting that night, or why, but—"

"I'll tell you what I think," Rene interrupted. "He had something on you, you, your family. And you had him killed. Maybe you even used that little twit Margaret to do it, and that's why she's dead now."

Weariness replaced pity. "That's ridiculous, even for you. If this is the kind of thing you're saying to reporters, that you intend to say on television, you're opening yourself up to serious legal action."

"Please." Rene sipped again. "Do you think I haven't consulted an attorney to see what I can say and how I can say it? You saw to it that Tony was about to be cut off, and that I came away with next to nothing. I intend to get what's coming to me."

"Really? And since we're so cold-blooded, aren't you afraid of retribution?"

Rene glanced toward a nearby table. Two men sat, sipping water. "Bodyguards. Round the clock. Don't even bother threatening me."

"You've created quite a fantasy world, and appear to be enjoying it. I'm sorry about you and Tony, sincerely, as you were perfect for each other. I came here to ask you to be reasonable, to show some decency toward my family and to think of Tony's child before you speak to the press. But that's a waste of time for both of us. I thought you might have loved him, but that was foolish of me. So we'll try this."

She leaned in, surprising Rene with the sudden and very cold gleam in her eye. "Do what you want, say what you want. In the end, you'll only look ridiculous. And though it's small of me, I'll enjoy that. More, I think, than you will saying it or doing it. Keep being the strident trophy wife, Rene, it suits you," Pilar said as she reached in her purse for money. "Just as those rather gaudy earrings suit you—a great deal more than they did me when Tony gave them to me for our fifth wedding anniversary."

She tossed a twenty on the table between them. "I'd consider them and anything else of mine he helped himself to over the years full payment. You'll never get anything else out of me, or Giambelli."

She didn't sweep out. She'd leave the drama for Rene. Instead she saun-

tered, and felt good about it. Just as she felt good about dropping another bill on the table where Rene's bodyguards sat watch.

"This round's on me," she told them and walked out laughing.

"Spul on a pretty good show." Steaming now, Pilar paced back and forth over the Aubusson in Helen Moore's living room. "And, by God, I think I came out on top. But I was so angry. This woman is gunning for my family and she's wearing my damn earrings while she's taking aim."

"You've got documentation on the jewelry, insurance records and so on. We could take issue."

"I hated those stupid earrings." Pilar gave a bad-natured shrug. "Tony gave them to me as a peace offering after one of his affairs. I got the bill, too, of course. Damn it, it's hard swallowing how often I was a fool."

"Then spit it out. Sure you don't want a drink?"

"No, I'm driving, and should be heading back already." Pilar hissed out a breath, sucked in another. "I had to blow off steam first or I might have given in to road rage and ended up in jail."

"Good thing you have a friend on the bench. Listen to me. I think you did exactly right by facing off with her. A lot of people would disagree, but they don't know you like I do."

Helen poured herself a couple of fingers of vodka over ice. "You had things to say, and you've waited too long to say them."

"It won't change anything."

"With her? Maybe, maybe not." Helen sat, stretched out. "But the point is, it changed something for you. You took charge. And personally, I'd have paid good money to see you tell her off. She'll go on her little rant on her trashy talk show and very likely end up getting hammered by various audience members who take offense at her designer suit and ten pounds of jewelry. *Wives*," she continued, "who've been cheated on, left holding the bag for women like her. God, Pilar, they'll rip her to tattered shreds before it's done, and you can bet Larry Mann and his producers are counting on just that."

Pilar stopped pacing. "I never thought of that."

"Honey, Rene Foxx is just one of God's many custard pies. She hit you in the face, sure, but so what? Time to wipe her off."

"You're right. I worry about the family, about Sophie. Even though it's

tabloid press, it's press, and it's going to embarrass her. I wish I knew how to shut her up."

"You could get a temporary restraining order. I'm a judge, I know these things," Helen said dryly. "You could file suit—libel, defamation. And you might win. Probably would. But as your lawyer, and your friend, my advice is to let her have her rope. She'll hang herself with it sooner or later."

"The sooner the better. We're in an awful mess, Helen."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"If she says things that hint we may have arranged for Tony to be killed, that Margaret was involved . . . The police have already questioned us about a relationship between Margaret and Tony. It worries me."

"Margaret was the unlucky victim of some maniac's lunacy. Product tampering doesn't even have a target, that's why it's lunacy. Tony was deliberate. One has nothing to do with the other, and you shouldn't start linking them in your mind."

"The press is linking them."

"The press would link a monkey with an elephant if it upped the ratings and sold papers."

"You're right there, too. I'll tell you something, Helen, over the anger, under the worry I felt when I talked to Rene, I realized something. I confronted her on this point because it mattered, because it was important, because I needed to take a stand."

Sipping her drink, Helen nodded. "And?"

"And it made me realize that I never, not once, confronted her or any of the others, the countless other women in and out of Tony's life. Because it stopped, he stopped being important. I had no stand to take. That's very sad," she said quietly. "And not all his fault. No, it wasn't," she went on before Helen could do more than spit out an oath. "It takes two to make a marriage, and I never pushed him to be one of those two in ours."

"He started chipping at your self-esteem right from the beginning."

"That's true." Pilar held out a hand, took Helen's glass for a small and absent sip. "But a great deal that happened, and didn't happen, between us was as much my doing as his. I'm not looking back with regret. I'm looking back, Helen, because I'm never, never going to make those mistakes again."

"Okay, fine." Helen took the vodka back, toasted with it. "To the new Giambelli woman. Since you're forging a new path, come sit down and tell me all about your sex life now that you have one."

On a low sound of pleasure, Pilar stretched her arms to the ceiling. "Since you ask . . . I'm having an incredible, exciting, illicit affair with a younger man."

"I hate you."

"You're going to loathe me when I tell you he has this wonderful, hard, tireless body."

"Bitch."

Laughing, she dropped onto the arm of the sofa. "I had no idea, really, how a woman could get through life without having a clue what it's like to be pressed down under a body like that. Tony was slim and rather delicate."

"Not much of a yardstick."

"You're telling me." She winced. "Oh, that's terrible. That's sick."

"No, that's great. James has . . . a comfortable body. Sweet old bear," Helen said fondly. "But you won't mind if I enjoy a few thrills through your sexual adventure?"

"Of course not. What are friends for?"

Sophia was ready for a little sexual adventure of her own. God knew she needed one. She'd worked herself to near exhaustion, then worried herself over the line.

A swim after she'd shut down for the day had helped, then a turn in the whirlpool to loosen muscles tensed from that work and worry. She'd added one more phase to the water therapy with a long, sumptuous bath full of oil and scent.

She'd lit candles throughout the room, fragrant with lemongrass and vanilla and jasmine. In their shifting light she chose a nightgown of black silk with a low, lacy bodice and thin straps. Why be subtle?

She'd selected the wine from the private cellar. A young, frisky Chardonnay. She set it on ice to keep it cool, curled into a chair to wait for Ty. And fell dead asleep.

It felt odd sneaking into a house where he'd always been welcome. Odd and exciting.

He'd had moments, off and on during his life, where he'd imagined slipping into Sophia's bedroom in the dark. Hell, what man wouldn't?

But actually doing it, knowing she'd be waiting for him, was a lot better than any midnight fantasy.

He knew when he opened those doors they'd fall on each other like animals.

He could already taste her.

He could see the candlelight beating against the glass. Exotic, sensual. The turn of the knob in his hand barely made a click and rang like a trumpet in his head.

He braced for her, closing the door at his back. Then he saw her, curled in a ball of fatigue in the chair.

"Ah, hell, Sophie. Look at you."

He crossed the room quietly, crouched down and did what he rarely had the opportunity to do. He studied her without her knowing it.

Soft skin that hinted of rose and gold. Thick, inky lashes and a full, lush mouth perfectly shaped to meet a man's.

"You're one gorgeous piece of work," he murmured. "And you wore yourself out, didn't you?"

He glanced around the room, noting the wine, the candles, the bed already turned down and heaped with pillows. "The thought's just going to have to count for tonight. Come on, baby," he whispered as he slid his arms under her. "Let's put you to bed."

She stirred, shifted, snuggled. He decided there had to be a medal for a man who would tuck in a woman who looked, smelled, felt like this one and not crawl in eagerly after her.

"Hmmm. Ty."

"Good guess. Here you go," he said, laying her down. "Go back to sleep."

Her eyes fluttered open as he pulled the duvet up. "What? Where are you going?"

"For a long, lonely walk in the cold, dark night." Amused at both of them now, he leaned down to brush a chaste kiss on her forehead. "Followed by the requisite cold shower."

"Why?" She took his hand, tucked it under her cheek. "It's nice and warm in here."

"Baby, you're beat. I'll take a rain check."

"Don't go. Please, I don't want you to go."

"I'll be back." He leaned down again, intending to kiss her good night.

But her lips were soft and tasted of lazy invitation. He sank into them, and into her as she reached for him.

“Don’t go,” she said again. “Make love with me. It’ll be like a dream.”

It was dreamlike. Scents and shadows and sighs. Slow, and tender where neither had expected it, where neither would have asked. He slid into bed with her, floated with her on the easy stroke of her hands, the gentle rise of her body.

And the sweetness of it drifted through him like starlight.

He found her mouth again, and everything he’d ever wanted.

Her breathing thickened as sensations began to layer. His hands were rough from work, and smoothed over her like velvet. His body was hard, and covered hers like silk. His mouth was firm, and took from her with endless and devastating patience.

No wildness here, no greed. No brilliant flashes of urgency. Tonight was to savor and soothe. To offer and welcome.

The first crest was like being lifted onto clouds.

She moaned under him, one long, low sound as her body bowed fluidly to his. Satisfaction and surrender. She skimmed her fingers in his hair, saw the shades of it shift in the light and shadow. He did that, she thought as she lost herself in him. Shifted and changed. There were so many facets to him.

And here, gently, he was showing her yet another. Her fingers curled, drawing him down until mouth met mouth, and she could answer.

In the dark, he could see the glint of the candlelight in her eyes, gold dust splashed over rich pools. The air was scented sweet. She watched him, and he watched her as he slipped inside her.

“This is different,” he told her, and touched his mouth to hers as she shook her head. “This is different. Yesterday I wanted you. Tonight, I need you.”

Her vision blurred with tears. Her lips trembled with words she didn’t know how to say. And then she was so full of him, she could only sob out his name, and give.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

What did a seventy-three-year-old winemaker from Italy have in common with a thirty-six-year-old sales executive from California? Giambelli, David thought. It was the only link he could find between them.

Except the manner of their deaths.

Tests on the exhumed body of Bernardo Baptista had confirmed he'd ingested a dangerous dosage of digitalis, along with his Merlot. It couldn't be construed as a coincidence. Police on both sides of the Atlantic were calling it homicide and the Giambelli wine the murder weapon.

But why? What motive linked Margaret Bowers and Baptista?

He left his children tucked in their beds, and after checking on the Giambelli vineyards, drove toward MacMillan. As the temperature had dropped, he and Paulie had turned on the sprinklers, had walked the rows as water coated the vines and the thin skin of ice formed a protective shield against the threatening hard frost. He knew Paulie would stand watch through the night, making certain there was a constant and steady flow of water. Pre-dawn temperatures were forecast to hover near the critical twenty-nine-degree mark.

In an instant, vines could be murdered as efficiently and as ruthlessly as people.

This, at least, he could control. He could understand the brutality of nature, and fight it. How could a rational person understand cold-blooded and seemingly random murder?

He could see the fine mist of water swirling over the MacMillan vines, the tiny drops going to glimmer in the cold light of the moon. He pulled on

his gloves, grabbed his thermos of coffee and left the car to walk in the freezing damp.

He found Tyler sitting on an overturned crate, sipping from his own thermos. "Thought you might be by." In invitation, Ty banged the toe of his boot on another crate. "Pull up a chair."

"Where's your foreman?"

"Sent him home just a bit ago. No point in both of us losing a night's sleep." The truth was Ty liked sitting alone in the vineyard, thinking his thoughts while the sprinklers hissed.

"We're doing all we can do." Ty shrugged, scanning the rows that turned to a fairyland of sparkle under the lights. "System's running smooth."

David settled down, uncapped his thermos. Like Ty he wore a ski cap pulled over his head and a thick jacket that repelled both cold and damp. "Paulie took the watch at Giambelli. Frost alarms went off just after midnight. We were already prepped for it."

"This one's usual for the end of March. It's the ones that sneak in on you at the end of April, into May. I got it covered here, if you want to get some sleep."

"Nobody's getting much of that lately. Did you know Baptista?"

"Not really. My grandfather did. *La Signora's* taking it hard. Not that she'll let it show," he said. "Not outside the family, and not much inside, for that matter. But she's knocked back by it. They all are—the Giambelli women."

"Product tampering—"

"It's not just that. That's the business end. This is personal. They went over for the funeral when he died. I guess Sophia thought of him as a kind of mascot. Said he used to sneak her candy. Poor old bastard."

David hunched forward, holding the thermos cup of coffee between his knees. "I've been thinking on it, trying to find the real connection. Probably a waste of time since I'm a corporate suit, not a detective."

Tyler studied him over his coffee. "From what I've seen so far you're not much of a time-waster. And you're not so bad, for a suit."

With a half-laugh, David lifted his own coffee. Steam from it rose and merged with the mist. "Coming from you, that's a hell of a kudo."

"Damn right."

"Well. From what I can tell, Margaret never even met Baptista. He was dead before she took over Avano's accounts and started the travel to Italy."

"Doesn't matter if they were random victims."

David shook his head. "It matters if they're not."

"Yeah, I've been thinking that, too." Tyler got up to stretch his legs, and they began to walk the rows together.

Somewhere along the way, he realized, he'd lost his resentment of David. Just as well, he thought. It took so much damn energy to hold a grudge. And it was a waste of that energy and valuable time when both of them were on the same page in any case.

"They both worked for Giambelli, both knew the family." Ty paused. "Both knew Avano."

"He was dead before Margaret uncorked the bottle. Still, we don't know how long she had it. He'd have had plenty of reason to want her out of the way."

"Avano was an asshole," Tyler said flatly. "He was a prick on top of it. But I can't see him as a killer. Too much thought, too much effort and not enough guts."

"Did anybody like him?"

"Sophie." Tyler shrugged and wished he could keep her out of his mind for more than ten minutes at a time. "At least she tried to. And yeah, actually, plenty did, and not just women."

It was the first time David had been offered a straight and uncensored picture of Anthony Avano. "Because?"

"He had a good line, put on a good show. Slick. I'd've said grease through a goose slick, but he got away with it." As his own father did, Ty mused. "Some people, they just slither through life, knocking over bystanders with, you know, impunity. He was one of them."

"*La Signora* kept him on."

"For Pilar, for Sophia. That's the family end. On the business front, well, he knew how to keep the accounts happy."

"Yeah, his expense account shows just how much he put into that effort. So with Margaret leapfrogging over him, he was losing his opportunities to wine and dine on Giambelli's tab. Had to piss him off. At the company, at the family, at her."

"His style would've been to try to fuck her, not kill her."

Tyler stopped, his breath streaming out as he looked over the rows, scanned them line after line. It was colder now. His internal farmer's gauge told him it was edging down toward thirty degrees.

"I'm not a corporate suit, but I've got to figure all this trouble is costing the company plenty in profit and in appearances, which can translate to the same thing. If somebody wanted to cause the family trouble, they found an inventive and nasty way to do it."

"Between the recall, immediate public panic and long-term consumer distrust in the label, it's going to cost millions. It's going to affect profit across the board, and that includes what's yours."

"Yeah." He'd already faced the grim reality of that. "I figure Sophia's smart enough to take the edge off that long-term distrust."

"She's going to have to be more than smart. She'll have to be brilliant."

"She is. That's what makes her a pain in the ass."

"Stuck on her, are you?" David waved the comment away. "Sorry. Too personal."

"I was wondering if you were asking as a corporate suit, an associate or as the guy who's dating her mother."

"I was aiming toward friend."

Tyler thought about it a moment, then nodded. "Okay, that works for me. I guess you could say I've been stuck on her on and off since I was twenty. Sophie at sixteen," he remembered. "Christ. She was like a lightning bolt. And she knew it. Irritated the hell out of me."

For a moment, while the misting water sizzled and froze, David was silent. "There was a girl when I was in college." He was pleasantly surprised when Tyler tugged a flask from his pocket and offered it. "Marcella Roux. French. Legs up to her ears, and this sexy little overbite."

"An overbite." Ty settled into the image. "That's a good one."

"Oh yeah." David drank, letting the brandy punch into his system. "God, Marcella Roux. She scared the hell out of me."

"A woman who looks like that, who *is* like that, just wears you out." Tyler took the flask, drank. "Me, I figured if you had to be stuck on a woman, which is an annoyance itself, you might as well get stuck on one who's easy to be around and doesn't make you jumpy half the time. I put considerable effort into that theory the last ten years. Didn't do me a damn bit of good."

"I can beat that," David said after a moment. "Yeah, I can beat it. I had a wife, and we had a couple kids—good kids—and I figured we were chasing the American dream. Well, that went into the toilet. But I had the kids. Maybe I screwed up there a few times, but that's part of the job. And my focus was on the goal. Give them a decent life, be a good father. Women, well,

being a good father doesn't mean being a monk. But you keep that area down on the list of priorities. No serious relationships, not again. No sir, who needs it. Then Pilar opens the door, and she's holding flowers. There are all kinds of lightning bolts."

"Maybe. They still fry your brain."

They walked the rows in the coldest hour before dawn, while the sprinklers hissed and the vines glittered, iced silver, and safe.

Two hundred and fifty guests, a seven-course dinner, each with appropriate wines, followed by a concert in the ballroom and ending with dancing.

It had been a feat to pull off, and Sophia gave her mother full marks for helping to perfect each detail. She added a pat on the back for herself for carefully salting the guests with recognizable names and faces from all over the globe.

The UN, she thought as she sat with every appearance of serenity through the aria by the Italian soprano, had nothing on the Giambellis.

The quarter million raised for charity would not only do good work, it was damn good PR. Particularly good since all members of the family were in attendance, including her great-uncle the priest, who'd agreed to make the trip after a personal, and insistent, call from his sister.

Unity, solidarity, responsibility and tradition. Those were the key words she was pounding into the media. And with words went images. The gracious villa opening its doors for the sake of charity. The family, four generations, bound together by blood and wine, and one man's vision.

Oh yes, she was using Cezare Giambelli, the simple farmer who'd built an empire on sweat and dreams. It was irresistible. And while she didn't expect it to turn the tide of adversity, it had stemmed it.

The only irritant in the evening was Kris Drake.

Missed a step there, Sophia decided. She'd issued an invitation to Jeremy DeMorney quite purposefully. Inviting a handful of important competitors illustrated Giambelli's openness, and again a sense of community. It hadn't occurred to her Jerry would bring a former Giambelli employee as his date.

Should have, she reminded herself. It was clever, sneaky and slyly amusing on his part. And just like him. On top of that she had to give Kris credit for sheer balls. Brass ones.

Scored off me this round, she admitted. But felt she'd got back her own by being flawlessly gracious to both of them.

"You're not paying attention." Tyler gave her a quick elbow jab. "If I have to, you have to."

She leaned toward him slightly. "I hear every note. And I can write mental copy at the same time. Two different parts of the brain."

"Your brain has too many parts. How long does this last?"

The pure, rich notes throbbed on the air. "She's magnificent. And nearly finished. She's singing of tragedy, of heartbreak."

"I thought it was supposed to be about love."

"Same thing."

He glanced toward her, saw the sheen of tears, the single drop that spilled from those dark, deep eyes and clung perfectly to her lashes. "Are those real, or for the crowd?"

"You're such a peasant. Quiet." She linked her fingers with his, allowed herself to think of nothing, to feel nothing but the music for the final moments.

When the last note shimmered into silence, she rose, along with the others, into thunderous applause.

"Can we get out of here for five minutes now?" Ty whispered in her ear.

"Worse than a peasant, a barbarian. *Brava!*" she called out. "You go ahead," she added under her breath. "I need to play hostess. You should grab Uncle James, who looks as miserable as you do. Go out and have a drink and a cigar and be men."

"If you don't think it took a man to sit here, and stay awake, during nearly an hour of opera, baby, you better think again."

She watched him escape, then moved forward, hands extended to the diva. "*Signora, bellissima!*"

Pilar did her duty as well, but her mind wasn't full of music or publicity copy. It was reeling with details and timing. The chairs had to be removed, quickly and smoothly, to clear the ballroom for dancing. The terrace doors would be flung open at precisely the right minute and the orchestra set up there would begin to play. But not before the diva had been allowed her moment of adulation. She waited while Tereza and Eli presented the singer with roses, then signaled David, Helen and a few hand-chosen friends to add their congratulations and praise.

As others followed suit, she nodded at the waiting staff. Then frowned when she saw her aunt Francesca still sitting, and obviously sound asleep. Sedated herself again, Pilar thought, winding her way through guests.

"Don." She squeezed her cousin's arm, smiling an apology to the couple he'd been speaking with. "Your mother isn't well," she said quietly. "Could you help me take her to her room?"

"Sure. I'm sorry, Pilar," he continued as they moved aside. "I should've kept a closer eye on her." He scanned the crowd, looking for his wife. "I thought Gina was with her."

"It's all right. *Zia* Francesca?" Pilar leaned down, spoke quietly, soothingly in Italian as she and Don helped the woman to her feet.

"*Ma che vuoi?*" She seemed dazed as she slapped at Pilar's hand. "*Lasciame in pace.*"

"We're just going to take you to bed, Mama." Don took a firmer grip. "You're tired."

"Sì, sì." She stopped struggling. "*Vorrei del vino.*"

"You've already had enough wine," Don told her, but Pilar shook her head at him.

"I'll bring you some, once you're in your room."

"You're a good girl, Pilar." Docile as a lamb, Francesca shuffled out of the ballroom. "So much sweeter of nature than Gina. Don should have married you."

"We're cousins, *Zia* Francesca," Pilar reminded her.

"You are? Oh, of course. My mind is muddled. Traveling is very stressful."

"I know. You'll feel better when you're in your nightgown and in bed."

Mindful of the time, Pilar rang for a maid as soon as they'd carted Francesca to her room. Though she was sorry for it, she dumped the matter on Don and rushed back to take her place in the ballroom.

"Problem?" Sophia asked her.

"Aunt Francesca."

"Ah, that's always fun. Well, having a priest in the family should help cancel out the odd drunk. Are we ready?"

"We are." Pilar dimmed the lights. At the signal, the terrace doors were opened and music poured in. As Tereza and Eli led the first dance, Sophia slid an arm around her mother's waist.

“Perfect. Wonderful job.”

“God bless us, every one.” She blew out a breath. “I could use a drink myself.”

“When this is over, we’ll kill a bottle of champagne apiece. Right now”—she gave Pilar a little nudge—“dance.”

It looked like socializing, but it was work. Putting on the confident front, answering questions, some subtle, some not, on the situation from interested guests and the invited press. Expressing sorrow and outrage, both sincerely felt, while getting the intended message across.

Giambelli-MacMillan was alive and well and making wine.

“Sophia! Lovely, lovely event.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Elliot. I’m so glad you could attend.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it. You know Blake and I are very active on behalf of the homeless. Our restaurant contributes generously to the shelters.”

And your restaurant, Sophia thought as she made appropriate noises, canceled its standing order on all Giambelli and MacMillan labels at the first sign of trouble. “Perhaps at some point your business and ours could work together on a fund-raiser. Food and wine, after all, the perfect marriage.”

“Mmm. Well.”

“You’ve known my family since before I was born.” To establish intimacy, Pilar took the woman’s arm, walked with her away from the music. “I hope you know how much we value that association, and that friendship.”

“Blake and I have nothing but the greatest respect for your grandmother, and for Eli. We couldn’t be more sorry about your recent troubles.”

“When friends have troubles, they look to other friends for support.”

“On a personal level, you have it. But business is business, Sophia. We have to protect our clientele.”

“As do we. Giambelli stands by its product. Any of us at any time can be the victim of tampering and sabotage. If we, and those who do business with us, allow the perpetrators of that to win, it only opens others up to the same risk.”

“Be that as it may, Sophia, until we’re assured the Giambelli label is clean, we can’t and won’t serve it. I’m sorry for it, and I’m impressed with the way you’re handling your difficulties. Blake and I wouldn’t be here tonight if we didn’t support you and your family on a personal level. Our

patrons expect fine food well served when they come to us, not to gamble on a glass of wine that may be tainted.”

“Four bottles out of how many thousands,” Sophia began.

“One is too many. I’m sorry, dear, but that’s the reality. Excuse me.”

Sophia marched directly to a waiter, took a glass of red and, after turning a slow circle in case anyone was watching, drank deeply.

“You look a little stressed.” Kris sidled up beside her, chose a glass of champagne. “Must come from actually having to work for a living.”

“You’re mistaken.” Her voice might have frosted the air between them. “I don’t work for a living, but for love.”

“Spoken like a princess.” Pleased with herself, Kris sipped her wine. As far as she was concerned, she had one function to fulfill that evening: to dig under Sophia’s skin. “Isn’t that what Tony used to call you? His princess.”

“Yes.” Sophia braced for the rush of grief, but it never came. That, itself, was a sorrow. “He never understood me. Apparently neither do you.”

“Oh, I understand you. And your family. You’re in trouble. With Tony gone and you and farm boy in charge, your company’s lost the edge. Now you’re flaunting yourself in your evening gowns and your heirloom pearls to try to drum up business and cover up mistakes. Really, you’re no different from the guy on the corner panhandling. At least he’s honest about it.”

Carefully, deliberately, Sophia set her wine aside and edged forward. Before she could speak, Jerry strode over, laid a hand on Kris’s arm.

“Kris.” There was warning in his tone. “This is inappropriate. Sophia, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need anyone to apologize for me.” Kris tossed back her hair. “I’m not on company time here, but my own.”

“I’m not interested in apologies. From either of you. You’re a guest in my home, and as long as you behave as such, you’ll be treated as a guest. If you insult me here, or any of my family, I’ll have you removed. Just as I had you removed from my offices. Don’t delude yourself into thinking I’ll hesitate to cause a scene.”

Kris pursed her lips in a kind of kiss. “Wouldn’t that play nicely in the press?”

“Dare me,” Sophia spat back. “Then we’ll see which one of us spins it best tomorrow. Either way, Kris, you’ll be out on your ass and your new boss might not care for that, right, Jerry?”

"Sophia! How lovely you look." Helen hugged an arm around Sophia's shoulders, squeezing hard. "Excuse us, won't you?" She said it brightly while she pulled Sophia away. "You want to turn down the kill lights in your eyes, honey? You're scaring the guests."

"I'd like to fry Kris with them, and Jerry with her."

"Not worth it, sweetie."

"I know it, I know it. She wouldn't have gotten to me if I hadn't already been steaming over Anne Elliot."

"Let's just take a little walk to the powder room while you calm down. Remind yourself you've put on a terrific show here. You've made an impression."

"Too little, for too much."

"Sophie, you're trembling."

"I'm just angry. Just angry." She held it in as they walked down to the family level. "And scared," she admitted when she slipped into a powder room with Helen. "Aunt Helen, I poured money into this event. Money, given the situation, I should have been more careful with. The Elliots aren't going to budge. Then Kris drops down like a crow smelling fresh kill."

"She's just one more of Tony's castoffs, and not worth your energy or your time."

"She knows the way I think." There wasn't room to pace off the heat, so Sophia simply stood and simmered in it. "The way I work. I should've found a way to keep her in the company, a way to control her."

"Stop it. You can't take on the blame for her. Anyone can see she's viciously jealous of you. I know things are shaky now, but I talked with a number of people tonight who're solidly behind you, who are appalled by what happened."

"Yes, and some of them may even be swayed to put their money where their sentiments are. But there are more, too many more, who won't. I had reports from the wait staff that a number of guests are avoiding the wine or watching others drink it, and live, first. It's horrible. And such a strain on *Nonna*. I'm starting to see it, and that worries me."

"Sophie, when a company's been in business a hundred years, it has crises. This is just one of them."

"We've never had anything like this. We're losing accounts, Aunt Helen. You know it. There are jokes, you've heard them. Having trouble with your wife? Don't see a lawyer, give her a bottle of Giambelli."

“Honey, I’m a lawyer, we’ve been jokes for centuries.” But she stroked Sophia’s hair. She hadn’t realized how much the child worried, hadn’t realized it went so deep. “You’re taking too much of this on yourself.”

“It’s my job to maintain the image, not only as the next generation but as an executive. If I can’t swing this . . . I know I put a lot of eggs in tonight’s basket, and I hate seeing some of them broken.”

“Some,” Helen reminded her. “Far from all.”

“But I’m not getting the message out. We’re the victims here, why can’t people see that? We were attacked. We’re *still* being attacked—financially, emotionally, legally. The police . . . For God’s sake, there are rumors drifting around that Margaret and my father were in some sort of conspiracy together, and Mama knew.”

“Just Rene’s blathering.”

“Yes, but if the police start taking it seriously, start questioning her as a suspect, I don’t know what we’ll do.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Oh, Aunt Helen, it could. With Rene streaming around from talk show to tabloid fanning the flames, and no sign of those responsible being caught, Mama’s top of the list. Right along with me.”

She’d thought of it, hadn’t been able to help it. But hearing it said so bluntly brought a chill to Helen’s skin. “Now you listen. No one is going to accuse you or your mother of anything. The police may look, but only to eliminate. If they step closer than that, they’ll have to go through James, through me, even Linc.”

She drew Sophia into a hug. “Don’t you worry about that.”

She patted Sophia’s back and stared at her own face in the mirror. The encouraging smile was gone, and concern had taken its place. She was grateful attorney-client privilege with Tereza prevented her from adding to the girl’s fears.

Only that morning, all financial records of the company had been subpoenaed.

Sophia freshened her lipstick, powdered her nose and squared her shoulders. No one would have seen the fear or despair now. She glittered, and glowed, her laugh warm and careless as she joined the guests.

She flirted, she danced and continued to campaign. Her spirits lifted considerably when she charmed and cajoled another major account into lifting its ban on the Giambelli label.

Pleased with herself, she took a short break to harass Linc. "Are you still hanging around this loser?" she asked Andrea.

"Well, he cries every time I try to dump him."

"I do not. I just look really forlorn. I was about to come looking for you," he told Sophia. "We're going to take off."

"So early?"

"The string quartet isn't really my scene. I'm just here because Mom bribed me with pound cake. But I wanted to see you before we headed out, to ask how you're holding up."

"Oh, fine."

He tapped her nose. "It's okay. Andrea knows the score."

"It's rough," she admitted. "*Nonna's* having a hard time accepting what happened to *Signore* Baptista. He meant a lot to her. I guess we're all feeling squeezed between the various investigations. In fact, I whined all over your mom a little bit ago."

"She's used to it. You know you can call me and whine anytime."

"I know." She kissed Linc's cheek. "You're not really so bad. And you have good taste in doctors. Go. Escape." She stepped aside. "Come back," she added to Andrea, and began another circuit of the room.

"There you are." Tyler caught her, pulled her toward a corner. "I can't take much more of this. I'm deserting the field."

"Now, buck up." She measured the crowd. Beginning to thin, she judged, but not by much. That was a good sign. "Hold out another hour and I'll make it worth your while."

"My while's worth quite a bit."

"I'll bear that in mind. Go charm Betina Renaldi. She's old, influential and very susceptible to rugged young men with tight butts."

"Boy, are you going to owe me."

"Just ask her to dance and tell her how much we value her patronage."

"If she pinches my tight butt, I'm taking it out on you."

"Mmm. I look forward to it." She circled just in time to spot an argument brewing between Don and Gina. Quickly, she cut across the ballroom.

“Let’s not do this here.” In what would be taken as an affectionate gesture, she stepped between them and linked arms. “We don’t need to add to the gossip mill.”

“You think you can tell me how to behave?” Gina would have wrenched her arm free if Sophia hadn’t borne down. “You, whose father was a gigolo, whose family has no honor.”

“Careful, Gina, careful. That family keeps you in diapers. Let’s go outside.”

“You go to hell.” She rammed Sophia hard against Don. “You, and all of you.” Her voice spiked, causing several heads to turn. Sophia managed to drag her to the doorway of the ballroom before she broke free.

“If you cause a scene here,” Sophia said, “it’ll cost you as much as the rest of us. Your children are Giambelli. Remember it.”

Gina’s lip quivered, but she lowered her voice. “You remember it. You both remember it, and that what I do, I do for them.”

“Don. Damn it. Go after her, calm her down.”

“I can’t. She won’t listen.” He moved behind the doors, took out a handkerchief to wipe his sweaty brow. “She’s pregnant again.”

“Oh.” Torn between relief and annoyance, Sophia patted his arm. “Congratulations.”

“I didn’t want another child. She knew. We fought about it. Then she tells me tonight, as we’re dressing and the children are screaming and my head’s bursting. She expects me to be thrilled, and when I’m not, she rips at me.”

He shoved the cloth back in his pocket.

“I’m sorry. Really. Very sorry, but impressions tonight are vital. Whether or not you’re happy about this, you have to fix it. She’s pregnant, vulnerable and her hormones are raging. Added to that, she didn’t get in that condition by herself. You need to go to her.”

“I can’t,” he said again. “She won’t speak to me now. I was upset. All during the evening she sulked or reminded me it was God’s will, a blessing. I needed to get away from her. Five precious minutes away from that nagging. So I slipped out to make a phone call. I called— There’s another woman.”

“Oh, perfect.” She didn’t bother to curse. “Isn’t that just perfect.”

“I didn’t know Gina followed me. Didn’t know she’d overheard. She waited until I was back inside to confront me, to accuse, to claw. No, she won’t speak to me now.”

“Well, you both picked your moment.”

“Please, I know what I have to do, and I will. Promise me you won’t tell Zia Tereza of this.”

“Do you think I’d go running to *Nonna* like a tattletale?”

“Sophie. I didn’t mean it that way.” Relieved at her angry claim not to be a gossip, he took her hands. “I’ll fix it. I will. If you could just go after Gina now, convince her to behave, to be patient. Not to do anything rash. Already with the investigation I’m under such pressure.”

“This isn’t about you, Donato.” She pulled her hands away. “You’re just one more man who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants. But it is about Giambelli. So I’ll do what I can with Gina. For once, she actually has my sympathy. And you will fix it. You’ll break it off with the other woman and deal with your marriage and your children.”

“I love her. Sophie, you understand what it is to be in love.”

“I understand you have three children and another on the way. You’ll be responsible to your family, Donato. You’ll be a man, or I’ll personally see you pay for it. *Capisce?*”

You said you wouldn’t go to *La Signora*. I trusted you.”

“*La Signora* isn’t the only Giambelli woman who knows how to deal with cheats and liars. Or cowards. *Cacasotto.*”

He went white. “You’re too hard.”

“Try me, and you’ll see just how hard. Now, be smart. Go back in and smile. Announce to your aunt that you’re about to bring another Giambelli into the world. And stay away from me until I can stand the sight of you again.”

She left him there, quivering with rage. Hard, she thought. Maybe. And maybe part of her rage had been directed at her father, another cheat, another liar, another father who ignored his responsibilities.

Marriage, she thought, meant nothing to some. No more than a game whose rules were broken for the thrill of it. She hurried through the family wing, but found no sign of Gina.

Idiot woman, she decided, and was unsure who she disliked more at the moment, Gina or Donato.

She called out quietly, peeked into the nursery where the children and the young woman hired to tend them for the evening slept.

Thinking Gina might have taken her rage outside, she stepped out on the terrace. Music from the quartet drifted out into the night.

She wished she could drift herself, just leave it all to work itself out. Enraged wives, straying husbands. Cops and lawyers and faceless enemies. She was tired of it, all of it.

She wanted Ty. She wanted to dance with him with her head on his shoulder and all her worries in someone else's brain for a few hours.

Instead she ordered herself to go back and do what needed to be done.

She heard a faint sound from the room behind her and started to turn. "Gina?"

A vicious shove sent her flying back. Her heels skidded, lost purchase on the terrace floor. She caught a blur of movement as she fell. And when her head hit the stone of the rail, she saw nothing but an explosion of light.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tyler decided to finish off his evening by dancing with Tereza. She felt small but reassuringly sturdy in her beaded gown. Her hand was dry and cool in his.

"Why aren't you exhausted?" he asked her.

"I will be, when the last guest leaves."

Over her head, he scanned the room. Too many people still left, he thought, and it was already after midnight. "We could start booting them out."

"Unfailingly gracious. I like that about you." When he grinned down at her, she studied him carefully. "None of this means anything to you."

"Of course it does. The vineyards—"

"Not the vineyards, Tyler." She gestured toward the terrace doors, the lights, the music. "This, the fancy clothes, the inane chatter, the wash of guilt."

"Not a damn thing."

"But you come, for your grandfather."

"For my grandfather, and for you, *La Signora*. For . . . the family. If it didn't matter, I'd have taken a hike last year when you reorganized my life."

"You haven't quite forgiven me for that," she chuckled.

"Not quite." But he shifted her hand and, in a rare gallant gesture, kissed her knuckles.

"If you'd walked away, I'd have found a way to bring you back. I'd have made you sorry, but I'd have brought you back. You're needed here. I'm going to tell you something, because your grandfather won't."

"Is he sick?" Tyler missed a step as he turned his head to seek out Eli in the crowd.

“Look at me. At me,” she said with quiet intensity. “I’d rather he didn’t know what we’re speaking of.”

“Has he seen a doctor? What’s wrong with him?”

“He is sick—but in his heart. Your father called him.”

“What does he want? Money?”

“No, he knows he’ll get no more money.” She would have kept it to herself. She detested passing burdens. But the boy, she’d decided after much thought, had a right to know. A right to defend his own, even against his own. “He’s outraged. The recent problems, the scandals are interfering with his social calendar and causing him, he claims, considerable embarrassment. Apparently the police have asked questions about him in the course of their investigation. He blames Eli.”

“He won’t call again. I’ll take care of it.”

“I know you will. You’re a good boy, Tyler.”

He looked down at her again, forced a smile. “Am I?”

“Yes, good enough. I wouldn’t shift this burden to you, but Eli has a soft heart. This has bruised it.”

“I don’t . . . have the soft heart.”

“Soft enough.” She lifted her hand from his shoulder to his cheek. “I depend on you.” When his face registered surprise she continued. “Does hearing that surprise you or frighten you?”

“Maybe both.”

“Adjust.” It was an order, smoothly given, as she stepped back from him.

“Now, you’re dismissed. Go find Sophia and lure her away.”

“She’s not easily lured.”

“I imagine you can handle her. There aren’t many who can. I haven’t seen her for some time now. Go find her, take her mind off work for a few hours.”

And that, Tyler mused, was akin to a blessing. He wasn’t sure that he wanted it. Didn’t know what he planned to do with it. For the moment, he was going to tuck it away and follow the spirit of Tereza’s order. Find Sophia, and escape.

She wasn’t in the ballroom or on the terrace. He avoided asking people if they’d seen her as that smacked too close to an eager idiot trying to find his date. Which he supposed was pretty much the case.

Regardless, he prowled the wing, poking into a reception room where some of the guests had gathered to sit and chat. He found the Moores there,

with James puffing on a cigar and Helen sipping tea while he discoursed on some ancient, landmark case. Linc and his date, who he thought had left an hour before, were either held hostage or enthralled on the sofa.

“Ty, come on in. Have a cigar.”

“No, thanks. I’m just . . . *La Signora* asked me to find Sophia.”

“Haven’t seen her for a while. Wow, look at the time.” Linc surged to his feet, dragging Andrea to hers. “We’ve really got to go.”

“She might’ve gone downstairs, Ty,” Helen offered. “To freshen up or catch her breath.”

“Yeah, right. I’ll check.”

He started down, and ran into Pilar on the steps. “Your mother’s wondering where Sophia is.”

“Isn’t she upstairs?” Distracted, Pilar shook back her hair. She wanted nothing more than ten minutes of fresh air and a tall glass of water. “I haven’t seen her for, oh, half an hour at least. I was just down trying to talk to Gina through the door of her room. She’s locked herself in. Fighting with Don, apparently. She’s throwing things around, weeping hysterically, and of course she’s woken the children. They’re shrieking.”

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll make sure to avoid that part of the house.”

“Why don’t you check her room? I got enough out of Gina to know Sophia tried to referee. She might be in there cooling off. Is David in the ballroom?”

“Didn’t see him,” Ty said as he walked by. “He’s probably around somewhere.”

He turned toward Sophia’s room. If he found her, he thought it might be a fine idea to lock the doors and take her mind off work, as ordered. He’d been wondering all night just what she had on under that red dress.

He knocked lightly, eased the door open. The room was dark and cold. With a shake of his head, he started across to close the terrace doors.

“You’re going to freeze your excellent ass off in here, Sophie,” he muttered, and heard a quiet moan.

Puzzled, he stepped out and saw her in the sprinkle of light that dripped down from the ballroom. She was sprawled on the terrace, braced on one elbow as she tried to shift. He leaped forward, dropped down on his knees beside her.

“Easy, baby. What’d you do? Take a spill?”

“I don’t know . . . I . . . Ty?”

"Yeah. Jesus, you're freezing. Come on, let's get you inside."

"I'm okay. Just a little jumbled. Let me get my head clear."

"Inside. You took a knock, Soph. You're bleeding."

"I'm . . ." She touched her fingers to the pump of pain on her forehead, then stared dully at the red smear she took away. "Bleeding," she managed as her lids closed again.

"Oh no, no, you don't." He shifted his grip. "No passing out." His heart staggered in his chest as he lifted her. Her face was sheet-white, her eyes glazed, and the scrape on her forehead was oozing blood. "That's what you get for wearing those skinny heels. I don't know how women walk on them without breaking their ankles."

He kept talking, to calm them both, as he laid her on the bed and turned back to shut the terrace doors. "Let's warm you up some, and we'll take a look at the damage."

"Ty." She gripped his hand as he pulled a throw over her. Despite the pain, her mind was clearing now. "I didn't fall. Somebody pushed me."

"Pushed you? I'm going to turn on this light so I can see where you're hurt."

She turned her head away from the glare. "I think I'm hurt everywhere."

"Quiet now. Just lie still." His hands were gentle, even as his temper raged. The head wound was nasty, a vicious scrape already swelling and full of grit. Her arm was scraped as well, just below the shoulder.

"I'm going to get you out of this dress."

"Sorry, handsome. I have a headache."

Appreciating her attempt at humor, he eased her forward, searching for a zipper, buttons, hooks. Something. "Honey, how the hell does this thing work?"

"Under the left arm." Every inch of her was beginning to ache. "Little zipper, then you sort of peel it off the rest of the way."

"I've been wondering what you had on under here," he babbled as he undressed her. He imagined there was a name for the strapless deal that cinched at her waist and curved up high at the hips. He'd have just called it stupendous. Stockings came up to her thighs and were hooked by little garters shaped like roses. While he appreciated the architecture of the underwear, he was more relieved that there wasn't extensive damage to the woman in it.

Her right knee was a little scraped up, and the sheer, silky stocking was a ruin.

Someone, he promised himself, was going to pay and pay dearly for putting marks on her. But that would have to wait.

“Not so bad, see?” His voice was easy as he helped her sit up a little to see for herself. “Looks like you fell on your right side, a little bruise coming up on your hip there, scraped knee and shoulder. Your head took the worst of it, so that’s lucky, considering.”

“That’s a really amusing way to tell me I have a hard head. Ty, I didn’t fall. I was pushed.”

“I know. We’ll get to that after I clean you up some.”

When he rose, she just lay back. “Get me a bottle of aspirin while you’re in there.”

“I don’t think you should take anything before you get to the hospital.”

“I’m not going to the hospital for a couple of scrapes and bumps.” She heard water hitting the sink in the adjoining bath. “If you try to make me, I’ll cry and go very female and make you feel horrible. Believe me, I’m ready to make someone feel horrible, and you’re in the line of fire. Don’t use my good washcloths. There’re some everyday ones in the linen closet, and antiseptic and aspirin.”

“Shut up, Sophie.”

She tugged the blanket higher. “It’s cold in here.”

He came back in carrying her Murano glass bowl, one of her best guest towels, already wet slopping inside, and a glass of water.

“What did you do with the potpourri that was in that dish?”

“Don’t worry about it. Come on, let’s play doctor.”

“Aspirin. I’m begging you.”

He pulled a bottle out of his pocket, opened it and shook out two.

“Please, let’s not be stingy. I want four.”

He let her take them and began cleaning the head wound. It took effort to keep his hands steady, to draw breath smoothly. “Who pushed you?”

“I don’t know. I’d come down looking for Gina. She and Don had a fight.”

“Yeah, I heard about it.”

“I couldn’t find her, came in here. I wanted a minute to myself, and some air, so I went out on the terrace. I heard something behind me, started to turn around. The next thing I know I’m skidding—couldn’t catch my balance. Then lights out. How bad’s my face?”

“Nothing bad about your face. That’s part of your problem. You’re going to have a knot up here, right along the hairline. Cut’s not deep, just a good-sized shallow scrape. You have any impression who pushed you? Man? Woman?”

“No. It was fast, and it was dark. I guess it might have been Gina, or Don for that matter. They were both furious with me. That’s what happens when you get in the middle.”

“If it was either of them, they’re going to look a whole lot worse than you before I’m finished.”

The quick little leap of her heart made her feel foolish. And went a long way to cooling her own bubbling temper. “My hero. But I don’t know if it was either of them. Could just as easily have been someone who’d come in to poke around in my room, then gave me a shove so I wouldn’t catch them.”

“We’ll take a look around, see if anything’s missing or messed with. Hold your breath.”

“What?”

“Hold your breath,” he repeated, then watched her face contort in pain as he used the peroxide he’d had in his other pocket.

“Festa di cazzo! Coglioni! Mostro!”

“A minute ago I was a hero.” Sympathetically, he blew on the sting. “Better in a minute. Let’s deal with the rest.”

“Va via.”

“Would you mind cursing at me in English?”

“I said go away. Don’t touch me.”

“Come on, be a big, brave girl. I’ll give you a lollipop after.” He yanked the blanket aside, dealt quickly, ruthlessly with the other scrapes.

“I’m going to put this gunk on them.” He pulled out a tube of antiseptic cream. “Bandage them up. How’s your vision?”

Her breath was puffing from the exertion of trying to fight him off, and he wasn’t even winded. It killed her. “I can see you well enough, you sadist. You’re enjoying this.”

“It does have certain side benefits. Name the first five presidents of the United States.”

“Sneezy, Dopey, Moe, Larry and CURLY.”

Christ, was it any wonder he’d fallen for her? “Close enough. Probably don’t have a concussion. There you go, baby.” He kissed her sulking lips gently. “All done.”

“I want my lollipop.”

“You bet.” But he just leaned down, held on. “Scared me,” he murmured against her cheek. “Scared hell out of me, Sophie.”

Hearing that, knowing that, had her heart making that same little leap. "It's okay now. You're not really a bastard."

"Still hurting?"

"No."

"How do you say 'liar' in Italian?"

"Never mind. It feels better when you're holding me. Thanks."

"No charge. Where do you keep your glittery things?"

"Jewelry? Costume is in the jewelry armoire, the real things are in my safe. You think I surprised a thief?"

"Easy enough to find out." He sat up, then rose to turn on the rest of the lights.

They saw it at the same time. Despite the lingering pain, Sophia shot straight out of bed. There was as much anger as terror in her belly as she read the message, scrawled in red, on her mirror.

BITCH #3

"Kris. Damn it, that's her style. If she thinks I'm going to let her get away with . . ." She trailed off as terror overwhelmed every other feeling. "Number three. Mama. *Nonna*."

"Put something on," Tyler ordered. "And lock the doors. I'll check it out."

"No, you won't." She was already marching to her closet. "We'll check it out. Nobody pushes me around," she said as she dragged on a sweater and pants. "Nobody."

They found similar messages on the bureau mirrors in Pilar's and Tereza's rooms. But they didn't find Kris Drake.

"There must be something else we can do."

Sophia wiped furiously at the letters smearing her mirror. The local police had responded, taken statements, examined the vandalism. And had told her nothing she hadn't concluded for herself. Someone had entered each bedroom, left an ugly little message written in red lipstick on the glass. And had knocked her down.

“There’s nothing else we can do tonight.” Tyler took her wrist, drew her hand down. “I’ll take care of that.”

“It was addressed to me.” But she threw the rag down in disgust.

“The cops are going to question her, Sophie.”

“And I’m sure she’ll tell them she waltzed in here, scrawled this love note and knocked me down.” She let out a sound of frustration, then clamped her teeth down on it. “Doesn’t matter. The police may not be able to prove she did this, but I know she did. And sooner or later, I’ll make her pay for it.”

“And I’ll hold your coat. In the meantime, go to bed.”

“I can’t sleep now.”

He took her hand, led her to the bed. She was still in her clothes, and he wore his shirt and tuxedo pants. He eased onto the bed with her, pulled up the blanket.

“Try.”

She lay still a moment, amazed when he made no move to touch her, to seduce, to take. He reached over, turned out the light.

“Ty?”

“Hmmm.”

“It doesn’t hurt as much when you hold me.”

“Good. Go to sleep.”

And settling her head on his shoulder, she was able to do as he asked.

Claremont stretched back in his chair as Maguire read the incident report. “So, what do you think?”

“The youngest Ms. Giambelli gets knocked down, banged up a little. All three of them receive an unpleasant message that smudges up their mirrors. On the surface?” she said, tossing the paperwork back on his desk. “Looks like a prank. A female one.”

“And under the surface?”

“Sophia G wasn’t hurt badly, but if it had been her grandmother who walked in at the wrong time, it could have been a lot more serious. Old bones break easier. And from the timeline the locals were able to put together, she was lying out there in the night chill for at least fifteen, twenty minutes. Very unpleasant. Might’ve been longer if our young hunk hadn’t gone hunting for her. So we have a mean prank, and somebody who’s doing whatever’s handy to needle them.”

"And from the youngest Giambelli's statement, Kristin Drake fits the bill."

"She's denied it, vehemently," Maguire countered, but they both knew she was playing devil's advocate. "Nobody can place her in that part of the house during the evening. No handy fingerprints to tie her in."

"Sophia G's lying about it? Mistaken?"

"I don't think so." Maguire pursed her lips. "No point in lying about it, and she doesn't strike me as a woman who does anything without a point. Careful, too. She wouldn't accuse unless she was sure. The Drake woman took a slap at her. It may be as simple as that. Or it may be a lot more."

"It bothers me. If we have somebody who's gone to the time, trouble, the risk, to taint wine, somebody who was willing to kill, why would that person bother with something as petty as a message on a mirror?"

"We don't know it's the same person."

Links clicking onto links. That's the way he saw it. "Hypothetically, using a vendetta against the Giambellis to connect."

"To kick at them, then. Gonna throw a big party, are you? Want to pretend everything's getting back to normal? Take this."

"Maybe. Drake's a connection. She worked for the company, she had an affair with Avano. If she's pissed enough to've caused the trouble at the party, she might've been pissed enough to put a couple bullets in a lover."

"Ex-lover, according to her statement." She frowned. "Frankly, partner, she was a dead end before, and I don't see this little sneak attack pinning her to the Avano homicide. Different styles."

"It's interesting though, isn't it? The Giambellis go for years, decades, without any substantial trouble. In the past few months, they've had nothing but. It's interesting."

Tyler paced outside with the phone. The house seemed too small when he was talking to his father. California seemed too small when he was talking to his father.

Not that he was doing any talking at the moment, just listening to the usual gripes and complaints.

He let them run through his head. The country club was rife with gossip and black humor involving him. His current wife—Ty had actually lost track of how many Mrs. MacMillans there'd been by this time—had been

humiliated at the spa. Expected invitations for various social functions had not been forthcoming.

Something had to be done about it, and quickly. It was Eli's responsibility to keep the family name above reproach, which he had obviously ignored by marrying the Italian woman in the first place. But be that as it may, it was essential, it was imperative, that the MacMillan name, label and company be severed from Giambelli. He expected Tyler to use all his influence before it was too late. Eli was old, and obviously long past the time for retirement.

"Finished?" Tyler didn't wait for his father's assent or objection. "Because here's how it's going to be. You have any complaints or comments, you direct them to me. If you call and harass Granddad again, I'll do whatever I can, legally, to revoke that trust fund you've been living off of for the last thirty years."

"You have no right to—"

"No, *you* have no right. You never worked a day for this company, any more than you and my mother worked a day to be parents. Until he's ready to step aside, Eli MacMillan runs this show. And when he's ready to step aside, I'll run it. Believe me, I won't be as patient as he's been. You cause him one more moment's grief, and we'll have more than a phone conversation about it."

"Are you threatening me? Do you plan to send someone after me like Tony Avano?"

"No, I know how to hit you where it hurts. I'll see to it all your major credit cards are canceled. Remember, you're not dealing with an old man now. Don't fuck with me."

He jabbed the off button, considered heaving the phone, then spotted Sophia standing at the edge of the patio.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop." If he'd looked angry, she could have brushed it off, but he looked miserable. She knew, how well she knew, what it was like. So she went to him, cupped his face in her hands. "Sorry," she said again.

"No big deal. Just a conversation with dear old Dad." Disgusted, he tossed the phone onto the patio table. "What do you need?"

"I heard the weather report, so I know there's a frost warning tonight. I wondered if you wanted any company out there."

"No, thanks. I can handle it." He lifted her bangs, studied the healing wound. "Very attractive."

“Those things always look worse a few days later. But I don’t feel stiff when I wake up in the morning anymore. Ty . . . tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing. I handled it.”

“Yes, yes, you can handle anything. Me too. We’re so annoying.” She gave his shoulders a squeeze. “I told you where it hurt. Now you tell me.”

He started to shrug her off, then realized he didn’t want to. “My father. He’s sniping at my grandfather about all the bad press, all the police business. Interfering with his tennis lessons, or something. I told him to lay off.”

“Will he?”

“If he doesn’t, I’m going to talk to Helen about putting some leaks in his trust fund. That’ll shut him up quick enough. The son of a bitch. The son of a bitch never did a day’s work in his life—worse, never stirred himself up to show an ounce of gratitude for what he was given. Just takes and takes, then whines if he runs into a bump. No wonder he and your father got along so well.”

He caught himself, cursed. “Goddamn it, Sophie. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be. You’re right.”

There was a bond here, she thought, that neither of them had acknowledged before. Perhaps this was the time.

“Ty, have you ever considered how lucky we are, you and I, that certain genes skipped a generation? Don’t close off,” she said before he could draw away. “You’re so like Eli.”

She combed her fingers through his hair. She’d come to love the way she could tease out the reds. “Tough guy,” she said as she touched her lips to his cheek. “Solid as a rock. Don’t let the weak space between you and Eli cut at you.”

As his temper deflated, he laid his forehead lightly on hers. “I never needed him—my father.” Not, he thought, the way you needed yours. “Never wanted him.”

“And I needed, wanted too much from mine for too long. That’s part of what made us what we are. I like who we are.”

“I guess you’re not half-bad, considering.” He gave her arms a casual caress. “Thanks.” He leaned down, kissed the top of her head. “I wouldn’t mind a little company on frost watch tonight.”

“I’ll bring the coffee.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tiny flowering buds, bursting open as the lengthening days bathed them in sunlight, covered the vines. The earth was turned, opened to hold the promise of new plantings. Trees held their spring leaves in tight fists of stinging green, but here and there sprouts, brave and young, speared out of the ground. In the woods, nests were heavy with eggs, and mother ducks guarded their newly hatched babies while they swam in the stream.

April, Tereza thought, meant rebirth. And work. And hope that winter was over at last.

“The Canada geese are about to hatch,” Eli told her as they took their morning walk in the cool and quiet mist.

She nodded. Her father had used that same natural barometer to judge the timing of the year’s harvest. She had learned to watch the sky, the birds, the ground, as much as she watched the vines. “It’ll be a good year. We had plenty of winter rain.”

“Still a couple weeks yet to worry about frosts. But I think we’ve timed the new plantings well.”

She looked over the rise of land to where the ground was well plowed. She’d given fifty acres for the new plantings, vines of European origin grafted to rootstock native to America. They’d chosen prime varieties—Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chenin Blanc. And, consulting with Tyler, had done much the same on MacMillan ground.

“In five years, perhaps four, we’ll see them bear fruit.” She had learned, too, to look from the moment to the future in one sweeping glance. Cycle would always spin into cycle.

"We'll have been together a quarter of a century, Eli, when what we plant now comes home to us."

"Tereza." He took her shoulders, turned her to face him, and she felt a shiver of alarm. "This is my last harvest."

"Eli—"

"I'm not going to die." To reassure, he ran his hands down her arms. "I want to retire. I've been thinking of it, seriously thinking of it since you and I traveled to Italy. We've let ourselves become too rooted here and there," he said, gesturing toward MacMillan land, "and at the *castello*. Let's do this last planting, you and I, and let our children harvest. It's time."

"We talked of this. Five years or so we said before we stepped aside. A gradual process."

"I know. But these last months have reminded me how quickly a life, even a way of life, can end. There are places I want to see before my time's up. I want to see them with you. I'm tired, Tereza, of living my life to the demands of each season."

"My life, the whole of it, has been Giambelli." Tereza stepped away from him, touched a delicate white blossom. "How can I turn from it now, when it's wounded. Eli, how can we pass something to our children that's blighted?"

"Because we trust them. Because we believe in them. Because, Tereza, they've earned the chance."

"I don't know what to say to this."

"Think about it. There's plenty of time before the harvest. I've thought. I don't want to give Ty what he's earned, what he deserves, in my will. I want to give it to him while I'm alive. There's been enough death this year." He looked over the buds toward the new plantings. "It's time to let things grow."

So she turned from the vines toward him. A tall man weathered by time, by sun, by wind, with an old and faithful dog at his side. "I don't know if I can give you what you're asking me. But I'll promise to think about it."

"Effervescence is the essential ingredient in a sparkling wine." Pilar led a winery tour through a favorite phase. The creation of champagne. "But the first stage is to make the still wine. These"—she pointed at the racked bottles in the cellars—"are aged for several months, then blended.

We call the blend *cuvée*, from the French, where it's believed the process has its origin. We're grateful to that very fortunate monk Dom Pérignon for making the discovery and being the first to, as he called it, drink stars."

"If it's just wine, what makes it bubble?"

"The second fermentation, which Dom Pérignon discovered in the seventeenth century."

Her answer was smooth and practiced. Questions tossed out by groups no longer spooked her or made her scramble for answers.

Dressed in a trim suit and low heels, she stepped to the side as she spoke so her group could take a closer look at the racked wine.

"It was initially thought to be a problem," she continued. "Wine bottled in fall popping their corks, or what was in those days cotton wadding, in the spring. Very troublesome, and in particular in the Champagne district of France. The Benedictine, the cellar master at the Abbey in Hautvillers, applied himself to this problem. He ordered thicker stoppers, but this caused the bottles themselves to break. Determined, he ordered stronger bottles. Both the stoppers and the bottles held, and the monk was able to sample the re-fermented wine. It was the first champagne toast."

She paused to give the group an opportunity to shuffle around the racks. Voices echoed in the cellars, so she waited until they subsided.

"Today . . ." A little flutter of anxiety rippled through her when David joined her group. "Today we create champagne quite purposely, though for the best we follow the traditional methods developed centuries ago in that French abbey. Using *méthode champenoise*, the winemaker bottles the young, blended wines. A small quantity of yeast and sugar is added to each bottle, then the bottle is capped, as you see here."

She took the sample bottle to pass among the tour. "The additive triggers the second fermentation, which we call, again in the French, *prise de mousse*. The bubbles result from the conversion of sugar into alcohol. Capped, the bubbles can't escape into the air. These bottles are then aged, from two to four years."

"There's gunk in here," someone commented.

"The sample bottle demonstrates sedimentation and particle separation. This is a natural process during this second aging and fermentation. The bottles are stored neck down on these inclined racks, and are lifted out and twisted every day for months."

"By hand?"

Pilar smiled at the woman who frowned at the wall of bottles. “Yes. As you’ve seen through the tour, Giambelli-MacMillan believes every bottle of wine offered to the consumer requires the art, the science and the labor necessary to earn the label. This turning process is called riddling, or in French, *remuage*, and accelerates the particle separation so that in a matter of months the wine is clear. When it is, the bottles are racked upside down to keep the particles in the neck.”

“If they drink that stuff, it’s no wonder it kills them.”

It was said in a whisper, but it carried. Pilar tensed, felt her rhythm break, but kept going. “It’s the winemaker’s task to determine when the wine’s reached its peak. At this point, the bottle is frozen at the neck in a solution of brine. In that way, the cap can be removed, no wine is lost and the frozen sediment slides out. *Dégorgement*, or disgorging. The bottle is topped off with more wine or a bit of *la dosage*—brandy or sugar to sweeten it—”

“Or a little digitalis.”

Her rhythm faltered again, and a number of people shifted uneasily. Still she shook her head as David took a step forward. “Throughout the process, as with any wine bearing our label, there are safety checks and security measures. When the sparkling wine is judged ready, it’s corked and shipped to market so that you can bring it to your table for your own celebration.

“There are cheaper and less cumbersome ways to create champagne, but Giambelli-MacMillan believes tradition, quality and attention to detail are essential to our wines.”

She smiled as she took back the sample bottle. “At the end of the tour, you’ll be able to judge for yourself in our tasting room.”

Pilar let the guests mingle in the tasting room, enjoy their complimentary samples, and answered individual questions. It was, she’d discovered, very much like entertaining. That, she’d always had the knack for. Better, it made her feel not just part of the family, but part of the team.

“Nice job.” David stepped up beside her.

“Thanks.”

“Despite the heckler.”

“He isn’t my first. I think I’ve gotten the hang of it. At least my palms don’t sweat anymore. I’m still studying. There are times I feel like I’m back in school cramming for exams, but it’s satisfying. I still have to—”

She broke off as a man at the end of the bar began to gag. He clutched his throat, staggered back. Even as Pilar rushed forward, he began to laugh uproariously.

The same joker, David realized, who'd made the sarcastic cracks in the cellar. Before he could deal with the situation, Pilar was taking over.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was a coo of polite concern. "Isn't the wine to your taste?"

He gave another snort of laughter even as his wife jabbed her elbow viciously into his side. "Cut it out, Barry."

"Aw, come on. It's funny."

"Humor's often subjective, isn't it?" Pilar said pleasantly. "Of course, we at Giambelli-MacMillan have difficulty finding amusement in the tragic deaths of two of our own, but we appreciate your trying to lighten the mood. Perhaps you should try it again, with our Merlot." She signaled to the bartender. "It's more appropriate."

"No, thanks." He patted his belly. "I'm more of a beer man."

"Really? I'd never have guessed."

"You're such a jerk, Barry." His wife snatched her purse off the bar and steamed out the door.

"It was a *joke!* Jeez." Hitching up his belt, he hurried after her. "Can't anybody take a joke?"

"Well now." Pilar turned to her group. People were either goggling or pretending to look elsewhere. "Now that we've had our comic relief, I hope you've enjoyed your tour. I'm here to answer any questions you may have. Please feel free to visit our retail shop, where our wines, including those you've sampled, are available. We at Villa Giambelli hope you'll visit us again, and stop by our sister facility at the MacMillan Winery, only minutes away here in Napa. We wish you *buon viaggio*, wherever your travels take you."

David waited until people began to wander off before he took Pilar's arm and led her outside. "I was premature on the nice job. I should've said fabulous. Fabulous job. Though I'd've been more inclined to crack that idiot over the head with the bottle of Merlot than offer him one."

"Oh, I do. Mentally." She drew a deep breath, stepped away from the vine-covered stone of the old winery. "We get someone like Barry once or twice a week. Responding in an obnoxiously pleasant manner seems to work best. It helps that I'm family."

"I haven't come in before during your tours. Didn't want you to think I

was checking up on you.” He lifted her pearls, let them run through his fingers. “You, Ms. Giambelli, are a natural.”

“You know what? You’re right.” She agreed, delighted with herself. “Just as you were right to push me into this. It gives me something tangible to do.”

“I didn’t push you. The fact that no one does is one of your secrets. You figured out a long time ago how to live your life the way that made sense to you at the time. Times changed. I opened a door, but you’re the one who walked through it.”

“That’s very interesting.” Amused at both of them, she cocked her head. “I’m not sure my family would agree with you. I’m not sure I do.”

“It took spine to stay in a marriage that wasn’t a marriage because you took your vows seriously. It would have been easier to walk away. I know all about that.”

“You give me too much credit.”

“I don’t think so, but if you want to be grateful I gave you a nudge into this job, I’ll take it. Especially,” he added, sliding his hands up her arms, “if you think of a way to pay me back.”

“I could think of something.” She let her fingers link with his. Flirting, she thought, got easier with practice. She’d certainly been enjoying her lessons. “We could start with dinner.”

“I’ve been scoping out this little inn.”

“That’s very nice.” But dinner at the inn was a date—and formal, however much they enjoyed each other’s company. She was, she realized, looking for something less. And something more.

“But I meant cooking you dinner. You and your children.”

“Cooking? For all of us?”

“I’m a very good cook,” she informed him. “And it’s a rare thing for me to have a kitchen to myself. You have a nice kitchen. But if you think it’d be awkward, or your kids would be uncomfortable with the idea, the inn would be fine.”

“Cooking,” he said again. “Like at the stove. With pots.” He lifted her off her feet for a kiss. “When do we eat?”

We’re getting a home-cooked meal tonight. Pilar’s cooking. I don’t know what’s on the menu, but you will like it. Be home by six. Until then, try to pretend you’re human children and not the mutants I won in a poker game.

Love, Dad.

Maddy read the note stuck on the refrigerator, grimaced. Why did they have to have company? How come she didn't have a say in who got to come over? Did he really think she and Theo were so brain-damaged they'd believe a woman came over and fiddled around in a guy's kitchen just to cook?

Please.

Okay, she amended. Maybe Theo was brain-damaged enough, but she'd fix that.

Taking the note, she jogged upstairs. Theo was already in his room, already on the phone, already ruining his eardrums with the music up to scream. He didn't need to hit the kitchen for fuel after school, she thought with a sniff. He, in direct violation of house rules, kept enough junk food stockpiled in his room to feed a small country.

She had that information tucked into her get-back-at-Theo file.

"Ms. Giambelli's fixing dinner."

"What? Go away. I'm on the phone."

"You're not supposed to be on the phone until after you do your homework. Ms. Giambelli's coming over, so you'd better get off. She might tell Dad you're screwing off again."

"Sophia?"

"No, jerkweed."

"Listen, call you back. My sister's being a pest, so I have to kill her. Yeah. Later." He hung up, stuffed taco chips in his mouth. "Who's coming over, for what?"

"The woman Dad's sleeping with is coming over to fix dinner."

"Yeah." Theo's voice brightened. "Like, on the stove?"

"Don't you get it?" Disgusted, she waved the note. "It's a tactic. She's trying to squeeze in."

"Hey, anybody wants to squeeze into the kitchen who can actually cook is fine with me. What's she making?"

"It doesn't *matter* what she's making. How can you be so slow? She's pushing it to the next level. Cooking for him, for us. Showing him what a big, happy family we can be."

"I don't care what she's doing, as long as I get to eat. Get off it, Maddy. I mean get—off—it. Dad's entitled to have a girlfriend."

"Moron. I don't care if he's got ten girlfriends. What are we going to do if he decides he wants a wife?"

Theo considered it, crunched on more chips. "I dunno."

“I dunno,” she mocked. “She’ll start changing the rules, start taking over. That’s what happens. She’s not going to care about us. We’re just add-ons.”

“Ms. Giambelli’s cool.”

“Sure, now. She’s sweet and nice. When she gets what she wants, she won’t have to be sweet and nice and cool. She can start telling us what to do, and what not to do. It’ll all have to be her way.”

She turned her head as she heard the kitchen door open. “See, she’s just walking right in. This is our house.”

Maddy stomped to her room, slammed the door. She intended to stay there until her father got home.

She made it an hour. She could hear the music from downstairs, the laughter. It was infuriating to hear her brother’s horsey laugh. The traitor. It was more infuriating that no one came up for her, or tried to talk her out of her sulks.

So she’d show them she didn’t care, either way.

She wandered down, nose in the air. Something smelled really good, and that was just another strike against Pilar in Maddy’s mind. She was just showing off, that was all. Making some big, fancy dinner.

When she walked into the kitchen, she had to grit her teeth. Theo was at the kitchen table, banging on his electric keyboard while Pilar stood stirring something at the stove.

“You need to add lyrics,” Pilar said.

He liked playing his music for her. She listened. When he played her something that sucked, she said so. Well, in a nice way, Theo thought. That kind of thing told him she was paying attention, real attention.

Their mother never had. To much of anything.

“I’m not good with the word part. I just like doing the melody.”

“Then you need a partner.” She turned, set down her spoon. “Hi, Maddy. How’s the essay going?”

“What essay?” She caught Theo’s warning hiss and shrugged, not sure whether she was furious or grateful that he’d covered for her. “Oh. It’s okay.” She opened the refrigerator, took her time selecting a soft drink. “What’s this gunk in here?”

“Depends. There’s cheese gunk for the manicotti. The other’s a marinade

for the antipasto. Your father tells me you like Italian food, so I figured I was safe.”

“I’m not eating carbs today.” She knew it was mean, and didn’t need Theo’s glare to tell her so. But when she made a face at him behind Pilar’s back, he didn’t respond in kind as he usually did. Instead he just looked away, like he was embarrassed or something.

And that stung.

“Anyway, I made plans to go to a friend’s house for dinner.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Casually Pilar got out a bowl to begin mixing the filling for tiramisú. “Your father didn’t mention it.”

“He doesn’t have to tell you everything.”

It was the first directly rude comment the girl had made to her. Pilar calculated the barriers were down. “He certainly doesn’t, and as you’re nearly fifteen you’re old enough to know what you like to eat, and where you like to eat it. Theo, would you excuse Maddy and me for a minute?”

“Sure.” He grabbed his keyboard, sent Maddy a disgusted look. “Who’s the moron?” he muttered as he walked by her.

“Why don’t we sit down?”

Maddy’s insides felt sticky, her throat hot. “I didn’t come down to sit and talk. I just came to get a drink. I have to finish my essay.”

“There isn’t any essay. Sit down, Maddy.”

She sat, sprawled, with a look of deliberate unconcern and boredom on her face. Pilar had no right lecturing her, and Maddy intended to make that very clear after the woman had blown off steam.

Pilar poured herself a demitasse of the espresso she’d brewed for the tiramisú. She sat across from Maddy at the table, sipped. “I should warn you I have an advantage here as I not only was a fourteen-year-old girl, but was once the mother of one.”

“You’re not my mother.”

“No, I’m not. And it’s hard, isn’t it, to have a woman come into your home this way? I’m trying to think how I’d feel about it. Probably very much the way you do. Annoyed, nervous, resentful. It’s easier for Theo. He’s a boy and doesn’t know the things we know.”

Maddy opened her mouth, then shut it again when she realized she didn’t know how to respond.

“You’ve been in charge a long time. Your men wouldn’t agree, would

likely be insulted by that statement,” she added and was pleased to see the faint smirk curve Maddy’s lips. “But the female force, a smart female force, usually pushes the buttons. You’ve done a good job keeping these guys in line, and I’m not here to take your control away.”

“You’re already changing things. Actions have reactions. It’s scientific. I’m not stupid.”

“No, you’re smart.” Scared little girl, Pilar thought, with a grown-up brain. “I always wanted to be smart, and never felt smart enough. I compensated, I think, by being good, being quiet, keeping peace. Those actions had reactions, too.”

“If you keep quiet, nobody listens.”

“You’re absolutely right. Your father . . . he makes me feel smart enough and strong enough to say what I’m thinking, what I’m feeling. That’s a powerful thing. You already know that.”

Maddy frowned down at the table. “I guess.”

“I admire him, Maddy—the man he is, the father he is. That’s powerful, too. I don’t expect you to throw out the welcome mat for me, but I’m hoping you won’t lock the door in my face.”

“Why do you care what I do?”

“Couple of reasons. I like you. Sorry, but it’s true. I like your independence, and your mind, and your sense of family loyalty. I imagine if I wasn’t involved with your father, we’d get along very well. But I am involved with him, and I’m taking some of his time and attention away from you. I’d say I was sorry about that, but we’d both know it wasn’t true. I want some of his time and attention, too. Because, Maddy, another reason I care what you do is I’m in love with your father.”

Pilar pushed her cup away and, pressing a hand to her stomach, rose. “I haven’t said that out loud before. That habit of keeping quiet, I suppose. Boy. Feels strange.”

Maddy shifted in her chair. She was sitting up now, ramrod straight. And her own stomach was jumping. “My mother loved him, too. Enough to marry him.”

“I’m sure she did. She—”

“No! You’re going to make all the excuses, all the reasons why. And they’re all bullshit. All of them. When it wasn’t just exactly the way she wanted, she left us. That’s the truth. We didn’t matter.”

Her first instinct, always, was to comfort. Console. There were a dozen things she could say to soothe, but this little girl with wet, defiant eyes wouldn't hear them.

Why should she? Pilar decided.

"No, you're right. You didn't matter enough." Pilar sat again. She wanted to reach out, to draw this young girl close. But it wasn't the way, or the time. "I know what it's like not to matter enough. I do, Maddy," she said firmly, laying a hand over the girl's before she could jerk away. "How sad and angry it makes you feel, how the questions and doubts and wishes run through your head in the middle of the night."

"Adults can come and go whenever they want. Kids can't."

"That's right. Your father didn't leave. You mattered to him. You and Theo matter most to him. You know that nothing I could say or do or be will change that."

"Other things could change. And when one thing does, others do. It's cause and effect."

"Well, I can't promise you that things won't change. Things do. People do. But right now your father makes me happy. And I make him happy. I don't want to hurt you because of that, Maddy. I can promise to try very hard not to hurt you or Theo. To respect what you think and what you feel. I can promise that."

"He was my father first," Maddy said in a fierce whisper.

"And he'll be your father last. Always. If I wanted to change that, if I wanted for some reason to ruin that, I couldn't. Don't you know how much he loves you? You could make him choose. Look at me, Maddy. Look at me," she said quietly and waited for the girl's gaze to lift. "If it's what you want so much, you could make him choose between you and me. I wouldn't have a chance. I'm asking you to give me one. If you can't, just can't, I'll make an excuse, clean this stuff up and be out of here before he gets home."

Maddy wiped a tear off her cheek as she stared across the table. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to hurt him, either."

Maddy sniffled, frowned down at the table. "Can I taste that?"

Pilar lifted a brow at her cup of espresso, then silently slid it toward Maddy. The girl sniffed it first, wrinkled her nose, but lifted the cup and tasted.

"It's horrible. How can anybody drink that?"

"An acquired taste, I guess. You'd like it better in the tiramisu."

"Maybe." Maddy pushed the cup back across the table. "I guess I'll give it a chance."

One thing Pilar was sure of: No one had a problem with her cooking. It had been a long time since she'd personally prepared a family dinner. Long enough for her to be outrageously pleased at the requests for second helpings and the cheerful compliments between bites.

She'd used the dining room for the meal, hoping that thin layer of formality would be less threatening to Maddy. But the formality had broken down the minute Theo had the first bite of her manicotti and announced it "awesome grub."

Theo did most of the talking, with his sister watching, digesting, then occasionally skewering through with a pointed question. It made her laugh, then it warmed her heart when David used a sports metaphor to illustrate an opinion and Maddy and she shared female amusement over the male mind.

"Dad played baseball in college," Maddy told her.

"Really? Another hidden talent. Were you good?"

"I was great. First base."

"Yeah, and he was so worried about his batting average, he never got past first base with the girls." Theo snickered, and easily ducked David's swing.

"A lot you know. I was a home run . . ." He trailed off. "Any way I play that, I'm in trouble. So instead I'll just say that was an amazing meal. On behalf of myself and my two gluttons, I thank you."

"You're welcome, but on behalf of your two gluttons, I'd like to point out you outate the table."

"I have a fast metabolism," he claimed as Pilar got to her feet.

"That's what they all say."

"Oh no." He laid a hand over hers before she could stack the dishes. "House rule. He who cooks, cleans not."

"I see. Well, that's a rule I can get behind." She lifted her plate, offered it to him. "Enjoy."

"Another house rule," he said over Theo's whoop of laughter. "Dad gets to delegate. Theo and Maddy will be delighted to do the dishes."

"Figures." Maddy heaved a sigh. "What do you get to do?"

"I get to work off some of this excellent meal by taking the chef for a walk." Testing the waters with his kids, he leaned in and kissed Pilar warmly. "That work for you?"

"Hard to complain."

She went with him, pleased to be out in the spring night. "That's a lot of mess to leave two teenagers to handle."

"Builds character. Besides, it'll give them time to talk about how I lured you outside for a make-out session."

"Oh. Have I been lured?"

"Sure hope so." He turned her into his arms, drawing her closer when she lifted her mouth to his. A long, slow thrill rippled through him at the way she sighed against him. The way she fit. "Haven't had much time to be together lately."

"It's hard. So much going on." Content for now, she rested her head on his shoulder. "I know I've been hovering around Sophie. I can't help it. Thinking of her being attacked, right in our own home. Knowing someone walked in and out of her room, and mine, and my mother's . . . I've caught myself lying in bed at night listening for sounds the way I never have before."

"I look out my window some nights, across the fields, and see your light. I want to tell you not to worry, but until this is settled, you will. We all will."

"If it helps, I feel better when I look out my window and see the light in yours. It helps knowing you're so close."

"Pilar." He drew her away, then lowered his forehead to hers.

"What is it?"

"There're some problems in the Italian offices. Some discrepancies in the figures that have turned up during the audit. I might have to go over for a few days. I don't like leaving now." His gaze shifted past her, back to the house with the kitchen lights bright in the window.

"The kids can stay at the villa while you're gone. We'll take care of them, David. You don't have to worry about that."

"No." Tereza had already decreed that his children would be guests of the villa during his travel. Still, he would worry about them. About everyone. "I don't like leaving you, either. Come with me."

"Oh, David." There was a rush of excitement at the thought. The Italian spring, the balmy nights, a lover. How wonderful that her life had taken

this turn, that such things were possible. "I'd love that, but it won't do. I wouldn't feel right about leaving my mother just now. And you'd do what you have to do faster and easier if you knew I was here with your children."

"Do you have to be practical?"

"I don't want to be," she said softly. "I'd love to say yes, to just run away." Feeling young, foolish, ridiculously happy, she turned in a circle. "To make love with you in one of those huge old beds in the *castello*. To sneak away for an evening to Venice and dance in the *piazza*, steal kisses in the shadows of the bridges. Ask me again." She spun back to him. "When all this is over, ask me again. I'll go."

Something was different. Something . . . more free about her, he realized. That made her only more alluring.

"Why don't I ask you now? Go with me to Venice when this is over."

"Yes." She threw out her hands, gripped his. "I love you, David."

He went very still. "What did you say?"

"I'm in love with you. I'm sorry, it's too much, too fast, but I can't stop it. I don't want to stop it."

"I didn't ask for qualifications, just for you to repeat yourself. This is handy. Very handy." He jerked her forward, and when she started to spill into his arms, he lifted her, spun her in a circle. "I had it figured wrong. By my astute calculations, it was going to take at least another two months before I could make you fall in love with me."

His lips raced over her face. "It was tough on me," he continued. "Because I was already in love with you. I should've known you wouldn't let me suffer for long."

She pressed her cheek to his. She could love. Her heart glowed with the joy of it. And be loved. "What did you say?"

"Let me paraphrase." He eased her back again. "I love you, Pilar. One look at you. One look, and I started to believe in second chances." He brought her close again, and this time his lips were tender. "You're mine."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Venice was a woman, la bella donna, elegant in her age, sensual in her watery curves, mysterious in her shadows. The first sight of her, rising over the Grand Canal with her colors tattered and faded like old ballgowns, called to the blood. The light, a white, washing sun, would sweep over her and lose itself like a wanderer in her sinuous veins, her secret turns.

Here was a city whose heart was sly and female, and whose pulse beat in deep, dark rivers.

Venice wasn't a city to be wasted on meetings with lawyers and accountants. It wasn't a city where a man could be content shut up in an office, hour by hour, while the sweet seductress of spring sang outside the stone and glass of his prison.

Reminding himself Venice had been built on commerce didn't help David's mood. Knowing the curvy streets and bridges were even now jammed with tourists burning up their Visa cards in the endless shops where tacky was often mistaken for art didn't stop him from wanting to be among them.

It didn't stop him from wishing he could stroll those ancient streets with Pilar, and buy her some ridiculous trinket they would laugh over for years. He'd have enjoyed that. Enjoyed watching Theo inhale a gelato like water, listening to Maddy interrogate some hapless gondolier over the history and architecture of the canals.

He missed his family. He missed his lover. And he hadn't been gone fully sixty-eight hours.

The accountant was droning on in Italian and in a whispery voice diffi-

cult enough to understand when full attention was paid. David reminded himself he hadn't been sent to Venice to daydream but to do a job.

"*Scusi*." He held up a hand, flipped over another page of a report fully an inch thick. "I wonder if we might go over this area again." He spoke slowly, deliberately stumbling a bit over the Italian. "I want to make sure I understand clearly."

As he'd hoped, his tactic hit its target with the Italian's manners. The new section of figures was explained, patiently.

"The numbers," the Italian said, switching out of compassion to English, "do not match."

"Yes, I see. They don't match in a number of departmental expenditures. Across the board. This perplexes me, *signore*, but I'm more perplexed by the activities attributed to the Cardianili account. Orders, shipments, breakage, salaries, expenses. All very clearly recorded."

" Ω . In that area there is no . . . what is it? Discrepancy. The figures are correct."

"Apparently they are. However, there is no Cardianili account. No Giambelli client or customer by that name. There's no Cardianili warehouse in Rome at the address recorded in the files. If there's no customer, no client, no warehouse, where do you suppose these orders, over the last three years, have been sent?"

The accountant blinked behind the lenses of wire-framed glasses. "I could not say. There is a mistake, of course."

"Of course. There's a mistake." And David believed he knew who'd made it.

He swiveled in his chair and addressed the lawyer. "*Signore*, have you had the opportunity to study the documents I gave you yesterday?"

"I have."

"And the name of the account executive in charge of this account?"

"Listed as Anthony Avano."

"And the invoices, the expense chits, the correspondence relating to the account were signed by Anthony Avano?"

"They were. Until December of last year his signature appears on much of the paperwork. After that time, Margaret Bowers's signature appears in the file."

"We'll need to have those signatures verified as genuine."

"I understand."

“And the signature who approved, and ordered, the shipments, the expenditures and signed off on the payments from the account. Donato Giambelli.”

“*Signore* Cutter, I will have the signatures verified, will look into this matter from a legal point of view and advise you of your position and your recourse. I will do that,” he added, “when I have the permission to do so from *Signora* Giambelli herself. This is a delicate matter.”

“I realize that, which is why Donato Giambelli was not informed of this meeting. I trust your discretion, *signori*. The Giambellis won’t wish more public scandal, as a company or as a family. If you would give me a moment, please, to contact *La Signora* in California and relate to her what we’ve just discussed?”

It was always tricky for an outsider to question the integrity, the honesty, of one of the core. David was neither Italian nor a Giambelli. Two strikes, he decided. The fact that he’d been brought into the organization barely four months before was the third.

He was going up against Donato Giambelli with one out already on his slate. There were two ways, in his opinion, to handle the situation. He could be aggressive and swing away. Or he could wait, with the bat on his shoulder, for the perfect pitch.

Back to sports metaphors, he thought as he stood at the window of his office, hands in his pockets, and watched the water traffic stream by. Apt enough. What was business but another game? Skill, strategy, luck were required.

Donato would assume he had home-field advantage. But the minute he walked into the office, he would be on David’s turf. That David intended to make clear.

His interoffice phone buzzed.

“*Signore* Giambelli is here to see you, *Signore* Cutter.”

“Thank you. Tell him I’ll be right with him.”

Let him sweat just a little, David decided. If the grapevine here climbed as quickly as it did in most companies, Don already knew a meeting had been held. Accountants, lawyers, questions, files. And he would wonder, he would worry.

He would, if he was smart, have some reasonable explanation in hand.

Answers lined up, fall guy in place. Smartest move would be fury, outrage. And he would be counting heavily on family loyalty, on the stream of blood to carry him through the crisis.

David walked to the door himself, opened it and watched Donato pace the outer office. "Don, thanks for coming in. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"You made it sound important, so I made time." He stepped into the office, scanned the room quickly. Relaxed a little when he found it empty. "If I'd been informed before you made your travel arrangements, I would have cleared my calendar so that I could have shown you Venice."

"The arrangements were made quickly, but I've seen Venice before. I'm looking forward to seeing the *castello*, though, and the vineyards. Have a seat."

"If you let me know when you plan to go, I'll arrange to escort you. I go there myself, regularly, to make certain all is as it should be." He sat, folded his hands. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Swing away, David decided, and took his place behind his desk. "You could explain the Cardianili account."

Don's face went blank. As his eyes darted from side to side, he worked up a puzzled smile. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," David said pleasantly. "That's why I'm asking you to explain it."

"Ah, well, David. You give my memory too much credit. I can't remember every account, or details of it. If you'll give me time to pull files and information—"

"Oh, I already have them." David tapped a finger on the file on his desk. Not so smart, he decided, surprised. And not prepared. "Your signature appears on a number of expense chits, correspondence and other paperwork pertaining to this account."

"My signature appears on many such account papers." Don was beginning to sweat—lightly, visibly. "I can hardly remember all of them."

"This one should stick out. As it doesn't exist. There is no Cardianili account, Donato. There's considerable paperwork generated for it, a great deal of money involved. Invoices and expenses, but no account. No man by the name of"—he paused, flipped open the file and drew out a sheet of Giambelli letterhead—"Giorgio Cardianili, with whom you appear to have corresponded several times over the last few years. He doesn't exist, nor does the warehouse with an address in Rome to which several shipments of wine

are listed to have been shipped. This warehouse, where you, on company expense, traveled to on business twice in the last eight months, isn't there. How would you explain that?"

"I don't understand." Donato sprang to his feet. But he didn't look outraged. He looked terrified. "What are you accusing me of?"

"At the moment, nothing. I'm asking you to explain this file."

"I have no explanation. I don't know of this file, this account."

"Then how is it your signature appears in it? How is it your expense account was charged more than ten million lire in connection to this account?"

"A mistake." Donato moistened his lips. He snatched the letterhead from the file. "A forgery. Someone uses me to steal money from *La Signora*, from my family. *Mia famiglia*," he said, and his hand shook as he thumped it against his heart. "I'll look into this immediately."

No, not smart at all, David decided. Not nearly smart enough. "You have forty-eight hours."

"You would dare? You would dare give me such an ultimatum when someone steals from my family?"

"The ultimatum, as you call it, comes from *La Signora*. She requires your explanation within two days. In the meantime, all activity on this account is frozen. Two days from now, all paperwork generated from this matter is to be turned over to the police."

"The police?" Don went white. His composure in tatters, his hands began to tremble and his voice to hitch. "This is ridiculous. It's obviously an internal problem of some kind. We don't want an outside investigation, the publicity—"

"*La Signora* wants results. Whatever the cost."

Now he paused, struggled to think, to find a rope swinging over the pit he'd so suddenly found himself standing over. "With Tony Avano as account executive, it's easy to see the source of the problem."

"Indeed. But I didn't identify Avano as the account exec."

"Naturally I assumed . . ." Don wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "A major account."

"I didn't qualify Cardianili as major. Take your two days," David said quietly. "And take my advice. Think of your wife and children. *La Signora* will be more likely to show compassion if you stand up for what's been done, and stand up for your family."

"Don't tell me what to do about my family. About my position. I've been

with Giambelli all my life. I *am* Giambelli. And will be long after you're gone. I want that file."

"You're welcome to it." David ignored the imperious and outstretched hand, and closed the folder. "In forty-eight hours."

It puzzled David that Donato Giambelli was so unprepared, so *clueless*. Not innocent, he thought as he crossed St. Mark's Square. Donato had his hand in the muck up to his elbow. But he hadn't put the scam together. He hadn't run the show. Avano, possibly. Quite possibly, though the amount skimmed under his name was petty cash next to what Donato had raked in.

And Avano had been dead four months.

The detectives in charge of his homicide investigation would likely be interested in this new information. And how much of that dingy light would land on Pilar?

Swearing under his breath, he moved toward one of the tables spilling out on the walkway. He sat, and for a time simply watched the flood of tourists pour across the stones, in and out of the cathedral. And in and out of the shops that lined the square.

Avano had been milking the company, he thought. That was a given, and already known. But what David now carried in his briefcase took things to another level. Donato stepped it all up to fraud.

And Margaret? There was nothing to indicate she'd had knowledge of or participation in any skimming prior to her promotion. Had she turned so quickly? Or had she learned of the false account and that knowledge had led to her death?

Whatever the explanation, it didn't answer the thorniest of questions: Who was in charge now? Who was it Donato was surely calling in panic for instructions, for help?

Would whoever that was believe, as easily as Donato had believed, that *La Signora* intended to take the matter to the police? Or would they be cool-headed and call the bluff?

In any case, within two days Donato Giambelli was going to be out on his ass. Which added one more layer to David's headache. Don would have to be replaced, and quickly. The internal investigation would have to continue until all leaks were plugged.

His own time in Italy would likely be extended, and at a point in his life where he wanted and needed to be home.

He ordered a glass of wine, checked the time, then took out his cell phone. "Maria? This is David Cutter. Is Pilar available?"

"One moment, Mr. Cutter."

He tried to imagine where she was in the house, what she was doing.

The last night they'd been together, they'd made love in his van on the edge of the vineyard. Like a couple of giddy teenagers, he remembered. So eager for each other, so desperate to touch.

And remembering brought on a painful longing.

It was easier, he found, to imagine her sitting across from him, while the light dimming toward dusk struck the dome of the cathedral like an arrow, and the air filled with the flurry of pigeons on the wing.

When all this is over, he promised himself, he would have that moment with her.

"David?"

The fact that she was a little breathless made him smile. She'd hurried. "I was just sitting here, in St. Mark's Square." He picked up the glass of wine the waiter brought him, sipped. "Drinking an interesting little Chianti and thinking of you."

"Is there music?"

"A small orchestra across the plaza, playing American show tunes. Sort of spoils the moment."

"Not at all. Not for me."

"How are the kids?"

"They're fine. Actually, I think Maddy and I are cautiously approaching friendship. She came out to the greenhouse yesterday after school. I got a lesson on photosynthesis, most of which was over my head. Theo broke up with the girl he's been seeing."

"Julie?"

"Julie was last winter, David. Keep up. Carrie. He and Carrie broke up, and he moped for about ten minutes. He's sworn off girls and intends to dedicate his life to his music."

"Been there. That should last maybe a day."

"I'll let you know. How's everything there?"

"Better now, for talking to you. Will you tell the kids I'll call them tonight? I'll make it about six your time."

"All right. I guess you don't know when you might be coming home?"

"Not yet. There are some complications. I miss you, Pilar."

"I miss you, too. Do me a favor?"

"You've got it."

"Just sit there awhile. Drink your wine, listen to the music, watch the light change. I'll think of you there."

"I'll think of you here, too. Bye."

When he hung up, he lingered over the wine. It had been an experience to talk to a woman—to her—about his children that way. To someone who understood them, appreciated them. It connected them in a way that made them almost like family. And that, he realized, was what he wanted. He wanted a family again. All the links that made the circle.

On an unsteady breath, he set down his wine. He wanted a wife. He wanted Pilar to be his wife.

Too fast? he wondered. Too much?

No. No, it wasn't. Any way he looked at it, it was exactly right. They were grown-ups with half their lives behind them. Why should they waste the rest of it inching along in stages?

He got to his feet, tossed some lire on the table.

Why should he waste another minute? What better place to buy a ring for the woman he loved than Venice? When he turned, and the first window to catch his eye was a jeweler's, David considered it a sign.

It wasn't as easy as he assumed it would be. He didn't want a diamond. It occurred to him that Avano had probably given her one, and he discovered in himself a deep-seated aversion to giving Pilar anything Avano had.

He wanted something that spoke to the two of them, something that showed her he understood her as no one else had. Or could.

Competitive, he supposed as he wandered into yet another shop. And so what?

He climbed the stairs on the jammed Rialto bridge, where the stores were shoved cheek by jowl on that rise above the water. Eager shoppers elbowed and shoved their way through as if terrified the last souvenir would be snatched away before they could buy it.

He bumped his way past the stalls offering leather goods, T-shirts and trinkets and tried to focus on the shop windows. Each one ran like rivers with gold, gems. A dazzle that confused the eye. Discouraged, annoyed, tired

from the long hike, he nearly called it a night. He could wait, ask his Venice assistant for a recommendation.

Then he turned, looked into one more window. And saw it.

The ring was set with five stones, all in delicate heart shapes that made a quiet stream of color. Like her flowers, he thought. Five stones, he thought, stepping closer. One for each of them and each of their children. He imagined the blue was sapphire, the red ruby, the green emerald. The purple and the gold stones he wasn't as sure of. What did it matter? It was perfect.

Thirty minutes later he walked out. He had the description of the ring—amethyst and citrine for the last two stones, he reminded himself—in his pocket. The ring was tucked in his pocket as well. He'd had it engraved with the date he'd bought it.

He wanted her to know, always, that he'd found it on the evening he'd sat in Campo San Marco while the light went soft, talking to her.

His steps were lighter than they had been as he left the bridge. He wandered the narrow streets now, giving himself the treat of an aimless walk. The crowds were thinning as night fell and turned the canals a glossy black. Now and then he could hear the echo of his own footsteps or the lap of water against a bridge.

He decided not to go back to his apartment, but ducked under the awning of a sidewalk trattoria. If he went back, he'd work and spoil the pleasure, the anticipation of the evening. He ordered the turbot, a half carafe of the house white.

He idled his way through the meal, smiling sentimentally at a couple obviously honeymooning, enjoying the little boy who escaped from his parents to charm the waiters. It was, he supposed, a typical reaction of a man in love that he'd find everyone and everything a simple delight.

He lingered over coffee and thought of what he would say, how he would say it, when he offered the ring to Pilar.

Most of the squares were empty as he headed back across the city. The shops were shut down and the sidewalk grifters had long since packed up their wares.

Now and then he saw the little beam of light from a gondola carrying tourists down a side canal or heard a voice rise and carry over the water, but for the most part, he was—at last—alone in the city.

Enjoying himself, he took his time, walked off the meal and let the stress of the day drain while he absorbed Venice after dark.

He crossed another bridge, walked through the shadows of another twisting street. He glanced up when light poured out of a window above him, and smiled as a young woman began to draw in the wash that fluttered faintly in the breeze. Her hair was dark and tumbled around her shoulders. Her arms were long and slim, with a flash of gold at her wrist. She was singing, and the cheerful bell of her voice rang into the empty street.

The moment etched itself on his brain.

The dark-haired woman who was late bringing in the day's wash but singing nonetheless, the scent of her supper that wafted down. She caught his eye, laughed, a sound full of fun and flirtation.

David stopped, turned, intending to call a greeting up to her. And doing so, likely saved his own life.

He felt the pain, a sudden, horrendous fire in the shoulder. Heard, dimly, a kind of muffled explosion even as the woman's face blurred.

Then he was falling, falling slowly and forever to the sounds of screams and running feet until he lay bleeding and unconscious on the cool cobbles of the Venetian street.

He wasn't out for long. There was a moment when his world seemed washed with red, and through that dull mist voices rose and fell. The Italian slipped incomprehensibly through his numb brain.

He felt heat more than pain, as if someone held him over the licking flames of a fire. And he thought, quite clearly: I've been shot.

Someone tugged at him, stirred his body so that pain woke and cut through the fire like a silver sword. He tried to speak, to protest, to defend himself, but managed little more than a moan as his vision grayed.

When it cleared again, he found himself staring up into the face of the young woman he'd watched pulling in her wash.

"You must've worked late tonight." The words came clear in his head, slurred through his lips.

"Signore, per piacere. Sta zitto. Riposta. L'aiuto sta venendo."

He listened solemnly, translating the Italian as slowly, as painstakingly as a first-year student. She wanted him to be quiet, to rest. That was nice of her, he thought dimly. Help was coming. Help for what?

Oh, that's right. He'd been shot.

He told her so, first in English, then in Italian. "I need to call my children. I need to tell them I'm all right. Do you have a phone?"

And with his head cradled in her lap, he went back under.

"You're a very lucky man, Mr. Cutter."

David tried to focus on the man's face. Whatever drugs the doctors had pumped into him were high-test. He wasn't feeling any pain, but he was hard-pressed to feel anything. "It's hard to agree with you at the moment. I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"DeMarco. I'm Lieutenant DeMarco. Your doctor says you need rest, of course. But I have just a few questions. Perhaps if you tell me what you remember?"

He remembered a pretty woman drawing in the wash, and the way the lights glimmered on the water, on the stones. "I was walking," he began, then struggled to sit up. "Pilar's ring. I'd just bought a ring."

"I have it. Calm yourself. I have the ring, your wallet, your watch. They'll be safe."

The police, David remembered. People called the police when someone got shot on the street. This one looked like a cop, not as slick as the detective back in San Francisco. DeMarco was a little dumpy, a little bald. He made up for both with a luxurious black moustache that flowed over his upper lip. His English was precise and correct.

"I was walking back to my apartment—wandering a little. I'd done some shopping—the ring—after work. Had some dinner. It was a nice evening and I'd been shut up in an office all day. I saw a woman in a window. She was pulling in her wash. She made a picture. She was singing. I stopped to look up. Then I hit the street. I felt . . ." Gingerly, he lifted an arm to his shoulder. "I knew I'd been shot."

"You've been shot before?"

"No." David grimaced. "It felt just like you think it would. I must've passed out. The woman was there with me when I came to. She ran down, I guess, when she saw what happened."

"And did you see who shot you?"

"I didn't see anything but the cobbles rushing up at me."

"Why do you think, Mr. Cutter, that someone would shoot you?"

"I don't know. Robbery, I guess."

"Yet your valuables were not taken. What is your business in Venice?"

"I'm chief operating officer for Giambelli-MacMillan. I had meetings."

"Ah. You work for *La Signora*."

"I do."

"There is some trouble, yes, for *La Signora* in America?"

"There has been, but I don't see what it has to do with my getting mugged in Venice. I need to call my children."

"Yes, yes, this will be arranged. Do you know anyone in Venice who might wish you harm, Mr. Cutter?"

"No." As soon as he denied it, he thought of Donato. "No," he repeated. "I don't know anyone who'd shoot me down on the street. You said you had my valuables, Lieutenant. The ring I bought, my wallet, my watch. My briefcase."

"No briefcase was found." DeMarco sat back. The woman who'd witnessed the shooting had claimed the victim was carrying a briefcase. She had described him very well. "What were the contents of this briefcase?"

"Papers from the office," David said. "Just paperwork."

It was difficult. Tereza thought, to stand up under so many blows. Under such constant assault, the spirit began to wilt. She kept her spine straight as she walked with Eli into the family parlor. She knew the children were there, waiting for the call from their father.

Innocence, she mused as she looked in to see Maddy sprawled on the sofa with her nose in a book, Theo banging away on the piano. Why did innocence have to be stolen this way, and so quickly?

She gave Eli's arm a squeeze. To reassure him, to brace herself, then stepped inside.

Pilar glanced up from her needlework. One look at her mother and her heart froze. The embroidery hoop slid out of her hands as she got slowly to her feet. "Mama?"

"Please sit. Theo." She gestured to quiet him. "Maddy. First I must tell you, your father is all right."

"What happened?" Maddy rolled off the couch. "Something happened to him. That's why he hasn't called. He's never late calling."

"He was hurt, but he's all right. He's in the hospital."

"An accident?" Pilar stepped up, laid a hand on Maddy's shoulder. When previously the girl would have shrugged her off, she merely clung tighter.

"No, not an accident. He was shot."

"Shot?" Theo shoved away from the piano. Terror coated his throat like bile. "That's wrong, that's a mistake. Dad doesn't go around getting shot."

"He was taken right away to the hospital," Tereza continued. "I've spoken with the doctor who treated him. Your father's doing very well. He's already listed in good condition."

"Listen to me." Eli moved forward, took Maddy's hand, then Theo's. "We wouldn't tell you he's all right if he wasn't. I know you're scared, and you're worried, and so are we. But the doctor was very clear. Your father's healthy and strong. He's going to make a full recovery."

"I want him to come home." Maddy's lip trembled. "I want him to come home now."

"He'll come home as soon as they release him from the hospital," Tereza told her. "I'm going to make the arrangements. Does your father love you, Madeline?"

"Sure he does."

"Do you know how worried he is about you right now? About you and your brother, and how this worry makes it harder for him to rest, to heal? He needs you to be strong for him."

When the phone rang, Maddy whirled away, leaped on it. "Hello? Hello? Daddy!" Tears gushed out of her eyes, shook her body down to the toes. Still, she slapped at Theo when he tried to grab the phone. "It's okay." Her voice broke, and she turned to Tereza. "It's okay," she repeated, swiping a hand under her nose, breathing deep. "So, hey. Do you get to keep the bullet?"

She listened to her father's voice, and watched *La Signora* nod at her.

"Yeah, Theo's right here, shoving at me. Can I hit him? Too late," she responded. "I already did. Yeah, here he is."

She passed the phone to her brother.

"You're a strong young woman," Tereza told her. "Your father should be very proud."

"Make him come home, okay? Just make him come home." She walked into Pilar's arms and felt better for crying there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Her head throbbled like an open wound, but it was nothing compared to the ache in her heart. She ignored both and took her place behind her desk.

Over Eli's and Pilar's objections, Tereza allowed the children to attend this emergency meeting. She was still head of the Giambelli family, and they had a right to know why she believed their father had been hurt.

They had a right to know it fell to her blood.

"I've spoken with David," she began, and smiled at his children. "Before his doctor came in and forced him to rest."

"It's a good sign." Sophia ranged herself beside Theo. He looked so young, so defenseless. "Guys are such babies when they're hurt. They just can't stop talking about it."

"Get out. We're like, stoic." Theo was trying to be, but his stomach kept pitching on him.

"Be that as it may," Tereza continued. "With his doctor's approval, he'll fly home in just a few days. Meanwhile the police are investigating the incident. I've also talked to the man in charge of the investigation."

And had, in short and ruthless order, researched his record. DeMarco would do. Tereza folded her hands on the lieutenant's file. "There were a number of witnesses. They have a description, though not a particularly good one, of the assailant. I don't know that they'll find him, or that he particularly matters."

"How can you say that?" Maddy jerked up in her chair. "He shot my father."

Approving the reaction, Tereza spoke to her as she would to an equal. "Because I believe he was hired to do so, as one buys and uses any tool. To take away papers in your father's possession. A misguided and despicable act of self-protection. There have been . . . discrepancies in a number of accounts. The details of that can wait. It became clear earlier today, through David's work, that my nephew has been funneling money from the company into a dummy account."

"Donato." Sophia felt a sharp pinch in the heart. "Stealing from you?"

"From us." That Tereza had already accepted and absorbed. "He met with David, on my orders, this afternoon in Venice and would have realized his actions would soon be uncovered. This was his response. My family's caused your pain," she said to Theo and Maddy. "I'm head of the family and responsible for that pain."

"Dad works for you. He was doing his job." As his stomach continued to shudder, Theo clenched his teeth. "It's that bastard's fault, not yours. Is he in jail?"

"No. They've yet to find him. It appears he's run." Disdain edged her voice. "Left his wife, his children and has run. I promise you he will be found; he will be punished. I'll see to it."

"He'll need money. Resources," Ty put in.

"You'll need someone in Venice to clear this up." Sophia rose. "I'll leave tonight."

"I won't put another of mine in danger."

"*Nonna*, if Donato was using an account to skim funds, he had help. My father. It's my blood," she continued in Italian, "as much as yours. My honor, as much as yours. You can't deny me my right to make amends." She took another breath, switched to English. "I'll leave tonight."

"Hell." Tyler scowled. "We'll leave tonight."

"I don't need a baby-sitter."

"Yeah, right." He lifted his gaze now, met hers with chilled steel. "We've got an equal stake in this, Giambelli. You go, I go. I'll check out the vineyards, the winery," he said to Tereza. "If anything's off there, I'll spot it. I'll leave the paper trail to the paper pusher."

So, Tereza thought as she looked at Eli across the room. The next step in the cycle. We pass the burdens to the young.

"Agreed." Tereza ignored Sophia's hissing breath. "Your mother will worry less if you're not alone."

“No, I’ll just spread the worry out over two people. Mama, Gina and her children?”

“They’ll be provided for. I don’t believe in the sins of the father.” Tereza shifted her gaze to Sophia’s, held it. “I believe in the child.”

The first thing David did when he was released from the hospital, or more accurately, when he released himself from the hospital, was buy flowers.

When the first bouquet seemed inadequate, he bought another, then a third.

It wasn’t easy carrying a huge load of flowers, one arm in a sling, through the crowded streets of Venice, but he managed it. Just as he managed to find the spot where he’d been shot.

He’d prepared himself for the jolt, but hadn’t realized there’d be fury along with it. Someone had thought him dispensable, had pierced his flesh with steel, spilled his blood. And had come very close to making his children orphans.

Someone, David promised himself as he stood on the stains of his own blood with his good arm full of flowers, was going to pay for thinking it. Whatever, and however long, it took.

He glanced up. Though there was no wash hanging out today, the window was open. He shifted his flowers, turned away from the street and entered the building. It amazed him how exhausted he was after the climb. Limbs weak, skin slicked with sweat. It pissed him off to find himself gasping for air and leaning limply on the wall outside the apartment door.

How the hell was he supposed to get back to the Giambelli apartment, pack, book a flight when he could barely make it up these stairs? The fact that the doctor had said essentially that before David had signed himself out only annoyed him.

So much so that, still puffing, he straightened and knocked.

He didn’t expect her to be home, intended to leave the flowers on her doorstep or hunt up a cooperative neighbor who’d take them for her. But the door opened, and there she was.

“*Signorina.*”

“*Sì?*” She stared at him blankly, then her pretty face lit up. “*Signore! Come sta? Oh, oh, che bellezza!*” She gathered the flowers and gestured him in. “I called the hospital this morning,” she continued in rapid Italian.

“They said you were resting. I’ve been so frightened. I couldn’t believe such a thing could happen right outside . . . Oh.” She tapped her head with her hand. “You’re American,” she said in careful English. “*Scusami*. Sorry. I don’t have good English.”

“I speak Italian. I wanted to thank you.”

“Me? I did nothing. Please come in, sit. You look so pale.”

“You were there.” He glanced around her apartment. Small, simple, with pretty little touches. “If you hadn’t been, and if I hadn’t looked up because you were late bringing in your wash and made such a lovely picture doing it, I might not be standing here now. *Signorina*.” He took her hand, lifted it to his lips. “*Mille grazie*.”

“*Prego*.” She angled her head. “A romantic story. Come, I’ll make you coffee.”

“You don’t need to trouble.”

“Please, if I’ve saved your life, I have to tend to it.” She carried the flowers to the kitchen.

“Ah . . . one of the reasons I was walking by so late was that I’d done some shopping before dinner. I’d just bought a ring, an engagement ring for the woman I love.”

“Oh.” She sighed, laid the flowers on the counter. She took another long look at him. “Pity for me. Lucky for her. I’ll still make you coffee.”

“I could use some. *Signorina*, I don’t know your name.”

“Elana.”

“Elana, I hope you’ll take this as intended. I think you’re the second most beautiful woman in the world.”

She laughed and began to fill a vase with his flowers. “Yes, very lucky for her.”

David was fed up with pain, fatigue, doctors and the pedestrian jumble that was Venice by the time he made it back to his rooms. He’d already come to the conclusion that he wouldn’t be heading back home that evening. He’d be lucky to undress himself and get into bed, much less stay on his feet long enough to pack.

His shoulder was screaming, his legs unsteady, and he cursed as he fought to work the key into the lock left-handed. Still that left hand came up, fisted to fight, when the door jerked open.

"There you are!" Sophia jammed her hands on her hips. "Are you out of your mind? Checking yourself out of the hospital, wandering around Venice by yourself. Look at you, pale as a sheet. Men are such morons."

"Thanks, thanks a lot. Mind if I come in? I think this is still my room."

"Ty's out hunting for you right now." She took his good arm as she spoke and helped him inside. "We've been worried to death since we went by the hospital and found out you'd left, over doctor's orders."

"Even in Italy they can't seem to make hospital food palatable." Giving in, he sank into a chair. "A man could starve to death in there. Besides, I wasn't expecting anyone this soon. What did you do, beam yourselves here?"

"We left last night. I've been traveling a very long time, on very little sleep, and have spent entirely too long pacing these rooms worried about you. So don't mess with me." She uncapped a bottle, handed him a pill.

"What is this?"

"Pain medication. You left the hospital without your prescription."

"Drugs. You brought me drugs. Will you marry me?"

"Morons," she repeated, and stalked to the mini-fridge for a bottle of water. "David, where have you *been*?"

"Taking a beautiful woman flowers." He sat back, reaching for the bottle, then sighing when Sophia jerked it out of reach. "Come on, don't tease a man about his pharmaceuticals."

"You've been with a woman?"

"Having coffee," he said, "with the woman who saved my life. I took her some flowers to thank her."

Considering, Sophia cocked her head. He looked exhausted, a little sweaty and very romantic with his arm in a sling and the shadows under those deep blue eyes.

"I suppose that's all right. Is she pretty?"

"I told her she was the second most beautiful woman in the world, but I'll happily bump her down to third place if you give me that damn water. Don't make me chew this pill, I'm begging you."

She handed over the bottle, then crouched in front of him. "David, I'm so sorry about this."

"Yeah, me too. The kids are okay, right?"

"They're fine. Worried about you, but reassured enough that Theo's starting to think it's pretty cool that you got shot. Not everybody's father . . ."

"Honey, don't do that to yourself."

"I won't. I'm not." She drew a deep breath. "Anyway, Maddy was kidding about the bullet last night. She said something to you about keeping it? But she's into it now, according to my mother. Wants to study it."

"That's my girl."

"They're great kids, David. Probably comes from having a father who'd think of buying flowers for a woman when he felt like something recently scraped off the sidewalk. Come on, let's get you into bed."

"That's what they all say." The slow, goofy grin he gave her told Sophia the medication was doing the job. "Your mother can't keep her hands off me."

"Good drugs, huh?"

"Really good. Maybe if I could lie down for a minute."

"Sure. Why don't you try it on a large flat surface?" She levered him up.

"Sophie? Pilar's not all twisted up about this, is she?"

"Of course she is. But she'll get untwisted when you get home where she can fuss over you."

"I'm okay, just a little fuzzy in the head now." He chuckled, leaning heavily on her as she led him to the bedroom. And would've sworn he was floating. "Better living through chemistry."

"You bet. Almost there."

"I wanna go home. How'm I gonna pack one-handed?"

"Don't you worry. I'll pack for you."

"You will? Really?" He turned his head to give her a kiss on the cheek and missed by three inches. "Thanks."

"No problem. Here we go. All the way down. Easy. I don't want to hurt— Oh! I'm sorry," she said when he yelped.

"No, it's not the arm. It's—in my pocket. The box. Rolled on it." He groped for it, swore and felt only mildly embarrassed when she reached in to retrieve it herself.

"Buying baubles, are we?" She flipped the box open, blinked. "Oh my."

"I guess I should tell you, I bought it for your mother. Gonna ask her to marry me." He pulled himself up a bit on the pillow and slid straight down again. "Got a problem with that?"

"I might, seeing as you proposed to me five minutes ago, you fickle bastard." A little teary-eyed, she sat on the side of the bed. "It's beautiful, David. She'll love it. She loves you."

"She's everything I've ever wanted. Beautiful, beautiful Pilar. Inside and out. Second chances all around. I'll be careful with her."

"I know you will. I know it. The year's not half over," she said quietly. "Everything's moving so fast. But some things," she added, "some things are moving in the right direction." She leaned over, kissed his cheek. "Close your eyes for a while. Papa."

When Tyler got back, she was making minestrone. It always knocked him back a step to see her working in the kitchen.

"He's here," she said without looking around. "Sleeping."

"I told you he could take care of himself."

"Yes, he did a wonderful job of that by getting shot, didn't he? Stay away from that soup," she added as he leaned over the pot. "It's for David."

"There's enough here for everybody."

"It's not done yet. You should drive up to the vineyard. You can stay at the *castello* tonight. I'm having files messengered over. I can work on the computer here."

"Well, you worked all that out, didn't you?"

"We're not here to sightsee." She walked out of the kitchen.

He took a moment to make sure his temper was on a leash, then followed her into the small office. "Why don't we just have this out?"

"Nothing to have out, Ty. I've got a lot on my mind."

"I know why you didn't want me to come."

"Really?" She booted up the computer. "Could it be that I have a great deal of work to do in a short amount of time?"

"It could be that you're pissed off, betrayed, hurt. Those things slice at you. And when you're hurt, you're vulnerable. Defenses go down. You're afraid I'll get too close. Don't want me too close, do you, Sophia?" He took her chin so that she had no choice but to look at him. "You never did."

"I'd say we've been as close as it gets. And it was my idea."

"Sex is easy. Stand up."

"I'm busy, Ty, and just not in the mood for a quick office fuck."

He hauled her up fast enough, violently enough, to upend her chair. "Don't try to boil everything down to that."

Moving too fast, she thought again. Too many things with too much speed. If she wasn't at the wheel, how could she maintain the right direction?

"I don't want any more than that. Anything else is too much trouble. I said I've got a lot on my mind. And you're hurting me."

"I've never hurt you." He eased his grip. "Maybe that's part of the problem. You ever ask yourself why you end up with the kind of guy you usually end up with?"

"No." She tossed her chin up.

"Older guys. Slick guys. The kind who slide right out the door when you give them the boot. I'm not slick, Sophie, and I won't slide."

"Then you'll just end up with rug burn on your ass."

"Like hell." His smile was lethal as he lifted her onto her toes. "I don't slide, Sophie. I stick. You better take some time and think about that." He let her go, strode to the door. "I'll be back."

Frowning after him, she rubbed her arms. Big son of a bitch had probably left bruises, she thought. "Don't rush on my account."

She started to drop back down in the chair, changed her mind and kicked the desk. The petty gesture made her feel marginally better.

Why didn't the man ever do what she expected him to do? She figured he'd make a show at the public relations deal, then slither away, bored brainless. But he'd stuck, and that thought made her kick the desk again.

They'd acted on some pure, healthy animal lust, she thought and picked up the chair. Had some stupendous sex. She'd expected him to cool off in that area, too. But no.

And what if it was true that she was a little worried because she didn't show any signs of cooling off, either? She was used to certain patterns in her life. Who wasn't? She'd never had any intention of developing serious feelings for Tyler MacMillan.

God, it was infuriating to know she had.

Worse, he'd been exactly and perfectly right in his rundown of her. She was pissed off, she did feel betrayed, she was feeling hurt and vulnerable and she wished Tyler was six thousand miles away in California. Because she wanted, so desperately, for him to be right here. Within easy leaning distance.

She wasn't going to lean. Her family was a mess. The company she'd been raised to run was in trouble. And the man who would very likely become her stepfather was lying in the next room with a bullet hole in his shoulder.

Wasn't that enough to worry about without thinking about her fear of commitment?

Not that she had a fear of commitment. Exactly. And if she did, Sophia decided and sat down again, she'd just have to think about it later.

He slept for two hours and woke feeling like a man who'd been shot, David supposed. But one who'd lived through it. Now that he was sitting up and being fed minestrone, he decided he could start thinking again.

"You've got your color back," Sophia told him.

"Most of my brain, too." Enough to realize she was playing with her soup rather than eating it. "Feel like filling me in?"

"I can tell you what's been done, or what I know. I don't imagine I can fill in all the gaps. They're looking for Donato, not only the police but a private investigator hired by my grandparents. They've interviewed Gina. I'm told she's hysterical and claims not to know anything. I believe her. If she did know something, and Don dumped her and the kids in the middle of this mess, she'd scramble to make trouble for him. They haven't been able to identify the woman he's been seeing. If he's in love with her, as he told me, I imagine Don took her along for company, so to speak."

"Rough on Gina."

"Yeah." She pushed away from the table, tired of pretending to eat. "Yeah. I was mildly fond of Don. Could barely tolerate Gina and felt even less warmly toward her progeny. Now she's deserted by her cheating, stealing, possibly murderous husband. And . . . damn it, I can't feel for her. I just can't."

"It's not impossible she pushed Don financially so he started to dip."

"Even if she did, he's responsible for his own choices, his own actions. Anyway, it's not that. I just can't stand her. Just can't. I'm a horrible person. But enough about me."

She waved that away, picked up a small hunk of bread to nibble and tear at while she paced. "It's assumed that Don had funds stashed, funds he bled from the company. Enough to run on for a while, I suppose, but to be frank with you, he's just not smart enough to stay underground."

"I agree with you. He had help in all of this."

"My father."

"To a point," David said, watching her. "And after he died, maybe Margaret. Their take in this, if they had one, was minimal. Not enough to convince me that either of them had a starring role."

She paused. "You think they were used, rather than users?"

"I think your father might have simply looked the other way. As for Margaret, she was just finding her rhythm."

"Then she was killed," Sophia said quietly. "My father was killed. It could all circle back to this. Somehow."

"Possibly. Still, Don isn't coolheaded enough, isn't long-thinking enough to have set up the kind of scam that slipped by the Giambelli accountants for several years. He was the inside man, with the connections. But somebody drew the blueprint. Maybe the mistress," he added with a shrug.

"Maybe. They'll find him. Either sunning himself by the surf on some tropical beach or floating facedown in it. While they look, we put the pieces back together."

She came back, sat. "Donato could have tampered with or hired someone to tamper with the wine."

"I know."

"I'm having trouble with the reason. Revenge? Why damage the reputation, and thereby the fiscal security, of the company that feeds you? And kill to do it?"

She paused, studied his bandaged arm. "Well, I guess he's shown he has no real problem with that area. He could have done it all." She pressed her fingers to her temples. "Killed my father. Rene's a high-maintenance woman, and Dad needed plenty of money. He knew he was being phased out of Giambelli. He'd burned his bridges with Mama, and I'd let him know he'd set the ones between us smoldering."

"He was responsible for his own choices, Sophia." David used her words. "His own actions."

"I'm resigned to that. Or very nearly. And I can imagine what those choices might have been. He could have pressured Don for more, a bigger cut, whatever. It wouldn't have been out of character for him to have threatened blackmail, in a civilized way, of course. He might have known about the tampering, about poor *Signore* Baptista. Then Margaret because she wanted more, or because he was afraid she'd find out about the embezzlement. You because he realized there was no way out."

"Why steal the paperwork?"

"I don't know, David. He couldn't have been thinking rationally. I suppose he thought you'd be dead, he'd have the files and that would be that. But you weren't dead, and it must have gotten through his head the files weren't going to hang him. He'd already hanged himself. Meanwhile, we have another public relations nightmare to get through. Ever think about ditching us and running back to La Coeur?"

"Nope. Sophia, why don't you try eating that bread instead of shredding it?"

"Yes, Daddy." She winced at the petulant sound in her own voice. "Sorry. Jet lag and general nastiness. Why don't I go deal with that packing for you? Since you insist on leaving rather than staying in my sparkling company, you've got a very early flight tomorrow."

He was sweating like a pig. The terrace doors were wide open, and the cool air rising off Lake Como swept into the room. It didn't stop the sweat. Only turned it to ice.

He'd waited until his lover was asleep before he'd crept out of bed and into the adjoining parlor. He hadn't been able to perform, but she'd pretended it hadn't mattered. How could a man maintain an erection at such a time?

Perhaps it didn't matter, really. She'd been thrilled with the trip, with his sweeping her away to the elegant resort on the lake, something he'd promised dozens of times in the past and had never fulfilled. He'd made a game of it, given her a ridiculous amount of cash so she could charge the room to her card. He wasn't known there, he told her. He wanted it to stay that way. What would he do if someone mentioned seeing him there with a woman other than his wife?

He thought that had been clever. Very clever. He had almost believed it a game himself. Until he'd seen the news report. Seen his own face. He could only be grateful his mistress had been in the salon. He could easily keep her away from newspapers, from the television.

But they couldn't stay. Someone would see him, recognize him.

He needed help, and knew only one source.

His hands shook horribly as he dialed New York. "It's Donato."

"I expected it would be." Jerry glanced at his watch, calculated. Giambelli had the three A.M. sweats, he thought. "You've been a very busy boy, Don."

"They think I shot David Cutter."

"Yes, I know. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't—I didn't." His English was failing him. "*Dio*. You told me to get out of Venice right away when I told you what Cutter said. I did. I never even went home to my family. I can prove it," he whispered desperately. "I can prove I wasn't in Venice when he was shot."

“Can you? I don’t know what good that’s going to do you, Don. The story I get is you hired a trigger.”

“Hired a . . . what is this? They say I hired someone to shoot him? For what reason? The damage was done. You said so yourself.”

“Here’s how I look at it.” Oh, it was getting better, Jerry thought. Better, sweeter than he’d ever imagined. “You killed two people, probably three with Avano. David Cutter,” he continued, amused by Donato’s panicked sputter. “What’s one more? You’re royally fucked, pal.”

“I need help. I have to get out of the country. I have money, but not enough. I need a—a—a passport. A new name, a change of my face.”

“That all sounds very reasonable, Don, but why tell me?”

“You can get these things.”

“You overestimate my reach and my interest in you. Let’s consider this conversation a severing of our business association.”

“You can’t do this. If they take me, they take you.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. There’s no way to connect me to you. I’ve made sure of that. In fact, when I hang up the phone, I intend to call the police and tell them you contacted me, that I tried to convince you to turn yourself in. It shouldn’t take them too long to trace this call back to you. That’s fair warning, given our previous relationship. I’d hit the road and hit it fast.”

“None of this would’ve happened— It was your idea.”

“I’m just full of ideas.” Serenely, Jerry examined his manicure. “But you’ll note, I never killed anyone. Be smart, Don, if you can manage it. Keep running.”

He hung up, poured himself a glass of wine, lit a cigar for good measure. Then he picked up the phone and called the police.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

With a mixture of regret and relief, David watched Venice recede.

“There’s no reason for you to haul yourself out of bed and tag along to the airport this way,” he told Tyler as the water taxi plowed its way through early-morning traffic. “I don’t need a baby-sitter.”

“Yeah, I’m getting a lot of that lately.” Tyler sipped his coffee and hunched his shoulders against the cool, damp air. “It’s starting to piss me off.”

“I know how to get on a plane.”

“Here’s the deal. I put you on at this end, they pick you up on the other end. Live with it.”

David took a closer look. Tyler’s face was unshaven, his expression foul. For some reason it perked David up. “Rough night?”

“I’ve had better.”

“You going to be able to get back okay? Your Italian’s pretty limited, isn’t it?”

“Kiss ass.”

David laughed, gently shifted his shoulder. “There, I feel better now. Sophia giving you a hard time?”

“She’s been giving me a hard time for twenty years. It’s stopped spoiling my day.”

“If I offer you some advice, are you going to pitch me overboard? Remember, I’m wounded.”

“I don’t need any advice where Sophia’s concerned.” Despite himself, Tyler frowned over at David. “What is it?”

“Keep pushing. I don’t think anyone’s ever kept pushing her. Not the male of the species, anyway. If she doesn’t kill you for it, she’s yours.”

“Thanks, but maybe I don’t want her.”

David settled back to enjoy the ride. “Oh yeah.” He chuckled. “You do.”

Yeah. Tyler admitted. He did. Which was why he was risking her considerable wrath. She didn’t like anyone touching her things. Didn’t like being told what to do, even—no, he corrected as he packed up her little portable office, *especially*—when it was what was best.

“What the hell are you doing?”

He glanced up, and there she was. Still damp from the shower and sending off sparks of temper. “Packing your saddlebags, partner. We’re riding out.”

“Get your hands off my stuff.” She rushed in, snatched back her laptop, pressing it against her like a beloved child. “I’m not going anywhere. I just got here.”

“I’m going back to the *castello*. Where I go, you go. Any reason you can’t work there?”

“Yes. Several.”

“And they are?”

She hugged the computer tighter. “I’ll think of them.”

“While you’re thinking, pack the rest of your gear.”

“I just unpacked.”

“Then you should remember where everything goes.” With this indisputable logic, he strolled out.

It irritated her. He’d caught her off guard and when her brain was still mushy from a sleepless night. It annoyed because she’d been planning on making the drive north and spending at least a day or two working out of the *castello*.

It irked as she recognized how petty it was for her to sulk in silence on the drive.

And it added one more layer of temper that he seemed so sublimely unconcerned.

“We’re taking separate bedrooms,” she announced. “It’s time we put the brakes on that area of our relationship.”

“Okay.”

She'd already opened her mouth to skewer him and his carelessly agreeable response had it hanging slack. “Okay,” she managed. “Fine.”

“Okay, fine. You know, we're weeks ahead in the growing season back home. Looks like they're just finishing up the new plantings. Talked to the operator yesterday. He tells me the weather's been good, no frosts for weeks, and they're seeing the beginnings of new bloom. Keeps up warm through the bloom, we'll get a normal set. Oh, that's the conversion of flower to grape.”

“I know what a normal set is,” she said between her teeth.

“Just making conversation.”

He turned off the highway and started the drive through the gentle hills. “It's pretty country. I guess it's been a few years since I made the trip over. Never seen it this early in the spring.”

She had, but had nearly forgotten. The quiet green of the hills, the pretty contrast of colorful houses, the long, sleek rows riding the slopes. Fields of sunflowers waiting for summer, and the shadow of far-off mountains that were a faint smudge against a blue sky.

The crowds of Venice, the urbanity of Milan were more than highway miles from here. This was a little heart of Italy that pumped steadily, fed by the earth and rain.

The vineyards here were the root of her destiny, had ordained it when Cezare Giambelli planted his first row. A simple dream, she thought, to grand plan. A humble enterprise to international empire.

Now that it was threatened, was it any wonder she'd use whatever came to hand to defend it?

She saw the winery, the original stone structure and its various additions. Her great-great-grandfather had placed the first stones. Then his son had added more, then his son's daughter. One day, she thought, she might place her own.

On the rise, with the fields spreading out like skirts, the *castello* ruled. Gracious and grand with its colonnaded facade, its sweep of balconies, its high arching windows, it stood as a testament to one man's vision.

He would have fought, she thought. Not just for the ledgers, not only for the profit. For the land. For the name. It struck her here, more deeply than in the fields at home, more than within the walls of her offices and meeting rooms. Here, where one man changed his life, and by doing so forged hers.

Tyler stopped so the car faced the house, its entrance gardens in young bud. “Great place,” he said simply and climbed out of the car.

She got out more slowly, breathing in the sight of it as much as she breathed in the lightly scented air. Vines spilled over decorative mosaic walls. An old pear tree bloomed wildly, already shedding some of its petals like snow. She remembered suddenly the taste of the fruit, sweet and simple, and how when she'd been a child the juice trickled down her throat as she walked down the rows with her mother.

"You wanted me to feel this," she stated, and with the hood of the car between them turned to him. "Did you think I didn't?" She pressed a closed fist to her heart. "Did you think I didn't feel it before?"

"Sophie." He leaned on the hood, a friendly, companionable stance. "I think you feel all sorts of things. But I know some of them can get lost in the worry and the, well, the now. Focus too hard on the now, you lose sight of the big picture."

"So you badgered me out of the penthouse in Venice so I'd see the big picture."

"That's part of it. It's blooming time, Sophie. Whatever else is going on, it's blooming time. You don't want to miss it."

He walked back to the trunk, popped it.

"Is that a metaphor?" she asked as she joined him, reaching by to grab her laptop herself.

"Me, I'm just a farmer. What do I know from metaphors?"

"Just a farmer, my ass." She hitched the strap of the laptop on her shoulder, plucked out her briefcase.

"Excuse me, but I'm no longer supposed to think about your ass." He pulled his suitcase out, then studied hers in disgust. "Why is your suitcase twice as big as mine, and three times as heavy? I'm bigger than you."

"Because." She fluttered her lashes. "I'm a girl. I suppose I should apologize for being snotty to you."

"Why?" He hauled her case out. "You wouldn't mean it."

"I'd sort of mean it. Here, let me give you a hand." She reached in, picked up the little tote that held her cosmetics, then slowly strolled away.

Pilar opened the door to the police. At least this time, she thought, she'd been expecting them. "Detective Claremont, Detective Maguire, thanks for coming."

She stepped back in welcome, gestured to the parlor.

"It's a beautiful day for a drive," she continued. "But I know you're both very busy, so I appreciate the time and trouble."

She'd already arranged for coffee and biscotti, and moved to serve the moment the cops were seated. Claremont and Maguire exchanged looks behind her back, then Maguire shrugged.

"What can we do for you, Ms. Giambelli?"

"Reassure me, I hope. Which, I know, isn't your job." She passed out the coffee, impressing Maguire by remembering how each of them took it.

"What reassurances are you looking for?" Claremont asked her.

"I realize you, your department, is in contact with the Italian authorities." Pilar took her seat but didn't touch her coffee. She was jumpy enough. "As you may already know, my mother has some influence over there. Lieutenant DeMarco has been as forthcoming as possible with information. I'm aware that my cousin contacted Jeremy DeMorney yesterday, and that Jerry informed the New York police of the phone call. Jerry was concerned enough to call my stepfather to tell him directly."

"If you're that well informed, I don't know what we can tell you."

"Detective Claremont, this is my family." Pilar let that statement hang. "I know that the authorities were eventually able to trace Don's call to the Lake Como area. I also know he was gone when they arrived to take him into custody. I'm asking you whether, in your opinion, my cousin killed my . . . killed Anthony Avano."

"Ms. Giambelli." Maguire set her coffee aside. "It isn't our function to speculate. We gather evidence."

"We've been connected, you and I, for months. You've looked into my life, into the personal details of it. While I understand that the nature of your business requires a certain professional distance, I'm asking for a little compassion. It's possible Donato is still in Italy. My daughter's in Italy, Detective Maguire. A man I care for, very much, was nearly killed. A man I was married to for half my life is dead. My only child is six thousand miles away. Please don't leave me helpless."

"Ms. Giambelli—"

"Alex," Maguire began before he could finish. "I'm sorry, Pilar, I can't tell you what you want to hear. I just don't have the answer. You know your cousin better than I do. Tell me."

"I've thought of it, of little else, for days," Pilar began. "I wish I could say we were close, that I understood his heart and his mind. But I don't. A week

ago I would have said, oh, Donato. He can be foolish, but he has a good nature. Now there's no doubt he was a thief, that he and the man I was married to were in league together stealing from the woman who allowed them to make a living."

She picked up her coffee cup to fill her hands. "Stealing from me. From my daughter. But even then, even knowing this, when I try to picture him sitting in my daughter's living room, facing a man he'd known all those years and killing him. I can't do it. I can't put the gun in Don's hand. I don't know if that's because it doesn't belong there, or because I can't bear to believe it."

"You're worried he'll go after your daughter. There's no reason for him to do that."

"If he's done all these things, isn't the fact that she exists reason enough?"

In her office, behind closed doors, Kris Drake raged. The Giambellis, headed by that little bitch Sophia, were still trying to ruin her. Sicced the cops on her, she thought as she pounded a fist into her palm. It wouldn't do them a damn bit of good. They thought they could weasel it all around, pin her with Tony's murder. Even tie her to the product tampering, to big-shot Cutter's little accident in Venice.

Shaking with fury, she thumbed open a pill bottle, dry-swallowed a tranquilizer.

They couldn't prove she'd been the one to give Sophia that helpful shove on the terrace. They couldn't prove anything. So what if she'd slept with Tony? It wasn't a crime. He'd been good to her, appreciated her, understood her and what she wanted to accomplish.

He'd made her promises. Promises the Giambelli bitches had seen to he couldn't keep. The lousy cheat, she thought with affection. They'd have made a good team if he'd just listened to her. If he hadn't let that whore talk him into marriage.

But it all lay down on the Giambellis, she reminded herself. They'd made certain that slut Rene Foxx knew about her, too. Now her name was being tossed around in the press, and she was getting smirking looks from coworkers.

Just as she had at Giambelli.

She'd come too far, worked too hard to let those Italian divas ruin her ca-

reer. Without Jerry's support, she might already be out on her ear. Thank God he was standing up for her, that he understood she was a victim, a target.

She *owed* him the inside information she was passing on. Let Giambelli try to sue her over it. La Coeur would fight for her. Jerry had made that clear from the beginning. She was valued here.

La Coeur was going to give her everything she'd always wanted. Prestige, power, status, money. By the time she was forty, she'd be listed as one of the top one hundred women in business. She'd be the fucking female executive of the year.

And not because someone had handed it to her in the cradle. Because she'd earned it.

But it wasn't enough. Not enough payback for the interrogations by the police, for the smears in the press, for the slights given her when she'd been at Giambelli.

Giambelli was going down, she thought. But there were ways to make the family tremble as it fell.

It was a long flight across an ocean, across a continent. He slept through most of it, and when he'd revived himself with coffee, called in for an update. Though he reached Eli and got filled in on what happened in Italy since he'd left, he was disappointed to have missed his kids and Pilar.

He wanted home. And by the time he landed at the Napa airfield, he resented even the short drive that separated him from it.

Then he crossed the tarmac to where he'd been told his driver would be waiting, and found it.

"Dad!"

Theo and Maddy sprang from opposite doors of the limo. The rush of emotion had him dropping his briefcase as he lunged toward them. He grabbed Maddy with his good arm, then had a line of pain spurting through his shoulder as he tried to hug Theo.

"Sorry, bad wing."

When Theo kissed him, surprise and pleasure flustered him. He couldn't remember the last time this boy, this young man, had done so. "God, I'm glad to see you." He pressed his lips to his daughter's hair, leaned into his son. "So glad to see you."

“Don’t ever do that again.” Maddy kept her face pressed against his chest. She could smell him, feel his heart beat. “Not ever again.”

“That’s a deal. Don’t cry, baby. Everything’s okay now.”

Afraid he was going to blubber as well, Theo pulled himself back, cleared his throat. “So, did you bring us something?”

“You’ve heard of Ferraris?”

“Holy shit, Dad! I mean . . . wow.” Theo looked toward the plane as if he expected to see a sleek Italian sports car unloaded.

“Just wondering if you’d heard of them. But I did manage to pick up a couple things that actually fit in my suitcases, which are right over there.” David jerked his head.

“Man.”

“And if you haul them for me like a good slave, we’ll go car shopping this weekend.”

Theo’s jaw dropped. “No joke?”

“No Ferrari, but no joke.”

“Cool! Hey, why’d you wait so long to get shot?”

“Smart-ass. It’s good to be home. Let’s get out of here and . . .” He trailed off as he looked back toward the car.

Pilar stood beside it, her hair blowing in the wind. As their eyes met, she began walking toward him. Then she was running.

Maddy watched her, and took her first shaky step toward adulthood by moving aside.

“What’s she crying for now?” Theo wanted to know as Pilar clung to his father and sobbed.

“Women wait until it’s over before they cry, especially when it’s important.” Maddy studied the way her father turned his face into Pilar’s hair. “This is important.”

An hour later, he was on the living room sofa being plied with tea. Maddy sat at his feet, her head resting on his knee while she toyed with the necklace he’d brought her from Venice. Not a little-girl’s trinket—she had a good eye for such things—but a real piece of jewelry.

Theo was still wearing the designer sunglasses, and occasionally checked himself out in the mirror to admire his European cool.

"Well, now that you're settled, I've got to get going." Pilar leaned over the back of the sofa, brushed her lips over David's hair. "Welcome home."

He might have been handicapped, but his good arm was quick enough. He reached back, grabbed her hand. "What's your hurry?"

"You've had a long day. We're going to miss you guys over at the main house," she said to Theo and Maddy. "I hope you'll keep coming around."

Maddy rubbed her cheek on David's knee, but her eyes were on Pilar's face. "Dad, didn't you bring Ms. Giambelli a present from Venice?"

"As a matter of fact."

"Well, that's a relief." Pilar gave his uninjured shoulder a squeeze. "You can give it to me tomorrow. You need to rest now."

"I rested for six thousand miles. I can't handle any more tea. Would you mind taking that into the kitchen, give me a minute here with the kids?"

"Sure. I'll give you a call tomorrow, see how you're feeling."

"Don't run off," he said as she began to clear the tray. "Just wait."

He shifted on the couch, tried to put the words he wanted to use together in his mind as she took the tray out. "Listen . . . Theo, you want to sit down a minute."

Obligingly, visions of sports cars dancing in his head, Theo plopped down on the couch. "Can we look at convertibles? It'd be so cool to tool around with the top down. Chicks really dig on that."

"Jeez, Theo." Maddy turned herself around until she was kneeling, her hands resting on David's knees. "You don't score a convertible by telling him you're going to use it to pick up girls. Anyway, shut up so Dad can tell us how he wants to ask Ms. Giambelli to marry him."

David's grin at the first half of her statement faded. "How the hell do you do that?" he demanded. "It's spooky."

"It's just following logic. That's what you wanted to tell us, right?"

"I wanted to talk to you about it. Any point in doing that now?"

"Dad." Theo gave him a manly pat. "It's cool."

"Thank you, Theo. Maddy?"

"When you have a family, you're supposed to stay with them. Sometimes people don't—"

"Maddy—"

"Uh-uh." She shook her head. "She'll stay because she wants to. Maybe sometimes that's better."

A few minutes later, he was walking Pilar home, across the edge of the vineyard. The moon was beginning its slow rise.

"Really, David, I know the way home, and you shouldn't be out in the evening air."

"I need the air and the exercise and a little time with you."

"Maddy and Theo are going to need a lot of reassurance."

"And how about you?"

She laced her fingers with his. "I'm feeling considerably steadier. I didn't mean to fall apart at the airport. I swore I wouldn't."

"You want the truth? I liked it. It's good for the ego for a man to have a woman cry over him."

He brought their joined hands to his lips, kissed her knuckles as they stepped onto the garden path. "Remember that first night? I ran into you out here. Christ, you were gorgeous. And furious. Talking to yourself."

"Sneaking a temper cigarette," she remembered. "And very embarrassed to have been caught at it by the new COO."

"The new, fatally attractive COO."

"Oh yes, that, too."

He stopped, pulled her gently into an embrace. "I wanted to touch you that night. Now I can." He skimmed his fingers down her cheek. "I love you, Pilar."

"David. I love you, too."

"I called you from St. Mark's, talked to you while the music played and the light faded. Remember that?"

"Of course I do. It was the night you were—"

"Ssh." He laid a finger over her lips. "I hung up, and sat there thinking of you. And I knew." He took the box out of his pocket.

She stepped back. Pressure dropped onto her chest, leaden weights of panic. "Oh, David. Wait."

"Don't put me off. Don't be rational, don't be reasonable. Just marry me." He struggled a moment, then let out a frustrated laugh. "Can't open the damn box. Give me a hand, will you?"

Starlight glittered on his hair, bright silver on deep gold. His eyes were dark, direct and full of love and amusement. As her breath jerked, she could

smell a hint of night jasmine and early roses. All so perfect, she thought. So perfect it terrified her.

“David, we’ve both been here before, both know it doesn’t always work. You have young children who’ve already been hurt.”

“We haven’t been here together, and we both know it takes two people who want to make it work. You won’t hurt my kids, because as my odd and wonderful daughter just told me, you won’t stay because you’re supposed to, but because you want to. And that’s better.”

Some of the weight lifted. “She said that?”

“Yes. Theo, being a man of few words, just told me it was cool.”

Her eyes wanted to blur, but she blinked tears away. It was a time for clear sight. “You’re going to buy him a car. He’d tell you anything you want to hear.”

“See why I love you? You’ve got him nailed.”

“David, I’m nearly fifty.”

He only smiled. “And?”

“And I . . .” Suddenly it felt foolish. “I suppose I just had to say it one more time.”

“Okay, you’re old. Got it.”

“Not that much older than—” She broke off this time, blowing out a breath when he laughed. “I can’t think straight.”

“Good. Pilar, let me put it this way. Whatever your birth certificate says, whatever you’ve done or haven’t done up to this moment, I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, to share my family with you, and to share yours. So help me open this damn box.”

“I’ll do it.” She expected her fingers to tremble, but they didn’t. The pressure in her chest was gone, and a lightness took its place. “It’s beautiful.” She counted the stones, understood the symbol. “It’s perfect.”

He took it out of the box, slid it onto her finger. “That’s what I thought.”

When Pilar went into the house, Eli was brewing tea in the kitchen. “How’s David doing?”

“Well, I think. Better than I’d imagined.” She ran her thumb over the ring that felt so new, and so right, on her finger. “He just needs to rest.”

“Don’t we all?” He sighed. “Your mother went up to her office. I’m worried about her, Pilar. She’s barely eaten today.”

"I'll go up, take her some tea." She rubbed a hand over his back. "We'll all get through this, Eli."

"I know it. I believe it, but I'm starting to wonder at the cost. She's a proud woman. This is damaging that part of her."

Eli's worry wormed its way into Pilar as she carried the tray to her mother's office. It occurred to her that it was the second time in one evening she'd brought tea to someone who probably didn't want it.

Still, it was a gesture meant to soothe, and she would do her best.

The door was open, and Tereza was at her desk. A logbook was open on it.

"Mama." Pilar sailed in. "I wish you wouldn't work so hard. You put the rest of us to shame."

"I'm not in the mood for tea, Pilar, or company."

"Well, I am." She set the tray on the table and began to pour. "David's looking remarkably well. You'll see for yourself tomorrow."

"It shames me, one of my own would do such a thing."

"And of course, you're responsible. As always."

"Who else?"

"The man who shot him. I used to think, used to let myself think, that I was responsible for the shameful things Tony did."

"You weren't blood."

"No, I chose him, and that's worse. But I wasn't responsible for what he did. He was. If there was responsibility on my part, it was for allowing him to do what he did to me, and to Sophia." She brought the tea to the desk, set the cup down. "Giambelli is more than wine."

"Hah. You think I need to be told that?"

"I think you need to be told it now. I think you need to be reminded of all it's done, all the good. The millions of dollars to charity the family has dispersed over the years. The countless families who've made their livings through the company. Field workers, winemakers, bottlers, distributors, factory workers, clerks. Every one of them depends on us, and what do we do, Mama."

She sat on the side of the desk, saw with satisfaction that she had her mother's full attention. "We work, worry, and we gamble every season on the weather. We do our best, and we hold faith. That hasn't changed. It never will."

"Was I unfair to him, Pilar. To Donato?"

"You'd question yourself? Now I see why Eli's worried. If I tell you the truth, will you believe me?"

Tired, Tereza got up from the desk, walked to the window. She couldn't see the vineyards in the dark. But she saw them in her mind. "You don't lie. Why wouldn't I believe you?"

"You can be hard. It's frightening sometimes. When I was little, I'd see you striding out along the rows and I'd think you were like a general out of one of my history books. Straight and stern. Then you might stop, study the vine, speak with one of the workers. You always knew their names."

"A good general knows her troops."

"No, Mama, most don't. They're faceless, nameless pawns. Have to be for the general to so ruthlessly send them to battle. You always knew their names, because it always mattered to you who they were. Sophia knows, too. That was your gift to her."

"God, you comfort me."

"I hope I do. You've never been unfair. Not to Donato. Not to anyone. And you aren't responsible for the acts of greed or cruelty or selfishness of those who only see faceless pawns."

"Pilar." Tereza laid her forehead on the window glass, such a rare gesture of fatigue that Pilar rose quickly to go to her. "*Signore* Baptista. He haunts me."

"Mama. He'd never blame you. He'd never blame *La Signora*. And I think he'd be disappointed in you if you blamed yourself."

"I hope you're right. Maybe I will have tea." She turned, touched Pilar's cheek. "You have a good, strong heart. I always knew that. But you have clearer vision than I once gave you credit for."

"Broader, I think. It took me a long time to work up the courage to take the blinders off. It's changed my life."

"For the good. I'll think about what you said."

She started to sit, then saw the flash of stones on Pilar's finger. Tereza's hand whipped out, snake-fast, and grabbed.

"So, what is this?"

"It's a ring."

"I see it's a ring," Tereza said dryly. "But not, I think, another you've bought to replace what you once wore there."

"No, I didn't buy it. And it's not a replacement. Your tea's getting cold."

"You weren't wearing such a ring when you left to pick up David, to take him home."

"Nothing wrong with your eyesight, even when you're brooding. All

right. I just wanted to call Sophia first, to . . . Mama, David asked me to marry him. I said yes.”

“I see.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“I’m not finished.” Tereza tugged Pilar’s hand under the desk light, examined the ring, the stones. She, too, recognized symbols. And valued such things.

“He gave you a family to wear on your hand.”

“Yes. His and mine. Ours.”

“Difficult for a woman with your heart to refuse such a gesture.” Her fingers curled tight into Pilar’s. “You told me what you thought about something in my heart. Now I’ll tell you. Once a man asked you to marry him. You said yes. Ah!” She lifted a finger before Pilar could speak. “You were a girl then. You’re a woman now, and you’ve chosen a better man. *Cara*.” Tereza framed Pilar’s face, kissed both her cheeks. “I’m happy for you. Now I have a question.”

“All right.”

“Why did you send him home, then bring me tea? Why didn’t you bring him in to ask my blessing, and Eli’s and drink champagne, as is proper? Never mind.” She waved it away. “Call him now. Tell them all to come.”

“Mama. He’s tired, not well.”

“Not so tired, and well enough to have mussed your hair and kissed the lipstick off your mouth. Call,” she ordered in a tone that cut off any argument. “This needs to be done properly, with family. We’ll go down, open our best vintage and call Sophia at the *castello*. I approve of his children,” she added, turning to the desk to close her logbook and return it to its place. “The girl will have my mother’s seed pearls, and the boy my father’s silver cuff links.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

“You’ve given me—all of us—something to celebrate. Tell them to hurry up,” she ordered, and strode out, straight and slim, calling for Maria to bring the wine.



PART FOUR

The Fruit

Who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week?
Or sells eternity to get a toy?
For one sweet grape who will the vine destroy?

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tyler was filthy, his back carried a nagging ache dead center, and he had a nasty scrape, poorly bandaged, across the knuckles of his left hand.

He was in heaven.

The mountains here weren't so different from the jagged outcroppings of his own Vacas. Where his soil was gravelly, this was rocky, but still high in the pH that would produce a soft wine.

He could understand why Cezare Giambelli had put the roots of his dream here, had fought his plow through this rocky soil. There was a rough beauty in the shadow of these hills that called to certain men, that challenged them. It wasn't a matter of taming it, Ty reflected, but of accepting it for what it was, and all it could be.

If he had to spend time away from his own vineyards, this was the place to do it. The weather was perfect, the days long and sweet and the *castello* operator more than willing to use the time and skill of another vintner.

And the muscle of one, Tyler thought as he strolled back through the rows toward the great house. He'd spent a good part of his days helping the crew install new pipelines from the reservoir to the young plantings. It was a good system, well planned, and the hours he'd spent with the crew had given him a chance to have a hand in this arm of the company.

And to casually question the men about Donato.

The language barrier wasn't as much of a problem as he'd anticipated. Those who didn't speak English were still willing to talk. With hand signals, facial expressions and the generous assistance of various interpreters, Tyler got a clear enough picture.

There wasn't a man in the fields who considered Donato Giambelli more than a joke.

Now, with the shadows lengthening toward evening, Tyler considered that opinion. He moved from field to garden where hydrangeas bloomed big as basketballs and rivers of pale pink impatiens wound a trail up a slope toward a grotto. Water spewed there in a fountain guarded by Poseidon.

The Italians, he thought, were big on their gods, and their fountains and flowers. Cezare Giambelli had certainly used them all here in this pretty palace tucked in the hills.

A very rich little palace, Tyler mused, setting his hands on his hips as he turned a slow circle. The kind of place an ambitious man with a demanding wife would covet.

Personally, he thought it was a nice place to visit, but how could anyone live there, with all those rooms, all those servants. The grounds alone, with the gardens, the lawns, the trees, the pools and statuary, would require a small army to maintain.

Then again, some men liked to have little armies at their disposal.

He passed between the mosaic walls with their bas-relief figures of well-endowed nymphs, walked down the steps circling yet another pool swimming with lily pads. From there he couldn't see the fields, the heart of the realm. More accurately, he decided, those who worked the fields couldn't see whoever lingered here. He supposed Cezare had wanted some privacy in certain corners of his empire.

What could be seen, beyond the flowers, the sprawl of terraces, was the swimming pool. And rising out of it, like Venus, was Sophia.

She wore a simple black suit that sleeked over her body like the water that streamed from it. Her hair was slicked back, and he could see the glint of something, probably diamonds, fire at her ears. Who but Sophia would swim wearing diamonds?

Watching her, he felt an uncomfortable combination of lust and longing.

She was perfect—elegant, lusty and clever. He wondered, as his belly tightened at the sight of her, if there was anything more unsettling to a man than perfection in a woman.

One thing, he decided, as he started toward her. Loving that woman to the point of stupidity.

“Water must be cold.”

She went still, the towel she'd picked up concealing her face for another

instant. "It was. I wanted it cold." Casually, she laid the towel aside and took her time slipping into a terry-cloth robe.

She knew he looked at her, studied her in that thorough and patient way of his. She wanted him to. Every time she'd passed a window that day, she looked toward the fields, picked him out among the men.

She'd studied him.

"You're filthy."

"Yeah."

"And pleased to be so," she decided. Filthy, she thought, sweaty. And gorgeous in a primitive way that shouldn't be so damned appealing. "What did you do to your hand?"

"Scraped several layers of skin off, that's all." He turned it over, glancing at it. "I could use a drink."

"Honey, you could use a shower."

"Both. Why don't I clean up? I'll meet you in the center courtyard in an hour."

"Why?"

"We'll open a bottle of wine and tell each other all about our day. Couple things I want to run by you."

"All right, that suits me. I have a few things of my own. Some of us can dig without ending up covered with dirt."

"Wear something pretty," he called after her and grinned when she glanced back over her shoulder. "Just because I'm not touching doesn't mean I don't like to look."

He picked up the damp towel when she went into the house, breathed in the scent of her. Beauty, he thought, was rough on a man. No, he didn't want to tame her any more than he wanted to tame the land. But by God, it was time for acceptance, on both sides.

She was going to give him plenty to look at. Plenty to wish for. She was, after all, an expert at packaging. She wore blue, the color of a lightning strike. The bodice dipped low, to frame the rising swell of her breasts; the skirt rose high to showcase the long, slim length of her thighs. She added a thin chain of diamonds with a single sapphire drop that lay cozily at her cleavage.

She slipped into ice-pick heels, dabbed scent in all the right places and considered herself ready.

And looked at herself in the mirror.

Why was she so unhappy? The turmoil around her was upsetting, it was challenging, but it wasn't the cause of this gut-deep unhappiness. She was all right when she was working, when she was focused on what had to be done and how best to do it. But the minute she stopped, the minute her mind drifted from the immediate task at hand, there it was. This dragging sadness, the flattening of spirit.

And with it, she admitted, an anger she couldn't identify. She didn't even know whom she was angry with anymore. Don, her father, herself. Ty.

What did it matter? She would do what needed to be done and worry about the rest later.

For now she'd have some wine and conversation, fill Tyler in on what she'd learned that day. And have the side benefit of putting him in a sexual spin. All in all, a fine way to spend the evening.

"God. I hate myself," she said aloud. "And I don't know why."

She kept him waiting, but he'd expected that. The fact was it gave him time to put everything in place. The tiled courtyard was shadowy with evening. Candlelight speared up from the table, from torchères lanced in the circling garden, from luminaries tucked among the flowerpots.

He'd chosen the wine, a soft, young white, and had begged some canapés from the kitchen staff. The staff, he'd noted, who were devoted to Sophia and appreciated the flavor of romance.

A good thing, he decided, as they'd been the ones to scurry around setting up the candles, adding little bottles of spring flowers he'd never have thought of, even putting music on low through the outdoor speakers.

He could only hope he lived up to their expectations.

He heard the sound of her heels on the tiles but didn't get up. Sophia, he thought, was too used to men springing to attention in her presence. Or falling at her feet.

"What's all this?"

"The staff got into it." He gestured to the chair beside him. "Ask for a little wine and cheese around here, you get the royal treatment." He looked at her while he took the wine from the bucket. "Look what happens when I ask you to wear something pretty. Comes from being in a castle."

"Not your style, but you seem to be coping."

"Digging a few ditches today put me in a good mood." He handed her a glass, tapped his to it. "*Salute.*"

“As I said, I did some digging of my own. The domestic staff’s been very informative. I’ve learned Don made regular visits here, unreported visits. While he never stayed here alone, he rarely came with Gina.”

“Ah, the love nest.”

“Apparently. The mistress’s name is *Signorina* Chezzo. She’s young, blonde, silly and likes breakfast in bed. She’s been a frequent guest for the last few years. Don insulted the staff by bribing them to keep her visits secret, but since no one here has any love for Gina, they took his money and complied. They’d have been discreet without the money, of course.”

“Of course. They tell you about his other visitors?”

“Yes. My father, but we’d already deduced that, and the woman my father came with once, who wasn’t Rene. Kris.”

Tyler frowned into his wine. “I didn’t get that from the vineyard.”

“Easier for me to nudge it out of the domestic staff. Anyway, it’s hardly fresh news. It’s fairly obvious he’d used my apartment for assignations when it suited him. Why not the *castello*.”

“You don’t want me to say I’m sorry, but I am.”

“No, I don’t mind you saying it. I’m sorry, too. It makes it that much more lovely that Mama’s found someone who’ll make her happy. Someone she can trust. Someone we can all trust. I say that knowing he once worked for Jerry DeMorney at La Coeur, and that Jerry’s also been a guest here.”

This time Tyler nodded. “I thought so. The crew could only give me a description, and that wasn’t clear. They tend to pay more attention to women than men in suits. Ties it together, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?” Restless, she rose, sipping her wine as she paced. “Jerry hated my father. A civilized sort of loathing, I’d always assumed.”

“Why?”

“You really stay out of the loop, don’t you?” she replied. “A few years back my father had a blistering affair with Jerry’s wife. They kept it quiet, but it was still fairly common knowledge in the inner circle. She left Jerry, or he kicked her out. That piece of the pie gets served up differently depending on who’s cutting it. Jerry and my father had been reasonably friendly before that, and after things chilled. But there was some heat under the chill, which I discovered two years ago when Jerry hit on me.”

“He came on to you?”

“Clear and strong. I wasn’t interested. He was annoyed and had a number of uncomplimentary things to say about my father, me, my family.”

"Damn it, Sophie, why didn't you mention this before?"

"Because he made a point of coming to see me the very next day, full of apologies. He said he'd been more upset about the divorce than he'd realized, felt terrible, and ashamed, at taking it out on me, and that he'd come to terms with the fact that his marriage had been over before all of that happened. And so on and so forth. It was reasonable, understandable. He said all the right things, and I didn't think of it again."

"What do you think of it now?"

"I see a crafty little triangle. My father, Kris, Jerry. Who was using whom, I can't say, but I think Jerry's involved, or at least knows about the embezzlement, maybe even the tampering. It would be profitable for La Coeur, has been, for Giambelli to be fighting consumer unease, public scandal, internal discord. Add Kris in and you have my plans, my campaign, my work tossed in their lap before I have a chance to implement them. Corporate sabotage, spies, that's common enough in business."

"Murder isn't."

"No, that's what makes it personal. He could've killed my father. I can more easily see him with a gun in his hand than I can Donato. I don't know if that's wishful thinking. It's a long way from corporate espionage to cold-blooded murder. But . . ."

"But?"

"Hindsight," she said with a shrug. "Thinking back on the things he said to me when he lost control, and more, how he said them. He was a man on the edge, and one ready to dive off. Within twelve hours, he's apologetic, sheepish, controlled and bringing me dozens of roses. And still, in a mildly civilized way, hitting on me. I should've seen the first incident was truth, and the rest facade. But I didn't. Because I'm used to men hitting on me."

The unhappiness, the dissatisfaction struggled toward the surface again before she tamped it down. "And I use it, when it suits me, to get what I want."

"Why shouldn't you? You're smart enough to use the tools at hand. If a guy lets you, it's his problem. Not yours."

"Well." She laughed a little, sipped her wine. "That's unexpected, coming from a man I've used them on."

"Didn't hurt me any." He stretched out his legs, crossed his ankles and knew she was trying to puzzle him out. Fine and good, Ty thought. Let her do the wondering for a change. "Anyway, the guy fitting DeMorney's de-

scription spent time in the winery,” Tyler told her. “Had access to the bottling plant. With Donato.”

“Ah.” How sad, she thought. “So the triangle re-forms into a four-sided box. Jerry links to Don, Don links to my father. Both Jerry and Dad link to Kris. Tidy.”

“What do you want to do about it?”

“Tell the police, here and at home. And I want to talk to David. He’ll know more about Jerry’s work at La Coeur.” She plucked a strawberry from a dish, bit into it slowly. “Tomorrow I’m going into Venice. I’ve agreed to give some interviews, during which I’ll hang Don up by the balls. Disgrace to the family, a betrayal to the loyal employees and customers of Giambelli. Our shock, sorrow and regret, and our unhesitating cooperation with the authorities in the hopes that he will be brought to justice quickly, and spare his innocent and pregnant wife, his young children, his grieving mother any more pain.”

She reached for the bottle to fill her glass again. “You think that’s cold and hard and just a little nasty.”

“No. I think it’s hard on you. Hard to be the one saying those things, keeping your head up when you do. You’ve got your grandmother’s spine, Sophie.”

“Again, unexpected, but *grazie*. I’m going to have to deal with Gina and my aunt, as well. If they want family support, emotional and the all-important financial, they’ll cooperate with the line we’re taking publicly.”

“What time are we leaving?”

“I don’t need you for this.”

“Don’t be stupid, it doesn’t suit you. MacMillan is just as involved, just as vulnerable. It’ll play better in the press if we do this as a team. Family, company, partnership. Solidarity.”

“We leave at seven, sharp.” She sat again. “I’ll type up a statement, some responses for you. You can go over them on the way in, so they’ll be fresh in your mind should you be questioned.”

“Fine. But let’s try to keep that the only area where you put words in my mouth.”

“It’s hard to resist with you taciturn types, but I’ll try.”

He spread some pâté on a cracker, handed it to her. “So, let’s change channels awhile. What do you think about your mother and David?”

“I think it’s great.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, don’t you?”

“As a matter of fact. But it seemed to me you’ve been a little off since they called with the big announcement.”

“I think, under the circumstances, I’m allowed to be a little off. But that’s one turn of events I can be pleased about. It feels right. I’m happy for her. For them. He’ll be good to her, and for her. And the kids . . . She always wanted more children, now she’ll have them. Even if they come half-grown.”

“I was half-grown, and she managed to be more of a mother to me than my own.”

Her shoulders, tensed when he’d tossed the question at her, relaxed again. “She’s too young to be your mother.”

“That’s what I used to tell her. And she’d say it’s not the age, it’s the seniority.”

“She loves you. A lot.”

“Feeling’s mutual. What’re you smiling at?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I’ve been a little down today, with one thing or another. And I didn’t expect to end the day sitting out here with you, actually relaxing. Feels better to have said all that ugly business out loud. Cleanse the palate,” she added with another sip of wine. “Then move on to something pleasant we can actually agree on.”

“We’ve got more common ground than either of us might have thought a year ago.”

“I suppose we do. And I’m impressed that instead of having this discussion inside, with your boots propped up on a coffee table, we’re sitting out here. Wine, candlelight, even music.” She leaned back, looked up at the sky. “Stars. It’s nice to know you can appreciate an attractive venue, even for a discussion that’s primarily business and distressful.”

“There’s that. But mostly I wanted to set this up out here so we’d have a pretty setting when I seduce you.”

She choked on her wine, managed to laugh it off. “Seduce me? Where’s that on your agenda?”

“Coming right up.” He grazed a fingertip over her thigh, just below the hem of her skirt. “I like your dress.”

“Thank you. I put it on to torment you.”

“Figured that.” His gaze met hers. “Bull’s-eye.”

She leaned over for the bottle again, filled his glass. When it came to sex-

ual skirmishes, she considered herself a veteran. “We agreed that part of our relationship was over.”

“No, you were having a snit about something, and I let you.”

“A snit.” She dipped a fingertip in her wine, tapped it gently on her tongue. “I don’t have snits.”

“Yeah, you do. All the time. You’ve always been a brat. A really sexy brat. And for the last while, you’ve had some pretty rough times.”

The spine he’d just complimented her on stiffened. “I’m not looking for your sympathy, MacMillan, or your tolerance.”

“See.” His grin, a calculated insult, flashed. “You’re working up toward a snit.”

Temper snuck up her backbone, added heat to rigidity. “Let me tell you something; if this is your idea of a seduction, it’s a wonder you’ve ever scored with a woman.”

“Here’s a difference between me and most of the men you know.” His legs were stretched out, his voice lazy. “I don’t keep score. I don’t think about you like a notch on the bedpost, or a trophy.”

“Oh yes, Tyler MacMillan. High-minded, moralistic, *reasonable*.”

Again he grinned at her, but this time it was full of fun. “You think that insults me? You’re just using temper as a defense. It’s your mechanism. Mostly I don’t mind much giving it right back to you, but I’m not in the mood for a fight. I want to make love with you, starting out here, slow, and working our way in, upstairs into that great, big bed in your room.”

“When I want you in my bed, you’ll know it.”

“Exactly.” Taking his time, he rose, pulled her to her feet. “You’re really stuck on me, aren’t you?”

“Stuck?” Her mouth would have fallen open if she hadn’t been so busy sneering. “Please. You’ll embarrass yourself.”

“Crazy about me.” He slipped his arms around her, chuckling when she pushed against his chest and arched away. “I saw you today, more than once, standing at the window looking at me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I might have looked out the window.”

“Looking at me,” he continued, slowly drawing her against him. “The way I was looking at you. Wanting me.” He nuzzled gently at her neck. “The way I was wanting you. And more.” His lips brushed her cheek as she turned her head away. “There’s more than the wanting between us.”

“There’s nothing—” She gasped when his hand squeezed the back of her neck, then moaned when his mouth crushed down on hers.

“If it was just this, just the heat, you wouldn’t be so scared.”

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

He eased back. “You don’t need to be. I’m not going to hurt you.”

She shook her head, but his lips came back to hers again. Gentle now, and unbearably kind. No, she thought as she softened against him. He wouldn’t hurt her. But she was bound to hurt him.

“Ty.” She started to push at him again, and ended by gripping his shirt. She’d missed this, the warmth he brought into her. Those twisted sensations of risk and safety. “This is a mistake.”

“It doesn’t feel like one. You know what I think?” He lifted her into his arms. “I think it’s stupid to argue, especially when we both know I’m right.”

“Stop it. You’re not carrying me into the house. The staff will gossip about it for weeks.”

“I figure they’ve already laid bets on how this was going to turn out.” He elbowed open a door. “And if you don’t want servants talking about what you do, you shouldn’t have servants. When we get home, I figure you should move in with me. Then it’ll be nobody’s business what we do.”

“Move—move *in* with you? Have you lost your mind? Put me down, Ty. I’m not going to be carried up the steps like a heroine in a romance novel.”

“You don’t like it? Okay, we’ll do it this way.” He shifted, hauling her up and over his shoulder. “Better?”

“This isn’t funny.”

“Baby.” He patted her butt. “It is from where I’m standing. Anyway, there’s plenty of room for your stuff at my place. Got three extra bedrooms with empty closets. That ought to be enough for your clothes.”

“I’m not moving in with you.”

“Yes, you are.” He walked into her bedroom, kicked the door shut behind him. He had to give the staff credit. He hadn’t seen one of them on the trip upstairs. Hadn’t heard a peep. He gave Sophia full marks, too. She wasn’t kicking and screaming. Too much class, he supposed as, still carrying her, he lit the candles scattered through the room.

“Tyler, I can recommend a good therapist. There’s absolutely no shame in seeking help for mental instability.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. God knows I haven’t been clear in the head since I

got tangled up with you. We can make an appointment together, after you move in."

"I'm not moving in with you."

"Yes, you are." He let her slide down until she was back on her feet and facing him. "Because it's what I want."

"If you think I give a single damn about what you want right now—"

"Because," he continued, skimming his fingers over her cheek, "I'm as crazy about you as you are about me. That shut you up, didn't it? It's time, Sophia, we started dealing with it instead of dancing around it."

"I'm sorry." Her voice shook. "I don't want this."

"I'm sorry you don't want it, too. Because it's the way it is. Look at me." He framed her face with his hands. "I wasn't looking for this, either. But it's been there, for a long time. Let's see where it takes us."

He lowered his mouth to hers. "Just us."

Just him, she thought. She wanted to believe it, wanted to trust all these soft and liquid feelings that were flowing into her. To love someone and have it be strong and true. To be capable of that. Worthy of it.

She wanted to believe it.

To be loved by an honest man, one who would make promises and keep them. Who would care for her, even when she didn't deserve it.

That was a miracle.

She wanted to believe in miracles.

His mouth was warm and firm on hers, patiently stirring desire. The steady, irresistible rise of passion was a relief. This she could understand, this she could trust. And this, she thought as she wrapped her arms around him, she could give.

She went with him willingly when he lowered her to the bed.

He kept the heat banked. This time there would be no mistaking what happened between them was an act of love. Generous, selfless and sweet. He linked his fingers with hers as he deepened the kiss, as he tasted the beginning of surrender on her lips.

It was meant to be there, in the old bed in the *castello* where it had all begun a century before. There, another beginning, another promise. Another dream. As he looked down at her, he knew it.

"Blooming time," he said quietly. "Ours."

"Always the farmer," she said with a smile as she unbuttoned his shirt.

But her hand trembled, went limp when he took it in his, pressed it to his lips.

“Ours,” he repeated.

He undressed her slowly, watched the candlelight shimmer over her skin, listened to the way her breath caught, released, caught again when he touched her. Did she know the barriers between them were crumbling? He did; he felt them fall when she quivered. And knew the precise moment her body yielded to her heart.

They seemed to sink into the bed like lovers in a pool. She gave herself to the sensations of those hard palms sliding over her, that persuasive mouth roaming where it pleased.

She reached for him, rose to him. And answered. The quiet beauty of knowing he would be there, that he would hold on even as she did, poured through her like wine in the blood.

When he pressed his lips to her heart, she wanted to weep.

No one else, he thought as he lost himself in her. No one else had ever unlocked him this way. He felt her rise under him, an arch of welcome. He heard her broken moan merge with his as she crested. And knew when he looked down at her that she was steeped in what they gave each other.

A blend, rare and perfect, finally shared.

Once again he linked his hands with hers, holding tight now. “Take me in, Sophie.” His body shook, control ruthlessly held, as he slipped inside her. “Take me. I love you.”

Her breath caught again as sensation swarmed into her, tore at her heart. Fear and joy bursting. “Ty. Don’t.”

He laid his lips on hers, the kiss gentle. Devastating. “I love you. Take me.” He kept his eyes open and on hers, watched tears swim and shimmer. “Tell me.”

“Ty.” Her heart quaked, seemed to spill over. Then her fingers curled strong to his. “Ty,” she said again. “*Ti amo.*”

She met his mouth with hers now, clung, and let him sweep her away.

“Say it again.” Drifting, Ty ran a fingertip up and down her spine. “In Italian like that.”

She shook her head, her only sign that she heard the request, and kept her cheek pressed against his heart.

“I like the way it sounds. I want to hear it again.”

“Ty—”

“There’s no point trying to take it back.” He continued his lazy stroke, and his voice was clear and calm. “You won’t get away with it.”

“People say all kinds of things in the heat of passion.” She scooted away, and nearly made it off the bed.

“Heat of passion? You start using clichés like that, I know you’re fumbling.” In one easy move, he flipped her back on the bed. “Say it again. It’s not as hard the second time. Believe me.”

“I want you to listen to me.” She pushed herself up, dragged at the bedcovers. For the first time she could remember, her own nudity left her feeling uneasy and exposed. “Whatever I might be feeling at the moment doesn’t mean . . . God! I hate when you look at me like that. Amused patience. It’s infuriating. It’s insulting.”

“And you’re trying to change the subject. I’m not going to fight with you, Sophia. Not about this. Just tell me again.”

“Don’t you understand?” She bunched her hands into fists. “I know what I’m capable of. I know my strengths and my weaknesses. I’ll just screw this up.”

“No, you won’t. I won’t let you.”

She raked a hand through her hair. “You underestimate me, MacMilan.”

“No. You underestimate yourself.”

It was that, she realized as she slowly lowered her hand again. That simple and quiet faith in her, more than she had in herself, that left her helpless. “No one else would ever say that to me. You’re the only one who’d say that to me. Maybe that’s why I’m . . .”

His nerves were starting to stretch, but he gave her ankle an easy pat. “Keep going. Almost there.”

“That’s something else. You push. Nobody else ever pushed.”

“None of the others loved you. You’re stalling, Sophie. Chicken.”

She narrowed her eyes. His were that calm lake blue, she thought. Just a little amused, just a little . . . No, she realized with a hard jolt. Not smug and amused. There was strain behind them, and nerves. And still he waited for her to give him what he needed.

“You’re not the first man I’ve been with,” she burst out.

“Stop the presses.” He leaned forward, caught her chin in his hand. The patience on his face was beginning to shift toward temper. It delighted her. “But here’s a flash for you. I’m damn well going to be the last.”

And that, she decided, was exactly right. “Okay, Ty, here it is. I’ve never said it to another man. Never had to be careful not to because it was never an issue. I’m probably not doing you any favors by saying it to you, but you’ll have to deal with it now. I love you.”

“There, that wasn’t so hard.” He ran his hands over her shoulders as relief pumped into him. “But you didn’t say it in Italian. It sounds really great in Italian.”

“You idiot. *Ti amo*.” She laughed, launching herself at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lieutenant DeMarco smoothed a fingertip along his moustache. “I appreciate your coming in, *signorina*. The information you and *Signore* MacMillan bring me is interesting. It will be looked into.”

“What exactly does that mean? Looked into. I’m telling you my cousin used the *castello* for assignments with his mistress, for clandestine meetings with a competitor and with an employee I personally terminated.”

“None of which is illegal.” DeMarco spread his hands. “Interesting, even suspicious, which is why I will look into it. However, the meetings were hardly clandestine, as many employees at the *castello* and at the vineyards were aware of them.”

“They weren’t aware of Jeremy DeMorney’s identity, or his connection with La Coeur.” Tyler put a hand over Sophia’s as he spoke. If he wasn’t mistaken she was about to shoot off her chair and directly through the roof. “What this implies is that DeMorney was involved in the sabotage that’s resulted in several deaths. Possibly others at La Coeur are involved, or at least aware.”

Since she couldn’t shove away Ty’s hand, Sophia fisted her own. “Jerry is the grand-nephew of La Coeur’s current president. He’s an ambitious and intelligent man who had a grudge against my father. And very likely against my family. Every market share Giambelli’s lost during these crises has been profit in La Coeur’s pockets. As a family member, that’s profit in Jerry’s pocket, and personal satisfaction along with it.”

DeMarco heard her out. “And I have no doubt that when presented with this information the proper authorities will want to question this Jeremy

DeMorney. Obviously, as he's an American citizen residing in New York, I'm unable to do so. At this point, my main concern is the apprehension of Donato Giambelli."

"Who's eluded you for nearly a week," Sophia pointed out.

"We learned the identity of his traveling companion, or I should say the woman we believe to be traveling with him, only yesterday. *Signorina* Chezzo's credit card has several extensive charges. I am even now waiting for further information."

"Of course he used her credit card," Sophia said impatiently. "He's an idiot, but he's not a fool. He's certainly smart enough to cover his tracks there and to get out of Italy the quickest and easiest way. Over the border into Switzerland, I'd imagine. He contacted Jerry from the Como district. The Swiss border is minutes away. The guards there barely look at a passport."

"We're aware of this, and the Swiss authorities are assisting us. It's only a matter of time."

"Time is a valuable commodity. My family has suffered personally, emotionally and financially for months. Until Donato is apprehended and questioned, until we have the answers and assurances that no other sabotage is planned, we can't end it. My father was part of this, how much a part I don't yet know. Can you understand how this feels?"

"Yes, I believe I understand, *signorina*."

"My father is dead. I need to know who killed him, and why. If I have to hunt down Don myself, if I have to confront Jerry DeMorney personally and take on the entire La Coeur organization to get those answers, believe me, that's what I'll do."

"You're impatient."

"On the contrary, I've been remarkably patient." She got to her feet. "I need results."

He held up a finger as the phone rang. His expression changed slightly as he listened to the stream of information. When he hung up, he folded his hands. "You have your results. The Swiss police have just taken your cousin into custody."

It was an education to watch her in action. Tyler didn't say a word, wasn't sure he'd have gotten one in if he'd tried. She'd peppered DeMarco with demands, questions, scribbling down information in her notebook.

When she'd marched out of DeMarco's office, Tyler had to lengthen his considerable stride just to keep up. She moved like a rocket with a cell phone attached to her ear.

He couldn't understand half of what she was saying anyway. She started in Italian, switched to French somewhere along the line and went back to Italian with a few short orders in English. She mowed her way through the tourists thronging the narrow streets, clipped busily over the pretty bridges and beelined across squares. And never stopped talking, never stopped moving, even when she had to cock the little phone between her ear and shoulder to drag out her Filofax and make more notes.

She passed shop windows without so much as a glance. He figured if she breezed by Armani without it putting a hitch in her stride, nothing was going to stop her.

At the main dock she jumped on a water taxi, and he caught the word for "airport" in her brisk stream of Italian. He figured it was a good thing he had his passport in his pocket, or he'd be left in her dust.

She didn't sit even then, but braced herself on the rail behind the driver and made still more calls. Fascinated, he wedged himself in on the other side and watched her. The wind teased her short cap of hair, the sun bounced off the dark lenses of her glasses. Venice washed by behind her, an ancient and exotic backdrop to a contemporary woman with places to go and people to see.

Small wonder he was crazy about her.

Tyler folded his arms, tipped back his head and let himself enjoy the last breezes of the city built on water. If he knew his woman, and he did, they were going to be spending some time in the Alps.

"Tyler!" He tuned back in when she snapped her fingers at him. "How much money do you have? Cash?"

"On me? I don't know. Couple hundred thousand in lire, maybe a hundred American."

"Good." She swung toward the stairs as the boat docked. "Pay the driver."

"Yes, ma'am."

She cut her way through the airport just as she had through the city streets. Per her orders, the corporate jet was waiting, fueled and cleared for the flight. Less than an hour after she'd received the news her cousin was in custody, she was strapped in for takeoff. And for the first time in that hour, she turned off her phone, shut her eyes and took a breath.

“Sophia?”

“*Che?* What?”

“You kick ass.”

She opened her eyes again, and her smile came slow and sharp. “Damn straight.”

He'd been taken from a tiny resort nestled in the mountains north of Chur and near the Austrian border. The farthest he'd thought ahead was perhaps getting over that border, or alternatively into Liechtenstein. The goal had been merely to put as many countries between him and Italy as possible.

But while looking north, Donato had failed to look at his own ground. His mistress wasn't as dim as he'd supposed, nor half as loyal. She'd seen a news report on the television while lounging in a bubble bath and had found his cache of cash in his traveling case.

She'd taken the money, booked a flight, placed a single anonymous call. And had been on her way, considerably richer, to the French Riviera when the efficient Swiss police had broken into Donato's room and plucked him out from under the bedcovers.

Now he was in a Swiss cell, bemoaning his fate and cursing all women as the bane of his existence.

He had no money to hire a lawyer and desperately needed one to fight extradition for as long as possible. For as long as it took, for God's sake, for him to think his way clear.

He would throw himself on the mercy of *La Signora*. He would escape and run to Bulgaria. He would convince the authorities he'd done nothing more than run off with his mistress.

He would rot in prison for the rest of his life.

With his thoughts circling this same loop, around and around, he looked up to see a guard on the other side of the bars. Informed he had a visitor, he got shakily to his feet. At least the Swiss had had the decency to let him dress, though he'd been allowed no tie, no belt, not even the laces in his Guccis.

He smoothed his hair with his hands as he was taken to the visiting area. He didn't care who'd come to see him, as long as someone would listen.

When he saw Sophia on the other side of the glass, his spirits soared. Family, he thought. Blood would listen to blood.

“Sophia! *Grazie a Dio*.” He fell into his chair, fumbled with the phone. She let him ramble, the panic, the pleas, the denials, the despair. And the longer he did so, the thicker the shell grew around her heart.

“*Stai zitto*.”

He did indeed shut up at her quiet order. He must have seen that she stood for her grandmother now, and that her expression was cold and merciless.

“I’m not interested in excuses, Donato. I’m not here to listen to your pitiful claims that it’s all been a horrible mistake. Don’t ask for my help. I’m going to ask the questions, you’ll give the answers. Then I’ll decide what will be done. Is that clear?”

“Sophia, you have to listen—”

“No, I don’t. I don’t have to do anything. I can get up, walk away. You, on the other hand, can’t. Did you kill my father?”

“No. *In nome di Dio!* You can’t believe that.”

“Under the circumstances, I find it easy to believe. You stole from the family.”

He started to deny it and, reading his answer in his eyes, Sophia set the phone down, began to get to her feet. Panicked, Don slapped his palm on the glass, shouted. When the guards started forward, she coolly gestured them back, picked up the phone again.

“You were about to say?”

“Yes. Yes, I stole. I was wrong, I was stupid. Gina, she makes me crazy. She nags for more. More babies, more money, more things. I took money. I thought, what did it matter? Please, Sophia, *cara*, you won’t let them keep me in prison over money.”

“Think again. I would, yes. My grandmother might not. But it wasn’t just money. You tampered with the wine. You killed an old, innocent man. For money, Don? How much was he worth to you?”

“It was a mistake, an accident. I swear it. It was only supposed to make him a little sick. He knew— He saw . . . I made a mistake.” His hand shook as he rubbed it over his face.

“Knew what, Donato. Saw what?”

“In the vineyard. My lover. He disapproved, and might have spoken of it to *Zia Tereza*.”

“If you continue to play me for a fool, I’ll walk away and leave you to rot. Believe it. The truth, Don. All of it.”

"It was a mistake, I swear it. I listened to poor advice. I was misled." Desperate, he dragged at his already loosened collar. His throat was closing, choking him. "I was to be paid, you see, and I needed money. If the company had some trouble, if there was bad press, lawsuits, I would be paid more. Baptista, he saw . . . people I spoke with. Sophia, please. I was angry, very angry. I've worked hard. My whole life. *La Signora* never valued me. A man has his pride. I wanted her to value me."

"And killing an innocent old man, attacking her reputation was the answer?"

"The first, that was an accident. And it was the company's reputation—"

"It's one in the same. How could you not know that?"

"I thought, if there's trouble, then I'll help fix it, and she'll see."

"And you'd get paid from both ends," Sophia finished. "It didn't work with *Signore* Baptista. He didn't get sick, he died. And they buried him believing his heart had just given out at last. How frustrating for you. How annoying. Then almost immediately *Nonna* reorganized the company."

"Yes, yes, and does she reward me for my years of service? No." Sincerely outraged, he thumped a fist on the counter. "She brings in an outsider, she promotes an American woman who then can question me."

"So you killed Margaret and tried to kill David."

"No, no. Margaret. An accident. I was desperate. She was looking at the accounts, at the invoices. I needed—wanted—only to delay her, a short time. How was I to know she would drink so much of the wine? A glass, even two, would only have made her ill."

"It was inconsiderate of her to spoil things. You sent bottles, poisoned wine, out on the market. You risked lives."

"I had no choice. No choice. You must believe me."

"Did my father know? About the wine? The tampering?"

"No. No, it was just a game to Tony. The business was his game. He didn't know about the dummy account because he never took time to look. He didn't know Baptista because he knew no one who worked in the fields. It wasn't his life. Sophia, it was my life."

She sat back briefly. Her father had been weak, a sad excuse for a husband, even for a man. But he'd had no part in murder, or in sabotage. It was, at least, some small comfort.

"You brought DeMorney to the *castello*, to the winery. You took money from him, didn't you? He paid you to betray your own blood."

"Listen to me." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Stay away from DeMorney. He's a dangerous man. You have to believe me. Whatever I've done, you have to believe I'd never want to hurt you. He'll stop at nothing."

"Murder? My father?"

"I don't know. I swear to you on my life, Sophia. I don't know. He wants to ruin the family. He used me for that. Listen to me," he repeated, laying his palm on the glass again. "I took money, I stole. I did what he told me to do to the wine. I was misled. Now he'll let me hang for it. I'm begging you to help me. I'm begging you to stay away from him. When I knew Cutter would expose me, I ran. I only ran, Sophia, I swear it to you. They're saying I hired someone, some thug from the streets to shoot him and steal the papers. It's a lie. Why would I? It was over already for me. It was done."

The twists of lies and truths had to be unknotted. It would take a cold and steady hand to do so, she thought. Even now, after all she knew of him, part of her wanted to reach out. She couldn't allow it. "You want my help, Don? Tell me everything you know about Jerry DeMorney. Everything. If I'm satisfied, I'll see to it Giambelli arranges for your legal needs, and that your children are cared for and protected."

When Sophia came back, Tyler thought she looked exhausted. Wilted. Before he could speak, she touched a hand to his. "Don't ask me yet. I'm going to arrange a conference call on the flight so I only have to say it all once."

"Okay. Let's try this instead." He pulled her in, held her.

"Thanks. Can you do without the things you took to the *castello* for a few days? I'll have them packed up and sent. We need to go home, Ty. I need to be home."

"Best news I've had in days." He kissed the top of her head. "Let's go."

"Do you believe him?"

Tyler waited until she'd completed the call, until all had been said. She was up now, pacing the cabin, sipping her third cup of coffee since takeoff.

"I believe he's a stupid man with a weak and selfish core. I believe he's convinced himself that *Signore* Baptista and Margaret were unfortunate accidents. He let himself be used for money, and for ego, by someone a great deal more clever. Now he's sorry, but sorriest for being caught. But I believe, absolutely, that he's afraid of Jerry. I don't think Don killed my father. I don't think he tried to kill David."

"You're looking at DeMorney."

"Who else? Proving it won't be so easy. Tying Jerry to any of this and making it hold won't be so easy."

Tyler rose, took the coffee from her hand. "You're revving yourself too high. Turn it off awhile."

"Can't. Who else, Ty? I could see you didn't agree when we were on the call. I can see it now."

"I'm not sure what I think just yet. I take longer than you to process things. But I can't figure out why your father'd have just met in your apartment with Jerry, or why after all this time, all this planning, Jerry would kill him. Would risk that, would bother. Doesn't ring for me. But I'm not a cop, and neither are you."

"They'll have to question him. Even on the word of someone like Donato, they'll have to. He'll slither and he'll slide, but . . ." She stopped, took a breath. "We'll be stopping in New York to refuel."

"Three countries in one day."

"Welcome to my world."

"You won't get anything out of him, Sophie."

"Just the chance to spit in his face."

"Yeah, there's that." And he'd get a charge out of watching her do it. "You know how to track him down? It's a big city."

She sat again and pulled out her Filofax. "Making connections is one of my best things. Thanks."

"Hey, I'm just along for the ride."

"Let me tell you something that didn't escape my notice today."

"Sophie, nothing does."

"Exactly. I was plowing my way through this mess, making calls, arrangements, pushing all the buttons, you never interrupted me, never asked me any questions, never patted my head and told me to step back so you could handle it."

"I don't happen to speak three languages."

"That wasn't it. It didn't occur to you to flex your muscles and take over, to show me you could handle things for me. Just like it didn't dent your ego that I knew what I had to do and how to do it. You don't have to flex your muscles because you know they're there. And so do I."

"Maybe I just like watching you flex yours."

She got up just to crawl into his lap, curl there. "All my life I've made cer-

tain to hook myself up with weak men. All show, no substance." With her head on his shoulder she could finally rest. "Now look what I've done."

Jerry made several calls himself. From pay phones. He didn't consider Donato much of a problem, but more of an inconvenience. And even that would be seen to before long. He'd accomplished what he'd set out to accomplish.

Giambelli was fighting its way out of yet another crisis, the family itself was in turmoil, consumer trust was diving toward an all-time low. And he was reaping the rewards, personally, professionally, financially.

Nothing he'd done—nothing he'd done that could be proved—had been illegal. He'd simply done his job, as an aggressive businessman would, and had seized opportunities that had come his way.

He was more amused than annoyed when lobby security announced he had visitors. Prepared to be entertained, he cleared them, then turned to his companion. "We have company. An old friend of yours."

"Jerry, we've got two solid hours of work to get through tonight." Kris uncurled her legs from the couch. "Who is it?"

"Your former boss. Why don't we open a bottle of the Pouilly-Fuissé? The '96."

"Sophia." Kris surged to her feet. "Here? Why?"

"We're about to find out," he said as the buzzer sounded. "Be a good girl, won't you? Fetch the wine."

He strolled to the door. "Isn't this a lovely surprise. I had no idea you were in town." He actually leaned forward to kiss Sophia's cheek. She was quick, but Tyler was quicker. His hand rammed sharply into Jerry's chest.

"Let's not start out being stupid," he advised.

"Sorry." Holding up both hands, Jerry stepped back. "Didn't realize things had changed between you. Come in. I was just about to open some wine. You both know Kris."

"Yes. How cozy," Sophia began. "We'll pass on the wine, thanks. We won't be here long. You appear to be enjoying all your new employee benefits, Kris."

"I much prefer the style of my new boss to the style of my old one."

"I'm sure you're a lot more friendly with your associates."

"Ladies, please," Jerry pleaded as he closed the door. "We're all pros here."

And we know executives switch companies every day. That's business. I hope you're not here to scold me for snatching one of yours. After all, Giambelli wooed one of our best away just last year. How is David, by the way? I heard he had a close call in Venice recently."

"He's doing very well. Fortunately for Kris, Giambelli has a firm policy against trying to kill former employees."

"But apparently not a strong enough one against internal wars. I was shocked to hear about Donato." Jerry lowered to the arm of a sofa. "Absolutely shocked."

"We're not wired, DeMorney." Tyler ran an arm down Sophia's arm to calm her. "So you can save the act. We paid Don a visit before we left Europe. He had some interesting things to say about you. I don't think the police will be far behind us."

"Really?" He'd been fast, Jerry thought, but apparently not quite fast enough. "I have more faith in our system than to believe the police, or anyone else for that matter, will put much credence in the ravings of a man who'd steal from his own family. This is a difficult time for you, Sophia." He stood again. "If there's anything I can do—"

"You could go to hell, but I'm not sure they'd have you. You should've been more careful," she continued. "Both of you," she added with a nod toward Kris. "Spending time at the *castello*, the winery, the bottling plant."

"It's not illegal." Jerry shrugged. "In fact, it's not an uncommon practice for friendly competitors to visit each other that way. We were invited, after all. You, and any member of your family, are always welcome at any La Coeur operation."

"You used Donato."

"Guilty." Jerry spread his hands. "But again, nothing illegal about it. He approached me. I'm afraid he's been unhappy at Giambelli for quite some time. We discussed the possibility of him coming aboard at La Coeur."

"You told him to tamper with the wine. Told him how to do it."

"That's ridiculous and insulting. Be careful, Sophia. I understand you're upset, but trying to deflect your family's troubles onto me and mine isn't the answer."

"Here's how it was." Tyler had spent the hours in the air working it out in his head. Now he sat, made himself comfortable. "You wanted to cause trouble, serious trouble. Avano'd bounced on your wife. Hard for a man to take that, even if the other guy's busy bouncing on every woman he can

find. But trouble just slides right off Avano. Nothing sticks. He keeps his wife just where he wants her, which is out of his way but close enough to lock in his position with her family organization. That's a pissar for you."

"My ex-wife is none of your business, MacMillan."

"But she was yours, and so was Avano. Goddamn Giambellis gave the son of a bitch free rein. Now there ought to be a way to take that rein and hang all of them. Maybe you know Avano's skimming, maybe you don't. But you know enough to look at Don. He cheats on his wife, too, and he's pretty friendly with Avano. Don's a friendly guy. Wouldn't be hard for you to get close to him, hint that La Coeur would love to have him on the team. More money, more power. You'd play into his complaints, his ego, his needs. You find out about the dummy account, and now you've got something on him."

"You're fishing, MacMillan, and fishing bores me."

"It gets better. Avano's snuggling up to Sophia's second in command. Isn't that interesting? Dangle a carrot under her nose and you get lots of inside information. Did he offer you money, Kris? Or just a corner office with a nice, shiny brass plaque?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." But she took a quick and careful step away from Jerry. "My relationship with Tony had nothing to do with my position at La Coeur."

"You keep thinking that," Ty said casually. "Meanwhile, DeMorney, you keep playing on Don, nudging him along. Deeper, deeper. He's got some money problems. Who doesn't? You lend him a little, just a friendly loan. And you string him along about the move to La Coeur. What else can he bring to the table? Inside information? Not good enough."

"My company doesn't require inside information."

"It's not your company." Ty inclined his head when he saw the fury spurt out of Jerry's eyes. "You just want it to be. You talk to Don about the tampering, just a few bottles. Show him what he should do, could do, then how he'd be able to step in and be a hero when the shit hits. Just like you'll be a hero at La Coeur because you're primed and ready to move when Giambelli takes the hit. Nobody's going to get really hurt, or that's what you tell that poor sap Don. But it'd shake up the company good."

"Pitiful." Beneath his precisely tailored shirt, a line a sweat ran down Jerry's back. "No one's going to believe this fairy tale."

"Oh, the police might be pretty entertained. Let's just finish it out," Ty

suggested. "It goes wrong for Don, and an old man dies. No skin off your ass, of course. You've got Don by the short hairs now. He talks, he's up for murder. Meanwhile, Giambelli's moving right along. Avano's still sliding. And one of your own moves to the enemy camp."

"We've managed to bump along without the help of David Cutter." He wanted to pour wine, carelessly, but realized his hand was shaking. "And you've taken up enough of my time."

"Nearly done. You'd already started a second front, courting one of the brains in promotion, feeding her dissatisfaction, her jealousies. When the crisis hits, and you're going to make sure it does, the Giambelli spin is going to be off balance."

"I had nothing to do with this." Kris grabbed her briefcase, began stuffing papers inside. "I don't know anything about this."

"Maybe not. Your style's more the backstabbing variety."

"I'm not interested in what you think or anything you have to say. I'm leaving."

She bolted to the door, slammed it behind her.

"Wouldn't count on too much company loyalty in that one," Ty commented. "You underestimated Sophia, DeMorney. Just like you overestimated yourself. You got your crisis, you spilled your blood, but it hasn't been enough for you. You want more, and that's what's going to choke you. Going after Cutter was stupid. Legal had copies of the paperwork, and Don knew it."

Kris didn't worry him. She could be sacrificed, like any pawn, if necessary. "Obviously Donato panicked. A man who's killed once doesn't scruple to kill again."

"That's right. Old Don, he doesn't figure he killed anybody. The wine did. And he was too busy running to worry about David. I wonder who clued you in to the meet in Venice, and Don's scramble to get the money out of his private account. The cops'll work on that angle, and they'll start tying you in. You're going to have a lot of questions to answer, and before too much longer you'll have your own public relations nightmare. La Coeur's going to prune you off, pal, just like they would a diseased cane."

Ty got to his feet. "You figure you've covered yourself, every inch. Nobody ever does. And when Don drowns, he's going to drag you under with him. Personally, I'm going to enjoy seeing you go under for the third time. I didn't care much for Avano. He was a selfish idiot who didn't appreciate

what he had. Don falls in the same category, at a slightly higher level. But you, you're a dickless coward who pays people to do the dirty work you haven't got the guts for. Doesn't surprise me your wife went hunting elsewhere for someone with balls."

He stood where he was, hands at his sides as Jerry lunged. And he took the fist on the jaw without making a move to block it. He even allowed Jerry to knock him back against the door.

"Did you see that?" Tyler asked Sophia calmly. "He punched me, now he's laying hands on me. I'm going to ask him politely to stop. You hear that, DeMorney? I'm asking you, politely, to stop."

"Fuck you." Jerry bunched a fist and would have rammed it into Tyler's belly if it hadn't been stopped an inch from its mark. If it hadn't suddenly been crushed and the pain radiating up his arm hadn't dropped him breathless to his knees.

"You're going to want to have that hand X-rayed," Tyler told him as he gave him a light shove that sent Jerry the rest of the way to the floor in a curl of agony. "I think I heard a bone snap. Ready, Sophie?"

"Ah . . . yes." Slightly dazed, she let Tyler draw her out the door, toward the elevator. Inside, she let out the breath she hadn't been aware of holding. "I'd like to point something out."

"Go ahead." He punched lobby level, leaned back.

"I didn't interrupt, or ask any questions. I wasn't compelled to flex my muscles," she continued as Tyler's mouth twitched. "Or prove to you I could handle things. I just want to mention all that."

"Got it. You've got your areas of expertise and I've got mine." He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Now let's go home."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“And then . . .” Sophia dug into the leftover lasagna while the family gathered in the villa’s kitchen. “Ty had his hand—I didn’t even see it happen. It was like lightning. This big hand covering Jerry’s pretty manicured one, which was probably still stinging from rapping against Ty’s jaw. Anyway”—she gulped down some wine—“all of a sudden Jerry’s gone white and his eyes are rolling back in his head and he’s folding like, I don’t know, an accordion toward the floor. And the big guy here’s not even breaking a sweat. I’m goggling, I know I am, but who wouldn’t, and Ty politely suggests that Jerry might want to get his hand X-rayed because he thinks he heard a bone snap.”

“Good lord.” Pilar helped herself to some wine. “Really?”

“Mmm.” Sophia swallowed. She was starving. The minute she’d walked in the door, she’d been starving. “I heard this little sound, like when you step on a twig. Rather horrible, really. Then we just left. And I have to say . . . Here, Eli, your glass is empty. I have to say that it was so quietly vicious, and exciting. So exciting, I’m not ashamed to say that when we got back on the plane, I jumped him.”

“Jesus, Sophie.” Tyler felt heat rise up the back of his neck. “Shut up and eat.”

“It didn’t embarrass you at the time,” she pointed out. “Whatever happens, however this all comes out, I’m always going to have the image of Jerry curled up on the floor like a cocktail shrimp. Nobody can take that away from me. Do we have any gelato?”

"I'll get it." Pilar got up from the table, then paused and kissed Ty on the top of the head. "You're a good boy."

Eli drew a breath, let it out. "He didn't leave much of a mark on your jaw there."

"Guy's got pussy hands," Ty said before he could think, then winced. "I beg your pardon, *La Signora*."

"As you should. I don't approve of such language at my table. But as I'm in your debt, I'll overlook it."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I know." She reached for his hand, held it tight. "That's why I'm in your debt. My own blood betrayed me and mine. For days knowing that opened a hole in me, made me doubt myself. Things I've done and things I haven't. Tonight I look and see the daughter of my daughter, and the boy Eli once brought to me. And that hole closes again. I regret nothing. I'm ashamed of nothing. How could I be? Whatever happens, we'll go on. We have a wedding to plan," she said, smiling as Pilar dished up ice cream. "A business to run, vines to tend." She lifted her glass. "*Per famiglia*."

Sophia slept like a log and woke early. At six she was already closed in her office, refining a press release and making personal calls to key accounts in Europe. By seven, she'd worked her way across the Atlantic to the East Coast. She was careful, very careful not to mention Jerry's name, and not to accuse a competitor of shady practices. But she let the implication take root.

At eight, she judged it late enough to phone the Moores at home.

"Aunt Helen, I'm sorry to call so early."

"Not so early. I'd've been out the door in fifteen minutes. Are you still in Venice?"

"No, I'm home, and in need of a legal opinion. On several pesky matters actually. Some involve international law."

"Corporate or criminal?"

"Both. You know Donato's been taken into custody. He's being extradited to Italy today. He's not going to fight it. He's implicated someone, privately to me at this point, an American, a competitor. This person was at minimum aware of the tampering and the embezzlement, and very likely

was more involved. Doesn't that make it conspiracy? Can he be charged? Margaret died here in the States, so—"

"Hold on, hold on. You're moving much too quickly, Sophie. The law's a slow wheel. First, you're going on something Don told you. He isn't very credible at the moment."

"He'll be more credible," she promised. "I just want a picture."

"I'm not an expert on international law. I'm not a criminal attorney, come to that. You need to talk to James, and I'll put him on in a minute. But I'm going to tell you this, as your friend. This is a matter for the police and the system. I don't want you to do anything, and I want you to be very careful what you say and what you print. Don't make any statements without running them by either me, James or Linc."

"I've drafted press releases for here and overseas. I'll fax them over if that's all right."

"You do that. You talk to James now. Don't do anything."

Sophia bit her lip. She wondered what her surrogate aunt, the judge, would have to say about the visit she and Ty had paid to Jerry the night before.

At mid-morning, David stood among the rows, among the young mustard plants, at the MacMillan vineyard. He felt useless, out of touch and more than a little panicked because his just-turned-seventeen-year-old son had driven off to school that morning behind the wheel of a secondhand convertible.

"Don't you have some papers to push?" Tyler asked him.

"Up yours."

"In that case I won't suggest you head over to the caves to check on the month's drawing. We're going to be testing the '93 Merlot for starters."

"I get to taste wine, you get to rumble."

"That's the breaks. Besides, it wasn't much of a rumble."

"Pilar said you flattened him one-handed." David tested his injured arm. "One hand's still about all I've got, though the sadist physical therapist says I'll be back to two in no time. I want to take a pop at him." David strode between the rows to work off some of the temper. "I worked for the son of a bitch. For years. Sat in meetings with him, had lunches, late-night strategy sessions. Some of them were about how to woo over some of Giambelli's accounts, some of yours. That's business."

“That’s right.”

“When La Coeur copped the exclusive on Allied flights to and from Europe, I went out and celebrated with him. We nudged Giambelli out on that one, barely. I patted myself on the back for days over that. Now I look at the timing, go through the steps and realize we copped it because he had the inside track. Don fed him Giambelli’s bid before it was made.”

“That’s the way some people do business.”

“I don’t.”

It was the tone that made Ty stop. He supposed somehow over the past months they’d become friends. Almost family. Near enough that he understood the guilt, and the frustration.

“Nobody’s saying that, David. Nobody thinks that.”

“No. But I remember how much I wanted that account.” He started to jam his hands in his pockets, and his bad arm vibrated. “Goddamn it.”

“You going to finish beating yourself up soon? Because I’ve got a lot of work to catch up on, seeing as I had to go to Italy to help wipe your blood off the street. You getting yourself shot really put a crimp in my schedule.”

David turned back toward Tyler. “Did you use that same tone when you suggested that fucker DeMorney get an X ray?”

“Probably. It’s the one I use when somebody’s being annoyingly stupid.”

The raw edges in David’s stomach smoothed away, and the first glint of humor sparked into his eyes. “I’d take a swing at you over that, but you’re bigger than me.”

“Younger, too.”

“Bastard. Now that I think of it, I could take you down, but I’ll give you a break because Sophia’s heading this way. I’d hate for her to have to watch her future stepfather kick your ass.”

“In your dreams.”

“I’m going to go sulk in the caves.” He started off, pausing as he passed Tyler. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He walked the opposite way until he met Sophia. “You’re late. Again.”

“Priorities. Where’s David going? I wanted to ask how he was feeling.”

“Do yourself a favor and don’t. He’s at the restless stage of his recovery. What priorities?”

“Oh, solidifying some shaky accounts, manipulating the press, consult-

ing with legal. Just another quiet day for the wine heiress. How are we doing out here?"

"Nights've been cool and moist. Brings on mildew. We'll do the second sulfur spraying right after the grapes have set. I'm not worried."

"Good. I'll carve out some time for the vintner tomorrow, and you carve out some for the promotion whiz. Back to teamwork. Now, why haven't you kissed me hello?"

"Because I'm working. I want to check the new plantings, run by the old distillery and check on the fermentation vats. And we're testing today in the caves. Then we've got to move your stuff over to my place."

"I haven't said I was—"

"But since you're here anyway." He leaned down and kissed her.

"We're going to have to discuss this," she began, then pulled her ringing phone out of her pocket. "Very soon," she added. "Sophia Giambelli. *Chi? Sì, va bene.*" She angled the phone away. "It's Lieutenant DeMarco's office. Don was transferred to his custody today. Ah." She shifted the phone back in place. "*Sì, buon giorno. Ma che . . . scusi? No, no.*"

Still clutching the phone, she sank onto the ground. "*Come!*" she managed. Gripping Tyler's hand before he could take the phone from her, she shook her head fiercely. "*Donato.*" She lifted her stunned gaze to Tyler's. "*E' morto.*"

He didn't need her to translate the last. He took the phone from her and, identifying himself, asked how Donato Giambelli had died.

"*A heart attack.* He wasn't yet forty." Sophia paced. "This is my doing. I pushed him, then I went to Jerry and pushed him. I might as well have drawn a target on Don's back."

"You didn't do it alone," Tyler reminded her. "I'm the one who yanked DeMorney's chain."

"*Basta,*" Tereza ordered, but without heat. "If they find Donato died from drugs, if they find he was murdered while in the hands of the police, there's no fault here. Donato's choices put him where he was, and the police were obliged to protect as well as contain him. I won't have blame cast on my house."

And that, she determined, would end that. "He was a disappointment to me. But I remember he was once a sweet young boy with a pretty smile. I'll mourn the little boy."

She reached out, found Eli's hand, brought it to her lips in a gesture Sophia had never seen her make.

"*Nonna*. I'll go to Italy, to the funeral to represent the family."

"No, the time for you to stand in my place will come soon enough. Not yet. I need you here. Eli and I will go, and that's as it should be. I'll bring Francesca, Gina and the children back with me if they want it. God help us if they do," she finished with spirit and got to her feet.

Sophia studied Linc's office. No one, she decided, could accuse his father of preferential treatment. The room was little more than a glorified box, cramped, windowless and stacked with law books and files. She imagined there was a desk hiding under the mounds of paperwork.

"Welcome to my dungeon. It's not much," Linc said as he cleaned off a chair for her. "But . . . it's not much." He dumped the files and books on the floor.

"The nice thing about starting at the bottom is, you can't get any lower."

"If I'm a good boy, I'll get my own stapler." With a skill that told her he'd done so before, he wheeled his desk chair around the mountain. From somewhere under the mounds of papers and books a phone began to ring.

"Do you need to get that? Wherever it is."

"If I do, somebody'll just want to talk to me. I'd rather talk to you."

How anyone could work in such confusion and disorder was beyond her. She had to mentally sit on her hands to keep herself from digging in to organize. "Now I feel guilty about adding to your workload. But not guilty enough to stop me from asking if the papers I sent you are somewhere around, and if you had a chance to look them over."

"I've got a system." He reached under a stack on the left corner of his desk, pulled out a file.

"It's like the magician's tablecloth trick," she commented. "Nicely done."

"Want to see me pull a rabbit out of my hat?" Grinning at her, he sat. "You covered yourself here," he began. "I fiddled with the press releases a little, got to earn my inflated fee, after all." He passed the revised papers over. "I take it you're acting as spokesperson for Giambelli-MacMillan."

"I take it, too, at least as long as *Nonna* and Eli are in Italy. Mama's not trained for this sort of thing. I am."

"David? Ty?"

"I'll see they have copies, just in case. But it's best that the media representative be someone from the Giambelli family. We're the ones getting kicked around."

"I'm sorry about Don."

"So am I." She looked down at the releases again, but she didn't see them. "Funeral's today. I keep thinking about the last time I spoke to him, how scared he was. I know what he did, and I can't forgive him for it. But I keep remembering how scared he was, and how cold I was to him."

"You can't slap yourself around for that, Sophie. Mom and Dad updated me on what went on, at least what we're sure of. He got greedy, and he got stupid. He was responsible for two deaths."

"Accidents, he called them. I know what he did, Linc. But who was responsible for him?"

"Which brings us around to DeMorney. You're going to have to be careful there. Keep his name out of your statements. Keep La Coeur out of them."

"Mmm-hmm." Idly, she studied her manicure. "It's leaked that the police are questioning him in connection with the tampering, the fraudulent account, even my father's murder. I can't imagine how the press got the information."

"You're a devious package, Sophie."

"Spoken as my friend or my lawyer?"

"Both. Just be careful. You don't want any leaks traced back to you. And if you're asked about DeMorney, and you're bound to be, go with no comment."

"I have plenty of comments."

"And the ones you're thinking of could dump you into a lawsuit. Let the system wind its tortuous way toward the end goal. If DeMorney was involved you don't have proof," he reminded her. "Let me be a lawyer. If he was involved, it's going to come out. But Don's word isn't enough."

"He pulled the strings. I'm sure of it, and that's enough for me. People are dead, and why? Because he wanted a bigger market share? For God's sake."

"People have killed for less, but I've got to say, that's the weak spot. He's a wealthy, respected businessman. It's going to be a rough road tying him to corporate espionage, embezzlement, product tampering, much less murder."

"He's opened it up, and the press is going to leap on the juicy morsel about his wife and my father. Humiliating him publicly. He hates us and will hate us more as this plays out. I felt that when I saw him in New York.

It's not business, or not just business. It's very personal. Linc, have you seen our new ad?"

"The one with the couple on the porch? Sunset on the lake, wine and romance. Very slick, very attractive. It had your name all over it. Yours, I mean, not just the company."

"Thanks. My team put a lot of time and thought into it." She reached into her briefcase, pulled a photograph from a file folder. "Someone sent this to me yesterday."

He recognized the ad, though this copy had been computer-generated and altered. In this, the young woman's head was tipped back, her mouth open in a silent scream. A glass lay on the porch, the wine spilling out and bleeding from white to red. The header read:

IT'S YOUR MOMENT

TO DIE

"Jesus, Sophie. This is sick, and nasty. Where's the envelope?"

"I have it. No return address, naturally. Postmarked San Francisco. Initially I thought of Kris Drake. It's her style. But I don't think so."

She could study the doctored ad now without a shudder. "I think she's backing way off to keep herself clear of the fallout. I don't know if Jerry was on the West Coast, but he did this."

"You need to take this to the police."

"I took the original in this morning. This is a copy. I got the impression that while they'll look into it, they see it as another ugly little prank." She pushed to her feet. "I want the private detective you've hired to look into it, too. And I don't want you to say anything about it to anyone."

"I agree with the first part, but find the second stupid."

"It's not stupid. My mother's planning her wedding. *Nonna* and Eli have enough to deal with. So do Ty and David. Besides, this came to me. Personally. I want to deal with it personally."

"Even you can't always have what you want. This is a threat."

"Maybe. And believe me, I intend to be very careful. But I'm not going to have this time spoiled for my mother. She's waited too long to be happy. I'm not going to dump any more stress on my grandparents. And I'm not telling Ty, not just yet anyway, because he'll overreact. So it's you and me, Linc."

She reached down for his hand. "I'm counting on you."

"Here's what I'll do," he said after a moment. "I'll put the detective on it, and give him forty-eight hours to work before I say anything. If during that time you get another of these, you have to come to me right away."

"I can promise that. But forty-eight hours—"

"That's the deal." He got to his feet. "I'll give you that because I love you, and I know what you're feeling. I won't give any more because I love you, and I know what I'm feeling. Take it or leave it."

"Okay. Okay," she said again on a long breath. "I'm not being brave and stupid, Linc. Stubborn, maybe, but not stupid. He wants to scare me, and throw my family into more turmoil. He's not going to. Right now, I'm going to meet my mother, and yours. We're going shopping for a wedding dress." She kissed his cheeks. "Thanks."

Maddy's idea of shopping was hanging around the mall, scoping out the boys who were hanging around the mall scoping out the girls, and spending her allowance on some junk food and new earrings. She expected to be terminally bored spending the day with three adults in fancy dress shops.

But she figured the points she'd earn with her father for agreeing to go would translate into the streaks she wanted to put in her hair. And if she played her cards right, she could cop some pretty cool stuff out of Pilar.

A potential new stepmother was prime fruit for plucking. Guilt and nerves, by Maddy's calculations, equaled shopping bags.

She was supposed to call Ms. Giambelli Pilar now. Which was weird, but better than being expected to call her Mom or something.

First she had to get through the lunch deal with Pilar and the judge lady. A girl lunch, Maddy thought with derision. Tiny portions of fancy, low-fat, tasteless food where you were expected to talk about clothes and your figure. It wouldn't have been so bad if Sophia had been with them. But Maddy's broad hints that she'd tag along with Sophia while she did her errands had fallen on barren ground.

She resigned herself to a miserable hour or two, more points, she decided. Then was surprised to find herself walking into a noisy Italian restaurant where the air was full of spice.

"I should get a salad. I should just get a salad," Helen repeated. "But I won't. I already hear the eggplant Parmesan calling my name."

“Fettuccine Alfredo.”

“Sure, fine for you,” Helen said to Pilar. “You never put on an ounce. You won’t have to worry how you’ll look naked on your wedding night.”

“He’s already seen her naked,” Maddy said and had both women turning around to stare at her. She felt her back go up, her brows lower as she prepared for a lecture. Instead she got laughter, and Helen draped an arm around her shoulders. “Let’s get a corner booth, then you can give me all the dirt on your father and Pilar I haven’t been able to crowbar out of her.”

“I think they did it outside last night. Dad had grass stains on his jeans.”

“Can you be bought?” Pilar demanded.

Maddy slid into the booth, grinned. “Sure.”

“Let’s negotiate.” Pilar sat down beside her.

She wasn’t bored. She was surprised to find herself having fun, not being shushed for wisecracks or expected to sit quietly and behave. It was, she thought, a lot like hanging out with Theo and their father—only different. Good different. And she was smart enough to realize it was the first women’s outing she’d ever had. Smart enough to understand Pilar knew it, too.

She didn’t even mind being dragged into the dress shop, or having the conversation turn absolutely and completely to clothes and fabric and color and cut.

And when she watched Sophia dash in, windblown, flushed, happy, Maddy at not quite fifteen had a revelation. She wouldn’t mind being like her, like Sophia Giambelli. She proved, didn’t she, that a woman could be smart, really smart, do exactly what she wanted in the world, and how she wanted to do it, and look really amazing at the same time.

She didn’t dress like she was craving attention, but she got it anyway.

“Tell me you haven’t tried on anything yet.”

“No, not yet. I wanted to wait for you. What do you think of this blue silk?”

“Hmm. A definite maybe. Hi, Maddy. Aunt Helen.” She leaned over to kiss Helen’s cheek, then let out a quick whoop. “Oh, Mama! Look at this. The lace is fabulous—romantic, elegant. And the color would be perfect on you.”

“It’s lovely, but don’t you think it’s a little young? More for you.”

“No, no. It’s for a bride. For you. You have to try it.”

While she studied the dress, Pilar laid a hand on Sophia's shoulder. Sort of absentmindedly, Maddy thought. Just to touch. Her own mother had never touched her absentmindedly, not that she could remember. They'd never had that connection. If they'd had it, she couldn't have left so easily.

"Try them both," Sophia insisted. "And this rose linen Helen's picked out."

"If she wasn't in such a rush to hook this guy, she could have something designed. And I could lose ten pounds before I have to wear the matron of honor gown. Do I have time for liposuction?"

"Oh stop. Okay. I'll start with these three."

When Pilar went off with the sales assistant to the dressing rooms, Sophia rubbed her hands together. "All right, your turn."

Surprised, Maddy blinked at her. "This is a grown-up shop."

"You're as tall as I am, probably about the same size," she added as she studied her target. "Mama's going for soft colors, so we'll stick with that. Though I'd like to put you in jewel tones."

"I like black," Maddy said for the hell of it.

"Yes, and you wear it well."

"I do?"

"Mmm, but we'll expand your horizons for this particular occasion."

"I'm not wearing pink." Maddy folded her arms.

"Aw, and I was imagining a pink organdy," Helen said, "with ruffles and little Mary Janes."

"What're Mary Janes?"

"Ouch. I'm old. I'm going over to daywear and sulk."

"Well, what are they?" Maddy demanded as Sophia went through the selections.

"Either shoes or pot—or both. I'm not entirely sure. I like this." She pulled out a full-length sleeveless gown in smoky blue.

"It'd look okay on you."

"Not for me, for you." Sophia turned, held the dress up in front of Maddy.

"Me? Really?"

"Yes, really. I want to see you in it with your hair up. Show off your neck and shoulders."

"What if I got it cut. My hair, I mean. Short."

"Hmmm." Lips pursed, Sophia mentally cut and restyled Maddy's straight

mop. “Yes, short around the face, a little longer in the back. A few highlights.”

“Streaks?” said Maddy, nearly speechless with joy.

“Highlights, subtle. Ask your father, and I’ll take you to my guy.”

“Why do I have to ask about having my hair cut? It’s my hair.”

“Good point. Go try this on. I’ll give the salon a call, see if they can fit you in before we head back home.” She started to hand Maddy the gown, then stopped. “Oh, Mama.”

“What do you think?” She’d started with the peach, the ivory lace romancing the bodice, the skirt sweeping back into a gentle train. “Be brutal.”

“Helen, come see,” Sophia called out. “You look beautiful, Mama.”

“Like a bride,” Helen agreed and sniffled. “Damn, there goes the mascara.”

“Okay.” Half-dreaming, Pilar turned in a circle. “Maddy? What’s your vote?”

“You look great. Dad’s eyes are going to pop out.”

Pilar beamed and turned in another circle. “We have a winner, first time out.”

It wasn’t as simple as that. There were hats, headdresses, shoes, jewelry, bags, even underwear. It was dark before they headed north, with the back of the SUV crammed with shopping bags and boxes. Which didn’t include the dresses themselves, Maddy thought with wonder. Those had to be fitted and altered and fussed with.

But she’d ended up with a pile of new clothes, shoes, really cool earrings that she was now wearing. They showed off great with her awesome haircut. And highlights.

This new girl-family deal had definite high points.

“Men,” Sophia was saying as she cruised north, “consider themselves the hunter. But they’re not. See, they decide to go after a grizzly, and that’s their whole focus. So while they track the big bear, they miss all the other game out of their narrowed vision. Women, on the other hand, may track the grizzly, but before, or even while, bagging it, they take down all the other game as well.”

“Plus men shoot the first big bear they see,” Maddy put in from the backseat. “They don’t take into account the entire world of grizzlies.”

“Exactly.” Sophia tapped the steering wheel. “Mama, this girl has real potential.”

“Agreed. But I’m not taking the rap for those shoes with the two-foot soles she’s wearing. That one’s on you.”

“They’re great. Funky.”

“Yeah.” Pleased with them, and herself, Maddy lifted her foot. “And the soles are only about four inches.”

“I don’t know why you’d want to clomp around in them.”

Sophia met Maddy’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “It’s a Mom thing. She has to say that. You should’ve seen her face when I got my belly button pierced.”

“You got your belly button pierced?” Fascinated, Maddy reached for the snap of her seat belt. “Can I see?”

“I let it grow back. Sorry,” she said with a chuckle as Maddy sat back again in disgust. “It was irritating.”

“And she was eighteen,” Pilar pointed out, turning her head to give Maddy a warning stare. “So don’t even think about it until you are.”

“Is that a Mom thing, too?”

“You bet. But I will say the two of you were right about the hair. It looks great.”

“So when Dad connips, you’ll calm him all down, right?”

“Well, I’ll . . .” She turned back as the car squealed around a curve. “Sophia, at the risk of saying another Mom thing, slow down.”

“Tighten your seat belts.” Grimly Sophia’s hands vised on the wheel. “Something’s wrong with the brakes.”

“Oh God.” Instinctively, Pilar turned back to Maddy. “Are you strapped in?”

“Yeah.” She grabbed the seat to brace herself as the car shot around another turn. “I’m okay. Pull up the emergency brake.”

“Mama, pull it up. I need both hands here.” Those hands wanted to shake, but she didn’t let them. Didn’t let herself think about anything but maintaining control. The car squealed again, fishtailed around the next turn.

“It’s up all the way, baby.” And the car didn’t slow. “What if we turned off the engine?”

“The steering’ll lock.” Maddy swallowed the heart that leaped into her throat. “She wouldn’t be able to steer.”

Gravel spit as Sophia fought to keep the car on the road. "Use my phone, call nine-one-one." She looked down briefly. A half tank of gas, she thought. No help there. And she wasn't going to be able to control the car around the upcoming S turns at this speed.

"Downshift!" Maddy shouted from the back. "Try downshifting."

"Mama, shove it into third when I tell you. It's going to give us one hell of a jolt, so brace yourselves. But it might work. I can't let go of the wheel."

"I've got it. It's going to be all right."

"Okay. Hold on." She pushed in the clutch, and the car seemed to gain more speed. "Now!"

The car jolted hard. Though Maddy bit her lip, she couldn't hold back the scream.

"Into second," Sophia ordered, wrenching the wheel from the shoulder of the road. A line of sweat ran cold down her back. "Now."

The car bucked, threw her forward, back again. She had a moment's panic that the airbags would deploy and leave her helpless.

"We've slowed down some. Good thinking, Maddy."

"We're going to head downhill, around more turns." Sophia's voice was ice calm. "So the speed's going to pick up again some. I can handle it. Once we're through them, we go up a slope, and that should do it. Get my phone, Mama, just in case. And everybody hold on."

She didn't look at the speedometer. Her eyes were glued to the road now, her mind anticipating each turn. She'd driven the road countless times. The headlights cut through the dark, slashed across oncoming traffic. She heard the angry sound of horns blaring as she crossed the center line.

"Nearly there, nearly there." She whipped the wheel left, then right. It slicked in her hands as her palms sprang with damp.

She could see, could feel the ground begin to level. Just a little more, she thought. A little bit more. "Into first, Mama. Shove it into first."

There was a horrible noise, a tremendous shudder. Sophia felt as if an enormous fist punched into the hood of the car. Something shrieked, then clanged. And as the speed dropped, she pulled to the side of the road.

No one spoke when they stopped. A car whizzed by, then another.

"Is everyone all right?" Pilar reached for the latch of her seat belt and discovered her fingers were numb. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah." Maddy dashed tears from her cheeks. "Okay. I think we should get out now."

“I think that’s a good idea. Sophie, baby?”

“Yeah. Let’s get the hell out.”

She managed to get out, to get to the far side of the car before her legs buckled. Bracing her hands on the hood, she fought to get her breath back, and only managed to wheeze.

“That was really good driving,” Maddy told her.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Here, baby. Here.” Pilar turned her, held her when the shakes came. And, holding her, reached out for Maddy. “Here, baby,” she said again. Maddy pressed herself into that circle of comfort and let the tears come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nearly blind with terror and relief, David bolted out of the house. Even as the police car braked, he scooped Maddy out, held her cradled in his arms as he would a baby.

"You're okay." He pressed his lips to her cheeks, her hair. Breathed her in, as the shakes he'd held off since the call took over. "You're okay." He said it a half dozen times as she curled into him.

"I'm all right. I'm not hurt or anything." But when she wrapped her arms around his neck, her world came all the way right again. "Sophie drove like one of those guys you and Theo like to watch on the raceway. It was kinda cool."

"Kinda cool. Yeah." Rocking now, calming himself, he kept his face buried in the curve of her throat while Theo awkwardly patted her back.

"Bet it was some ride." Theo manfully swallowed the prickly lump in his throat. There was a jittering inside his chest that came as much from seeing his father break apart as from anxiety over Maddy. "I'll haul her in, Dad. You're going to wreck your arm."

Unable to speak, David just shook his head and held on. His baby, was all he could think. His little girl might have been lost.

"It's okay, Dad," Maddy told him. "Everybody's okay now. I can walk. We got the shakes after, but we got over it. But Theo can haul in all the loot." She rubbed her cheek against her father's. "We kicked shopping butt, right, Pilar?"

"Right. I could use a hand, Theo."

"Theo and I'll get it." She wiggled until David set her down.

“What’d you do to your hair?” David ran his hand over the sassy crop of it, left his hand resting warm on the back of her neck.

“Got rid of most of it. What do you think?”

“I think it makes you look grown up. You’re growing up on me. Damn, Maddy, I wish you wouldn’t.” He sighed, pressed his lips to the top of her head. “Just another minute, okay?”

“Sure.”

“I love you so much. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t scare me like that again anytime soon.”

“I don’t plan on it. Wait till you see the dress I got. It goes with the hair.”

“Great. Go ahead, drag off your loot.”

“You’ll stay, won’t you?” Maddy asked Pilar.

“Yes, if you want.”

“I think you should stay.” Since Theo had grabbed the bags, she clomped off after him in her funky new shoes.

“Oh, David, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t say anything. Just let me look at you.” He cupped her face, skimmed his hands back into her hair. Her skin was chilled, her eyes huge and full of worry. But she was here, she was whole. “Just let me look.”

“I’m fine.”

He drew her close, seemed to fold himself around her and rock. “Sophia?”

“She’s fine.” The taut wire that had held her straight and steady snapped as she burrowed into him. “God, David, God. Our babies. I’ve never been so scared, and all the time it was happening, they . . . they were amazing. I didn’t like leaving Sophie back there, dealing with the police, but I didn’t want Maddy coming home alone, so . . .”

“Ty’s already on his way down.”

She drew a ragged breath, then a second that came easier. “I thought he would be. That’s all right then.”

“Come inside.” He shifted her, keeping her close to his side. “Tell me everything.”

Tyler swung behind the police cruiser with a harsh scream of brakes. In the flashing lights, Sophia watched him stride over the road. She could see him well enough to recognize rage. As calmly as she could, she turned away from the cop who was interviewing her and walked toward him.

He grabbed her fast enough, hard enough to knock the breath out of her. Nothing had ever felt so safe.

"I was hoping you'd come. I was really hoping."

"Did you get banged up any?"

"No. The Jeep, on the other hand . . . I think I blew the transmission. Ty, I didn't have any brakes. They were just gone. I know they're going to tow it in and check it out, but I already know."

The words poured out of her, shaky at first, then gaining strength, gaining temper. "It wasn't an accident. It wasn't some mechanical failure. Somebody wanted to hurt me, and they didn't care if my mother and Maddy got hurt, too. Goddamn it, she's just a little girl. Tough, though. Tough and smart. She told me to downshift. She doesn't even know how to drive."

The rage would have to wait. He'd have to wait to break something in half, to plow his fist into something, anything. Sophia was trembling, and needed tending.

"Kid knows something about everything. Get in the car. Time for somebody else to take the wheel."

A little dazed now, she glanced behind her. "I think they still want to talk to me."

"They can talk to you tomorrow. I'm taking you home."

"Fine by me. I have some shopping bags."

He smiled, and his grip on her loosened to a caress. "Of course you do."

He meant what he'd said about taking her home. His home. When she didn't argue the point, he figured she was more shaken than she'd admitted. He dumped her shopping bags in the foyer, then wondered what the hell to do with her.

"You want, like, a hot bath, a drink?"

"How about a drink in a hot bath?"

"I'll take care of it. You ought to call your mother, let her know you're back. And you'll be staying here."

"All right, thanks."

He dumped half a tube of shower gel that had been around since Christmas into the tub. It smelled like pine, but it bubbled. He figured she'd

want bubbles. He stuck a couple of candles on the counter. Women went for candlelit baths, for reasons he couldn't fathom. He poured her a glass of wine, set it on the lip of the tub and was standing back, trying to figure out what else to do when she stepped into the bathroom.

Her single huge sigh told him he'd already hit the mark.

"MacMillan, I love you."

"Yeah, so you said."

"No, no, at this moment—this exact moment, no one has ever, will ever love you more. Enough to let you get in with me."

In a tub full of bubbles? He didn't think so. And if he could overlook the mortification of that for the obvious benefits, she looked beat.

"I'll take a pass on this one. Strip and get in."

"You romantic bastard. A half hour in here and I'll feel human again."

He left her to it and went down to get her things. To his way of thinking, if he dumped her shopping loot in the bedroom, it would take her that much longer to run off again. As far as he was concerned, this was the first stage of her moving in.

He grabbed her purse, her briefcase, four—Jesus Christ—four loaded shopping bags, and started back up with them. As long as he kept busy, he told himself, did what came next, he wouldn't give in to the fury choking him.

"What'd you buy? Small slabs of granite?" He tossed them on the bed, considered the job done, and her briefcase tumbled off. He grabbed for it, managed to snag the strap and, upending it, dumped out most of the contents.

Why did anyone need so much junk in a briefcase? Resigned, he crouched and began to gather it up again. Okay, he could see the bottle of water, her bulging Filofax, the electronic memo deal. The pens, though, God knew why she needed a half dozen of them. Lipstick.

Idly he uncapped it, swiveled the tube out. One sniff and he tasted her.

Travel scissors. Hmmm. Post-its, paper clips, aspirin, a powder-puff thing, a fingernail thing, other assorted girl things that made him wonder why she bothered to carry a purse as well, and what the hell she put in it. Breath mints, a little bag of unopened candy, a mini-tape recorder, Wet Naps, matches, a couple of floppy disks and some file folders, a pair of Hi-Liters and a bottle of clear nail polish.

Amazing, he decided. It was a wonder she didn't walk crooked once she

strapped it over her shoulder. Just passing the time, he flipped through the file folders as he replaced them. She had a tear sheet of the first ad, a comp of the second, a ream of scribbled notes and a stack of typed ones.

He found the press releases, with the notes scribbled over them. Lips pursed, he read the English version and found it solid, strong and smart.

He'd expected nothing else.

Then he found the altered ad.

Holding it, and a copy of an envelope addressed to her, he came straight up. He was still holding them when he shoved open the bathroom door.

"What the hell is this?"

She'd nearly fallen asleep. When she blinked the first thing she saw was his furious face. And the second the sheets in his hands.

"What were you doing in my briefcase?"

"Never mind that. Where did you get this?"

"In the mail."

"When?"

A hesitation, brief but long enough to let him know she was considering a cover.

"Don't bother jiving me, Sophie. When did you get this?"

"Yesterday."

"And you were planning to show it to me . . . when?"

"In a couple of days. Look, would you mind if I finish up in here before we discuss this? I'm naked and covered with boy bubbles."

"A couple of days?"

"Yes, I wanted to think about it and I went to the police with it. To Linc just today so I could get a legal opinion. I can handle it, Ty."

"Yeah." He looked at her, up to her chin in froth, her face haunted by shadows of fatigue. "You're a real handler, Sophia. I guess I forgot that part."

"Ty—" She slapped a fist on the water when he walked out and closed the door. "Just wait a minute." She got out of the tub and, rather than drying off, just wrapped a towel around herself. She went after him, leaving a trail of water and bubbles.

She called him again, cursed him and heard the back door slam shut as she raced downstairs.

She slapped on the outside lights, saw that his long, angry strides were carrying him toward the vineyards. Tightening her grip on the knotted towel, she ran outside.

Her bare foot came down hard on a small stone, inspiring a fresh string of curses as she continued in a limping run.

“Tyler! Just wait a damn minute.” She hurled insults at his back until she realized she was using Italian and they might as well have been promises of undying love to his ear. “Listen, you idiot, you coward. You stop where you are and fight like a man.”

Because he stopped, whirled around, she all but plowed straight into him. She pulled up short, puffing like a steam engine and hopping to take the weight off her sore foot. “Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded.

“You don’t want to be near me now.”

“Wrong.” To prove it she tapped a fist on his chest. “You want to take a shot at me, fine.” She angled her chin. “I’d rather somebody take an honest punch than walk away.”

“As tempting as that is, and believe me I’m in the mood to punch something, I don’t hit women. Go back in the house. You’re wet and half-naked.”

“I’ll go back when you go back. In the meantime we can have this out right here. You’re mad because I didn’t come running to you over that nasty bit of business. Well, I’m sorry, I did what I thought best about it.”

“You’re half-right. You did what you thought best, but you’re not sorry. I’m surprised you bothered to call me tonight just because somebody tried to kill you.”

“Ty, it’s not the same thing. It’s just a stupid picture. I wasn’t going to let it upset me, or you, or anyone.”

“*You* weren’t going to let. There you go. Teamwork, my ass.”

He was shouting now, such a rare occurrence she could only stare up at him. A big, furious man who’d finally snapped his leash.

“You decide what you’ll give, how much and when. Everyone’s supposed to fall in line with your schedule, your plan. Well, fuck it, Sophie. Fuck that. I just stepped out of line. Goddamn it, I love you.” He hauled her up on her toes, calloused hands against pampered skin. “You’re it for me. If it’s not the same on both sides, it’s nothing. Do you get it? Nothing.”

Furious with both of them, he dropped her back on her feet. “Now go inside and get dressed. I’ll take you home.”

“Please don’t. Please,” she said, touching his arm as he started to walk by her. “Please, God. Don’t walk away.” The shakes were back, but had nothing to do with fear for her life. This was so much more. “I’m sorry. I’m so

sorry that by not doing something I thought would worry you, I did something to hurt you. I'm used to taking care of myself, used to making my own decisions."

"That's not how it works anymore. If you can't deal with that, we're wasting our time."

"You're right. And you're scaring me because I understand this is important enough to make you walk away from me. I don't want that to happen. You're right and I was wrong. I wanted to handle it my way, and I was wrong. Yell at me, curse at me, but don't push me out."

His temper had peaked and ebbed and, as always, left him feeling annoyed with himself. "You're cold. Let's go inside."

"Wait." His voice was so final, so distant. It tied knots in her belly. "Just listen."

She gripped his arm, her fingers digging desperately into his shirt. If he turned away now, she knew she'd be alone as she'd never been alone before in her life.

"I'm listening."

"I was angry when it came. All I could think was that the bastard, I know it's Jerry, the bastard's using my own work to taunt me. To try to scare me, and I'm not going to let him. I'm not going to let him worry me, or my mother or anyone I care about. I thought I could handle it myself and protect you from the worry. And I realize standing here right now that if you'd done the same thing, I'd be just as hurt, just as angry as you are."

Her voice hitched, and she feared she'd sob. Unfair tactics, she reminded herself and bit down on grief. "I love you. Maybe that's the one thing I don't know how to handle. Not yet. Give me a chance to figure it out. I'm asking you not to walk away from me. It's the one thing I can't take. Needing someone, loving them and watching them walk away."

"I'm not your father." He cupped a hand under her chin. He saw the tears brimming, and her valiant attempt to hold them off. "And neither are you. My being there for you, taking some of the weight doesn't make you weak. It doesn't make you less, Sophie."

"He always let someone else deal with the sticky parts." She drew in a breath, let it out shakily. "I know what I'm doing, Ty, when I push people back so I can deal with problems on my own. I know what I'm trying to prove. I even know it's stupid and self-serving. But I can't always seem to stop doing it."

“Practice.” He took her hand. “I told you before I’d stick, didn’t I?”

A shudder ran through her. “Yes, you did.” To steady herself, she brought their joined hands to her cheek. “I’ve never been it for anyone before. No one’s been it for me. Looks like you are.”

“That works for me. We square now?”

“I guess we are.” Her lips curved. He made things so simple, she thought. All she had to do was let him. “It’s been a hell of a night so far.”

“Let’s go back, finish it off.” He slid an arm around her to lead her back to the house, automatically taking her weight as she limped.

Served her right, he thought, riling him up the way she had. “Hurt your foot?”

The amused and satisfied tone didn’t escape her notice. “I stepped on a rock while I was running after this big, stupid *culo*.”

“Which would be me. I understand enough gutter Italian to know when the woman I love’s calling me an asshole.”

“But very affectionately. Since you’re up on the language, why don’t we finish the night off by . . .” She rose up to whisper in his ear, ending the provocative Italian with a quick nip on his lobe.

“Ummm.” He didn’t have a clue what she’d said, but the blood had cheerfully drained out of his head. “I think I’m going to need a translation on that one.”

“Happy to,” she said. “Once we’re inside.”

It surprised Pilar to see Tyler outside the kitchen door at what she imagined he’d consider the middle of the morning. It surprised her a great deal more to see the bouquet of flowers in his hand.

“Good morning.”

“Hi.” He stepped inside the Cutter kitchen, nearly shuffled his feet. “I didn’t expect to see you here or I’d’ve . . .” Embarrassed, he shook the flowers in his hand. “You know, brought more.”

“I see. You brought them for Maddy? Ty.” Delighted with him, she reached up, squeezed his cheeks. “You’re so sweet.”

“Yeah, right. Well. How’re you feeling?”

“Fine. Lucky.” She stepped toward the inside doorway and called for Maddy. “Sophia was amazing. Steady as a rock.”

"Yeah, that's Sophie. I gave her a break, left her sleeping this morning." He looked over as Maddy came in. "Hi, kid."

"Hey. What're those?"

"I think they're flowers. For you."

Her eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. "Me?"

"I have to go. I'll just say goodbye to David and Theo." Pilar kissed Maddy lightly, absently on the cheek, and made the girl's color come up. "See you later."

"Yeah, okay. How come they're for me?" she asked Tyler.

"Because I hear you did good." He held them out. "You want them or not?"

"Yeah, I want them." She took them, noted the little flutter in her belly as she sniffed. A kind of muscle reflex, she supposed it was. A nice one. "Nobody ever gave me flowers before."

"They will. I figured I'd get you something for your brain, too, but I haven't come up with it yet. Anyway, what did you do to your hair?"

"I cut it. So?"

"So . . . just asking." He waited while she got out a vase. The new do made her look like a brainy pixie, Ty thought. Boys, he realized with a little tug of regret, were going to come sniffing at the door. "You want to hang with me today? I've got to check for mildew, then see how the work's going over at the old distillery. Start on the weeding."

"Yeah, that'd be good."

"Tell your dad."

When she was settled in the car beside Tyler, Maddy folded her hands on her lap. "I've got two things I want to ask you."

"Sure. Shoot."

"If I were, like, ten years older and had actual breasts, would you go for me?"

"Jesus, Maddy."

"I don't have a crush on you or anything. I sort of did when we first moved here, but I got over it. You're too old for me, and I'm not ready for a serious relationship, or sex."

"Damn right you're not."

“But when I am ready, I want to know if a guy would go for me. Theoretically.”

Tyler ran a hand over his face. “Theoretically, and leaving out the breasts because that’s not what a guy looks for, if you were ten years older, I’d’ve already gone for you. Okay?”

She smiled, slipped on her sunglasses. “Okay. But that’s bull about breasts. Guys say how they look for personality and intelligence. Some of them say how they’re leg men or whatever. But it’s the breasts.”

“And you know this because?”

“Because it’s something we have you don’t.”

He opened his mouth, shut it again. This wasn’t a debate he could comfortably enter into with a teenage girl. “You said you had a couple of questions.”

“Yeah, well.” She shifted in her seat to face him. “The other’s an idea. *Vino-therapy*.”

“*Vino-therapy*?”

“Yeah, I read about it. Grape seed–based skin creams and stuff. I was thinking we could start a line of products.”

“We could?”

“I need to do more research, some experimenting. But this company’s doing it in France. We could corner the American market. See, red wine contains antioxidants—polyphenols, and—”

“Maddy, I know about polyphenols.”

“Okay, okay. But see the seeds—and you ditch them during wine production—they have antioxidants. And that’s really good for the skin. Plus, I’m thinking we could do an herbal deal, internal, too. A whole health and beauty line.”

Health and beauty. What next? “Look, kid, I make wine, not skin cream.”

“But you could,” she insisted. “If I could have the seeds when you harvest, and a place to experiment. You said you wanted to give me something for my brain. Give me this.”

“I was thinking more like a chemistry set,” he mumbled. “Let me mull on it.”

He intended to let the mulling wait until after work, but Maddy had different ideas.

Sophia was in the vineyard, watching the cutters weed with their wedge-

shaped blades. Maddy headed straight for her and started before Sophia could speak.

"I think we should move into vino-therapy like that French company."

"Really?" Sophia pursed her lips, a sure sign she was carefully considering. "That's interesting because I've had that idea on a back burner for a while now. I've tried the facial mask. It's marvelous."

"We're winemakers," Ty began.

"And will always be," Sophia agreed. "But that doesn't preclude addressing other areas. There's an enormous market for natural beauty products. I've had to table the idea because we've had a difficult year and other things demanded my attention. But maybe this is a good time to consider. Expansion rather than damage control," she mused, and was already playing on the spin. "I'll need to accumulate more data, of course."

"I can get it," Maddy said. "I'm good at research."

"You're hired. Once research moves toward research and development, we'll need a guinea pig."

As one, they turned to study Tyler.

He blanched. Actually felt the blood fall away from his face. "Forget it."

"Chicken." Sophia's amused expression faded as she spotted the two figures walking toward them. "The police are here. Claremont and Maguire. It can't be good news."

Deliberate. Sophia thought as she sat in Tyler's living room. The four-wheel had been tampered with, as deliberately as the wine had been. Part of her had known it, but having it confirmed now with cold, hard facts brought a fresh chill to her skin.

"Yes, I use that vehicle often. Primarily I drive my car to and from the city, but it's a two-seater. The three of us were spending the day in San Francisco, shopping for my mother's wedding. We needed the bigger car."

"Who knew of your plans?" Maguire asked her.

"A number of people, I suppose. Family. We were meeting Judge Moore, so her family."

"Did you make appointments?"

"Not really. I stopped by to see Lincoln Moore before I met the others for lunch. The rest of the day was loose."

“And the last place you stopped, for any length of time?” Claremont asked.

“We had dinner. Moose’s at Washington Square. The car was parked about ninety minutes. From around seven to eight-thirty or so. We left for home from there.”

“Any idea, Ms. Giambelli, who would want to cause you harm?”

“Yes.” She met Claremont’s gaze levelly. “Jeremy DeMorney. He’s involved in the product tampering, in the embezzlement, in every problem my family’s had this year. I believe he’s responsible for it, that he planned it and used my cousin and whatever, whoever else came to hand. And as I’ve told him so personally, he’s unlikely to be happy with me just now.”

“Mr. DeMorney’s been questioned.”

“And I’m sure he had plenty of answers. He’s responsible.”

“You saw the ad he sent Sophia.” Frustrated, Tyler pushed to his feet. “It was a threat, and he made good on it.”

“We can’t prove DeMorney sent the ad.” Maguire watched Ty prowl the room. Big hands, she noted. DeMorney must have crumbled like plaster under them. “We’ve confirmed he was in New York when the package was mailed from San Francisco.”

“He had it sent, then. Find a way to prove it,” Tyler shot back. “That’s your job.”

“I believe he killed my father.” Sophia kept her voice calm. “I believe his hatred of my father is at the core of everything that’s happened. He may tell himself, in some skewed way, that it’s business. But it’s personal.”

“Basing that on the alleged affair between Avano and the former Mrs. DeMorney, it’s a long time to wait for payback.”

“No, it’s not.” Maddy spoke up. “Not if you want to do it right, pull everyone in on it.”

Claremont took the interruption in stride, gave Maddy a quiet, go-ahead look.

“If he goes after Sophia’s father right after the divorce, then everybody knows he’s whacked out over it.” She’d spent some time analyzing it, running theories. “Like if I want to get Theo for something, I sit back, wait, figure out how to hit him best. Then when I do, he’s not expecting it and doesn’t even know why he’s getting it.” She nodded. “It’s scientific, and lots more satisfying.”

“The kid’s a genius,” Ty commented.

“*A dish best served cold,*” Claremont mused on the drive back to the city. “It fits DeMorney’s profile. He’s cool, sophisticated, erudite. He’s got money, position, impeccable taste. I can see that type waiting, planning things out, tugging strings. But I can’t get his type risking losing that position over a cracked marriage. How would you handle it if your man cheated on you?”

“Oh, I’d kick his ass, then scalp him in the divorce and do everything in my power to make the rest of his life a living hell, including sticking pins in the throat and balls of a doll made in his image. But then, I’m not sophisticated and erudite.”

“And people wonder why I’m not married.” Claremont flipped open his notebook. “Let’s go talk to Kristin Drake again.”

It was infuriating to have the police come to your place of business. People would be talking, speculating, snickering. There was nothing Kris hated more than people gossiping behind her back. And as she saw it, the blame of it was squarely on Sophia’s shoulders.

“If you want my opinion, the problems Giambelli’s been facing this year were brought on because Sophia’s more interested in promoting her own agenda than in the company or the people who work for it.”

“And that agenda is?” Claremont asked.

“Sophia is her own agenda.”

“And her self-interest, as you see it, has resulted in no less than four deaths, a shooting and what might have been a fatal accident involving herself, her mother, a friend and a young girl.”

She remembered the cold rage on Jerry’s face when she’d been in New York and Sophia and her farmer had cornered him. “Obviously she’s pissed somebody off.”

Not her problem, Kris assured herself. Not her deal.

“Besides you, Ms. Drake?” Maguire said pleasantly.

“It’s no secret that I left Giambelli on less than amicable terms, and the reason for it was Sophia. I don’t like her, and I resent the fact that she was brought in over me when I clearly had seniority and more experience. And I intend to make her pay for it in the market.”

“How long were you being courted by DeMorney and La Coeur while you were still drawing a salary from Giambelli?”

“There’s no law against considering other offers while employed with another firm. It’s business.”

“How long?”

She shrugged. “I was first approached last fall.”

“By Jeremy DeMorney?”

“Yes. He indicated that La Coeur would be pleased to have me on their team. He made an offer, and I took some time to consider it.”

“What decided you?”

“I simply realized I wasn’t going to be happy with Giambelli as things stood. I felt creatively stifled there.”

“Yet you remained there, stifled, for months. During that period, were you and DeMorney in contact with each other?”

“There’s no law against—”

“Ms. Drake,” Claremont interrupted. “We’re investigating murder. You’d simplify the process by giving us a clear picture. We simplify it for you by asking questions here, where you’re comfortable, rather than bringing you into the station house where the atmosphere isn’t nearly as pleasant. Were you and DeMorney in contact during that period?”

“So what if we were?”

“During those contacts did you give Mr. DeMorney confidential information about Giambelli—business practices, promotional campaigns, personal information that may have come into your hands regarding members of the family?”

Her palms went damp. Hot and damp. “I want to call a lawyer.”

“That’s your privilege. You can answer the question and help us out here, maybe cop to some unethical business practices we’re not interested in using against you. Or you can hang tough and possibly end up charged with accessory to murder.”

“I don’t know anything about murder. I don’t know anything about that! And if Jerry . . . Jesus. Jesus.”

She was starting to sweat. How many times had she gone back over the scenario Tyler had painted in Jerry’s apartment? How often had she wondered if what he’d said, even part of what he’d said, was true?

If it was, she’d be connected. It was time, she decided, to break the link.

“I’m willing to play hardball to get what I want, in business. I don’t know

anything about murder, about product tampering. I passed Jerry some information, yes. Gave him a heads-up on Sophia's big centennial plans, the scheduling. Maybe he asked about personal business, but it wasn't anything more than office gossip. If he had anything to do with Tony . . ."

She trailed off, and her eyes glimmered with oncoming tears. "I don't expect you to believe me. I don't care if you do. But Tony meant something to me. Maybe, at first, I started seeing him because I saw it as another slap at Sophia, but it changed."

"You were in love with him?" Maguire infused her voice with sympathy.

"He mattered to me. He made me promises, about my position at Giambelli. He'd have made good on them, I know it, if he'd lived. I told you before, I'd met him in Sophia's apartment a couple times. *Not*," she added, "the night he was killed. We were cooling it awhile. I admit I was upset about that at first. Rene had her clutches in him deep."

"It hurt you when he married her?"

"It pissed me off." Kris pressed her lips together. "When he told me they were engaged, I was angry. I didn't want to marry him, for God's sake. Who needs it? But I liked his company, he was good in bed and he appreciated my professional talents. I didn't care about his money. I can make my own. Rene's nothing but a gold-digging whore."

"Which is what you called her when you phoned her apartment last December," Maguire stated.

"Maybe I did. I'm not sorry for saying what I think. Saying what I think's a long way from having anything to do with killing somebody. My relationship with Jerry's been professional, right down the line. If he had anything to do with Tony, or any of the rest, it's on him. I'm not swinging with him. I don't play the game that way."

"Some game." Maguire slid behind the wheel. "Give me a nice, clean 'I killed him because he cut me off on the freeway' any day of the week."

"Drake's running scared. Shaking down to the toes. She thinks DeMorney set all this up and she's in line to take the fall."

"He's a slick son of a bitch."

"Yeah. Let's pump up the pressure on him. The slicker they are, the harder you squeeze."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

He wasn't going to tolerate it. The idiot police were certainly on the Giambelli payroll. He had no doubt of it.

Of course they could prove nothing. But the muscle in Jerry's cheek twitched as doubts danced in his head. No, he was sure of that. Sure of it. He'd been very, very careful. But that was beside the point.

The Giambellis had publicly humiliated him once before. Avano's affair with his wife had put his name on wagging tongues, forced him to change his life, his lifestyle. He could hardly have remained married to the unfaithful slut—particularly when people knew.

It had cost him placement and prestige in the company. In his great-uncle's eyes, a man who lost a wife to a competitor could lose accounts to a competitor.

And Jerry, always considered the La Coeur heir apparent, particularly by himself, had been taken down a painful peg.

The Giambellis hadn't suffered because of it. The three Giambelli women had remained above it all. The talk of Pilar had been respectful sympathy, of Sophia quiet admiration. And there was never talk of the great *La Signora*.

Or hadn't been, Jerry reminded himself. Until he'd made it happen.

Years in the planning and stylish in its execution, his revenge had cut through to the core of Giambelli. It had sliced through the family, keen as a scalpel. Disgrace, scandal, mistrust, and all brought about by their own. Perfection.

Who'd been taken down a peg now?

Even with all his planning, his careful stages, they were turning it on him. They knew he'd bested them, and they were trying to drag him under. He wouldn't permit it.

Did they think he'd tolerate having his associates speculate about him—a DeMorney? The idea of it made him shake with black, bitter rage.

His own family had questioned him. *Questioned* him on business practices. The hypocrites. Oh, they didn't mind seeing their market share increase. Had they asked questions then? But at the first sign there might be a ripple in the pond, they laid the groundwork to make him a scapegoat.

He didn't need them, either. Didn't need their sanctimonious questioning of his ethics, or his methods, or his personal agenda. He wouldn't wait for them to ask for his resignation, if they would dare to do so. He was financially comfortable. It might be time to take a break from business. An extended vacation, a complete relocation.

He'd move to Europe, and there his reputation alone would ensure him a top position with any company he selected. When he was ready to work again. When he was ready to pay La Coeur back for their disloyalty.

But before he restructured his life yet again, he would finish the job. Personally, this time. MacMillan thought he didn't have the guts to pull his own trigger? He'd learn differently, Jerry promised himself. They would all learn differently.

The Giambelli women were going to pay dearly for offending him.

Sophia zipped through her interoffice e-mail. She'd have preferred attending to the reports, the memos, the questions personally in her San Francisco office. But the law had been laid down. She didn't go to the city unaccompanied. Period.

Tyler refused to be pulled away from the fields. The weeding wasn't complete, the suckering was just begun, and there was a mild infestation of grape leafhoppers. Nothing very troublesome, she thought with a little twist of resentment as she answered an inquiry. The wasps fed on the leafhopper eggs. That's why blackberry bushes, which served as hosts for the predator, were planted throughout the vineyard.

Hardly a season passed without a slight infestation. But there were sto-

ries, and those who loved to tell them, of an entire crop being devastated by the little bastards.

She wouldn't budge Tyler until he was certain it was under control, and by that time, she'd be so busy with the last-minute details of her mother's wedding she wouldn't be able to spare a day to go into the office, much less out to the vineyards.

When the wedding was over, the harvest would begin. Then no one would have time for anything but the crush.

At least the demands, the tight schedule, helped keep her mind off Jerry and the police investigation. It had been two full weeks since she'd careened around turns with no brakes. As far as she could tell, the investigation was at a standstill.

Jerry DeMorney was a different matter.

She, too, had her sources. She was perfectly aware there was talk about him. Questions, not only by the police, but by his superiors. And the board members, led—mortifyingly, she hoped—by his own great-uncle.

It was some satisfaction to know he was being squeezed, as her family had been squeezed. Between the greedy fists of gossip and suspicion.

She brought up another e-mail, clicked to open the attached file.

As she watched it scroll on-screen, her heart stumbled, then began to race.

It was a copy of the next ad, one set to run in August.

A family picnic, a wash of sunlight, the dapple of shade from a huge old oak. A scatter of people at a long wooden table that was loaded with food and bottles of wine.

The image Sophia had hand-picked was of several generations, a mix of faces, expressions, movement. The young mother with a baby in her lap, the little boy wrestling with a puppy on the grass, a father with a young girl riding his shoulders.

At the head of the table, the model who'd reminded her of Eli sat, his glass lifted as if in a toast. There was laughter in the picture, continuity, family tradition.

This image had been altered. Subtly, slickly. Three of the models' faces had been replaced. Sophia studied her grandmother, her mother, herself. Her eyes were wide with horror, her mouth gaping with it. Stabbed into her chest, like a knife, was a bottle of wine.

It read:

THIS IS YOUR MOMENT
IT'LL BE THE DEATH OF YOU
AND YOURS

"You son of a bitch, you son of a bitch." She jabbed the keyboard, ordered the copy to print, saved the file, then closed it.

He wouldn't shake her, she promised herself. And he wouldn't threaten her family with impunity. She would deal with him. She would handle this.

She started to slap the hard copy of the ad in a file, hesitated.

You're a handler, Tyler had told her.

Suckering the vines was a pleasant way to spend a summer's day. The sun was warm, the breeze mild as a kiss. Under the brilliant blue cup of sky, the circling Vacas were upholstered with green, the hills rolling down lush with the promise of summer.

His grapes were protected from that streaming midday sun by a lovely verdant canopy of leaves. Nature's parasol, his grandfather called it.

The crop was more than half its mature size, and before long the black grape varieties would begin changing color, green berries miraculously going blue, then purple as they pushed toward that last spurt of maturity. And harvest.

Each stage of growth required tending, just as each stage brought the season to its inevitable promise.

When Sophia crouched beside him, he continued his work, and his pleasure.

"I thought you were going to hole up in your office all day, waste this sunshine. Hell of a way to make a living, if you ask me."

"I thought a big, important vintner like yourself would have more to do than suckering vines personally." She combed a hand through his hair, lavishly streaked by the sun. "Where's your hat, pal?"

"Around somewhere. These Pinot Noir are going to be our earliest to ripen. I've got a hundred down with Paulie on these babies. I say they're going to give us our best vintage in five years. His money's on the Chenin Blanc."

"I'll take a piece of that. Mine's on the Pinot Chardonnay."

"You ought to save your money. You're going to need it financing Maddy's brainstorm."

"It's an innovative, forward-thinking project. She's already buried me in data. We're putting together a proposal for *La Signora*."

"You want to rub grape seeds all over your body, I could do it for you. No charge." He shifted, their knees bumped before he laid a hand on hers. "What's the matter, baby?"

"I got another message, another doctored ad. It came through a file attached to interoffice e-mail." As his hand tensed, she turned hers over so their fingers linked. "I've already called. It was sent under P.J.'s screen name. She hasn't sent me any posts today. Someone either used her computer or had her account information and password. It could've come from anywhere."

"Where is it?"

"Back home. I printed it out, locked it in a drawer. I'm going to send it to the police, add it to their pile. But I wanted to tell you first. As much as I hate the idea, I suppose the thing to do is call a summit meeting so everyone in the family's aware and on guard. But . . . I wanted to tell you first."

He stayed as he was, crouched, his hand dwarfing hers. Overhead a cloud teased the edges of the sun and filtered the light.

"Here's what I want to do. I want to hunt him down and peel the skin off his bones with a dull knife. Until that happy day, I want you to promise me something."

"If I can."

"No, Sophie, there's no if. You don't go anywhere by yourself. Not even from the villa to here. Not even for a walk in the gardens or a quick trip to the goddamn mini-mart. I mean it."

"I understand how worried you are, but—"

"You can't understand, because it's unreasonable. It's indescribable." He tripped her heart by bringing her free hand up, pressing his lips to the palm. "If I wake up in the middle of the night and you're not there, I break out in a cold sweat."

"Ty."

"Shut up, just shut up." In one fast and fluid move, he got to his feet to walk off the nerves and the rage. "I've never loved anyone before. I didn't ex-

pect it to be you. But it is, and that's it. You're not doing anything to mess this up for me."

"Well, naturally, we can't have that."

He turned, gave her a look of profound frustration. "You know what I mean, Sophie."

"Fortunately for you, I do. I don't intend to mess this up for you, or me, either."

"Great. Let's go pack your things."

"I'm not moving in with you."

"Why the hell not?" Frustration had him dragging his hands through his hair. "You're there half the time anyway. And don't give me that lame excuse about needing to be home to help with the wedding."

"It's not a lame excuse, it's a reason. Potentially a lame reason. I don't want to live with you."

"Why? Just tell me why."

"Maybe I'm old-fashioned."

"Like hell you are."

"Maybe I'm old-fashioned," she repeated, "in this one area. I don't think we should live together. I think we should get married."

"That's just another . . ." The words sank in, momentarily dulled his brain. "Whoa."

"Yes, and with that scintillating response, I need to go back home and call the police."

"You know, one day you're actually going to let me work through a process at my own time and pace. But since that isn't the case on this one, at least you could ask me in a more traditional way."

"You want me to ask you? Fine. Will you marry me?"

"Sure. November's good for me." He cupped her elbows, lifted her a couple inches off the ground. "Which was when I was going to ask you—but you always have to be first. I figured we could get married, have a nice honeymoon and be back home before pruning time. Kind of a tidy and symbolic cycle, don't you think?"

"I don't know. I have to think about it. *Culo*."

"Back at you, honey." He gave her a hard kiss, then dropped her back on her feet. "Let me finish this vine, then we'll go call the cops. And the family."

"Ty?"

“Mmm.”

“Just because I did the proposing doesn’t mean I don’t want a ring.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get to it.”

“I’ll pick it out.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Why not? I’m the one who’ll be wearing it.”

“You’re the one wearing your face, too, but you didn’t pick that out, either.”

On a sigh, she knelt beside him. “That makes absolutely no sense.” But she tipped her head onto his shoulder as he worked. “When I came here I was scared and angry. Now I’m scared, angry and happy. It’s better,” she decided. “A lot better.”

“This is who we are,” Tereza stated, lifting her glass. “And who we choose to be.”

They were dining alfresco, in a kind of Giambelli reflection of the ad. A purposeful choice, Sophia thought. Her grandmother would stand straight against a threat and kick it dead in the balls if need be.

The evening was warm, the sunlight still brilliant. In the vineyards beyond the lawns and gardens, the grapes were growing fat and the Pinot Noir, as Tyler had predicted, was just beginning to turn.

Forty days till harvest, Sophia thought. That was the old rule. When the grapes took color, harvest was forty days away. Her mother would be married by then, and just back from her honeymoon. Maddy and Theo would be her brother and sister, and back in school. She would be planning her own wedding, though she’d pressured Tyler not to announce their engagement yet.

Life could continue because, as *La Signora* said, this is who they were. And who they chose to be.

“When we have trouble,” Tereza continued, “we band together. Family. Friends. This year has brought trouble, and changes and grief. But it’s also brought joy. In a few weeks Eli and I will have a new son, and more grandchildren. And, it seems,” she added, turning toward Maddy, “a new enterprise. In the meantime, we’ve been threatened. I’ve given considerable thought to what can and should be done. James? Your legal opinion of our options.”

He set down his fork, gathered his thoughts. “While evidence indicates DeMorney was involved, even perhaps instrumental, in the embezzlement

scheme, the tampering, there's no concrete proof. Donato's claims notwithstanding, there isn't enough to convince the district attorney to file charges on those matters, or Tony Avano's death. It's been confirmed that he was in New York when Sophia's car was tampered with."

"He would have hired someone," David began.

"Be that as it may, and I don't disagree, until the police have evidence against them, there's nothing they can do. And nothing," James added, "you can do. My best advice is to stay above it, let the system work."

"No offense intended to you or your system, Uncle James, but it hasn't been working very well to date. Donato was murdered while he was *in* the system," Sophia pointed out. "And David was shot on a public street."

"Those are matters for the Italian authorities, Sophie, and only tie our hands all the more."

"He's harassing Sophie with those ads." Tyler shoved at his plate. "Why can't they be traced back to him?"

"I wish I had the answers. This isn't a stupid man or, thus far, a careless one. If he's at the core of all of this, he's covered himself with layers of protection, alibis."

"He walked into my apartment, sat down and shot my father in cold blood. I'd consider that, at the very least, a careless act. He needs to be punished. He should be hounded and pursued and harassed, just as he's hounded, pursued and harassed the family."

"Sophia." Helen reached across the table. "I'm sorry. Sometimes justice isn't what we want it to be, or what we expect."

"He set out to ruin us." Tereza spoke calmly. "He hasn't done so. Damaged, yes, caused us loss. But he'll pay a price for it. Today he was asked to resign his position at La Coeur. I'm pleased to believe that discussions Eli and I had with certain members of their board, and discussions David had with key executives bore this particular fruit."

She sipped her wine, enjoyed the bouquet. "I'm told he didn't take it well. I'll use whatever influence I have at my disposal to see to it he finds no position at any reputable winemaker. Professionally, he's finished."

"It's not enough," Sophia began.

"It may be too much," Helen corrected. "If he's as dangerous as you believe, this sort of interference will push him into a corner, make it only more imperative that he strike back. As a lawyer, as your friend, I'm asking you . . . all of you, to leave it alone."

"Mom." Linc shook his head. "Could you?"

"Yes." The single syllable was a fierce declaration. "To protect what mattered most, I could. I would. Tereza, your daughter is about to be married. She's found happiness. She's weathered a storm, and so have all of you. This is a time for you to celebrate, to move on, not to focus on revenge and retribution."

"We each protect what matters most, Helen. In our own way. The sun's going," she said. "Tyler, light the candles. It's a pleasant evening. We should enjoy it. Tell me, do you still pit your Pinot Noir against my Chenin Blanc?"

"I do." He worked his way down the table, setting the candles to flame. "Of course, it's a win-win situation, as we're merged." When he reached the head of the table, he met her eyes. "Speaking of mergers, I'm going to marry Sophia."

"Damn it, Ty! I told you—"

"Quiet," he said so casually, Sophia sputtered into silence. "She's the one who asked me, but I thought it was a pretty good idea."

"Oh, Sophie." Pilar leaped up from the table and rushed to throw her arms around her daughter.

"I only wanted to wait until after your wedding to tell you, but big mouth here couldn't keep it shut."

"That part was her idea, too," Tyler agreed as he circled the table. "Sophie's not wrong that often, so it's hard to get it through her head when she is. The way I figure it, you just can't have enough good news. Here."

He grabbed her hand, holding it when she tugged. He took a ring out of his pocket and slipped the simple and spectacular square-cut diamond on her finger. "That makes it a deal."

"Why can't you just . . . It's beautiful."

"It was my grandmother's. MacMillan to Giambelli." He took her hand, lifted it and kissed it. "Giambelli to MacMillan. It works for me."

She sighed. "I really hate it when you're right."

Revenge. Jerry decided. made stranger bedfellows than politics. Not that they'd quite gotten to the bed yet. But they would. Rene was so much easier a mark than he'd have believed.

"I appreciate your seeing me like this. Listening. Hearing me out." He

reached for Rene's hand. "I was afraid you believed those vicious rumors the Giambellis are circulating."

"I wouldn't believe any of them if they said the sun came up in the east." Rene settled back on the sofa, made herself cozy. Over and above her loathing for the Giambellis was a keen sense for a man with money. She was quickly running out of cash.

Tony, damn him, hadn't been honest with her. She'd already sold off some jewelry, and if she didn't land another fish soon, she'd have to go back to work.

"I'm not saying I didn't play hardball, that's my job. Believe me, La Coeur was behind me all the way. Until things got sticky."

"Sounds like the way the Giambellis treated Tony."

"Exactly." Oh, he'd use that, use that and her innate hatred to turn his tide. "Don offered me inside information; I took it. Of course, the Giambellis can't have that stand, can't abide people knowing they were undermined by their own. So it has to be me, I have to have coerced or finagled or bribed, or God knows. I took what was offered. It's not like I held a gun to their heads."

He broke off. Squeezed her hand. "Jesus, Rene, I'm so sorry. What a stupid thing to say."

"It's all right. If Tony hadn't lied to me, hadn't cheated and snuck around with that little tramp who worked with Sophia, he'd still be alive today." And she wouldn't be damn near broke.

"Kris Drake." For effect, he pressed a hand to his brow. "I didn't know about her and Tony before I hired her. The idea that she might have had something to do with Tony's death . . ."

"If she did, she was still working for them. They're behind it. All of it."

Could she be more perfect? He only wished he'd thought of using Rene months before. "They've ruined my reputation. I guess I brought part of that on myself. I shouldn't have wanted to win so much."

"Winning's all there is."

He smiled at her. "And I'm a man who hates to lose. In anything. You know, when I first saw you, I didn't know you and Tony were an item, and I . . . Well, I never got the chance to compete there, so I suppose that doesn't qualify as losing. More wine?"

"Yes, thanks." She pursed her lips, considering how to play it while he

reached over for the bottle. "I was swept away by Tony's charm," she began. "And I admired what I thought was his ambition. I'm very attracted to clever businessmen."

"Really? I used to be one," he said as he poured the wine.

"Now, Jerry, you're still a clever businessman. You'll land on your feet."

"I want to believe that. I'm thinking of moving to France. I have some offers there." Or would have, he thought grimly. Damn well would have. "Luckily I don't need the money. I can pick and choose, take my time. It might do me good to just travel awhile, enjoy the benefits of the years of hard work I've put in."

"I love traveling." She purred it.

"I don't feel I can leave until I've straightened all this out. Until I've dealt with the Giambellis, face-to-face. I'll be frank with you, Rene, because I think you'll understand. I want to pay them back for putting this smear on me."

"I do understand." In what could be taken for sympathy, or otherwise, she laid a hand over his heart. "They always treated me like something cheap that could be easily ignored." She worked tears into her eyes. "I hate them."

"Rene." He moved in slowly. "Maybe we can find a way to pay them back. For both of us."

Later, when she lay naked, her head pillowed on his shoulder, he smiled into the dark. Tony's widow was going to clear his path straight into the heart of the Giambellis. And he would rip it out.

It was going to be fun. Rene dressed carefully for the role she was about to play. Dark, conservative suit, minimal makeup. She and Jerry had worked it all out, just what she'd say, just how she'd behave. He'd made her rehearse countless times. The man was a little too demanding for her taste, but she figured she'd bring him around. If she kept him long enough.

For now he was useful, entertaining and a means to an end. And he, as most did, underestimated her. He didn't realize she knew he also considered *her* useful, entertaining and a means to an end.

But Rene Foxx was nobody's fool. Particularly no man's fool.

Jerry DeMorney was dirty up to the knot of his Hermès tie. If he hadn't called the shots in that whole product tampering business, she'd start wear-

ing off-the-rack suits. Gave those rotten Giambellis a good kick in the ass with that one, she mused. As far as she was concerned, a man smart and devious enough to pull that off was just what she was looking for.

She decided walking into the homicide division with the box in her hands was her first step into a very lucrative tomorrow.

"I need to see Detective Claremont or Maguire," she began, then spotted Claremont just rising from behind his desk. "Oh, Detective." She was pleased she'd tagged him first. She always did better with men. "I have to see you. Right away. It's urgent. Please, is there somewhere—"

"Take it easy, Mrs. Avano." He took her arm. "How about some coffee?"

"Oh, I couldn't. I couldn't keep anything down. I've been up half the night."

She was focused on the job at hand and missed his quick signal to his partner.

"We'll talk in the coffee room. Why don't you tell me what's upset you?"

"Yes, I . . . Detective Maguire. It's good you're here, too. I'm so confused, so upset." She set the safe box on the table, pushed it to the center as if she wanted distance, then sat. "I was going through some of Tony's things, his papers. I hadn't gotten to all of them yet. I couldn't before. I found this box on the top shelf of his closet. I couldn't imagine what might be in it. I'd already had to deal with all the insurance papers, the legal papers." She fluttered her hands. "There was a key in his jewelry case. I remembered coming across it before, but not knowing what it was for. This," she said, gesturing. "It was for this. Open it. Please. I don't want to look through it again."

"Records," she said when Claremont opened the box and began to sift through the paperwork. "Ledgers or whatever they're called from that false account the Giambellis set up. Tony, he must've known. And that's why they had him killed. I know he must have been gathering this evidence. Trying to do the right thing, and . . . it cost him his life."

Claremont glanced through the accounts and correspondence, passing the sheets on to Maguire. "You believe your husband was killed over these papers."

"Yes, yes!" What was he, Rene thought impatiently, an idiot? "I'm afraid I might be partially responsible. I'm afraid of what might happen to me. I know someone's been watching me," she said, dropping her voice. "It sounds paranoid, I know, but I'm sure of it. I snuck out of my own apartment like a thief to come here. I think they've hired someone to watch me."

“Who would do that?”

“The Giambellis.” She reached out, gripped Claremont’s hand. “They’re wondering if I remember, but I didn’t, I didn’t until I found this. And if they know, they’ll kill me.”

“That you know what?”

“That Sophia killed my Tony.” Rene covered her mouth with her hand and sacrificed her makeup to tears.

“That’s a serious accusation.” Maguire rose to grab some tissues. “Why are you making it?”

Rene’s breath hitched, her hand trembled as she reached for the tissues. “When I found these I remembered. I’d come home. It was so long ago, a year ago. Sophia was there. She and Tony were arguing upstairs. She was furious, and he was trying to calm her down. They didn’t even know I’d come in. I went into the kitchen. I could still hear her. She was shouting as she does when she’s in that terrible temper of hers. She said she wasn’t going to stand for it. That it was none of his business. I didn’t hear what he said, because his voice was low.”

She dabbed at tears again. “Tony never raised his voice to her. He adored her. But she . . . she detested him, because of me. The Cardianili account—she said the name, but I didn’t think of it again. The Cardianili account would be left alone, and that would be the end of it. If he did anything with the ledgers, she would make him pay. She said, very clearly: ‘If you don’t leave this alone, I’ll kill you.’ I came out of the kitchen then because it made me angry. Almost at the same time she came flying down the stairs. She saw me, said something vicious in Italian, then stormed out.”

She released a shuddering breath, sniffled delicately. “When I asked Tony about it, I could see he was shaken, but he brushed it off, said it was business and she was just blowing off steam. I let it go. Sophia often blew off steam that way. I never thought she meant what she said. But she did. He knew she’d been involved in embezzlement, and she killed him for it.”

“So.” Maguire tipped back her chair when she and her partner were alone. “You buy any of that?”

“For somebody who didn’t sleep last night, she looked pretty alert. For somebody terrified and upset, she remembered to match her shoes to her purse and coordinate her hose.”

“You’re a real fashion cop, partner. No way she just came across these papers. She’d have been through every drawer, closet and cubbyhole within a day of his death, to make sure she had access to every penny.”

“Maguire, I don’t think you like the widow Avano.”

“I don’t like people who think I’m stupid. Question: if she had these papers all along, why turn them over now? If she didn’t have them before, who passed them to her?”

“DeMorney’s in San Francisco.” Claremont tapped the tips of his fingers together. “Wonder how far he and the widow go back.”

“One thing for certain, they’ve both got it in for the Giambellis, and that one wants to put the screws to Sophia G, and she wants it bad.”

“Bad enough to give a false statement to the police.”

“Oh hell, she enjoyed that. And she’s smart enough to know she didn’t say anything we could hook her on. We can’t prove if and when she found those papers. And if it came down to it, the argument scene would be her word against Sophia’s, who’s likely to have argued with her father at some point during the last year of his life. No way to cook her on that even if we wanted to bother.”

“Never made sense for her to marry Avano and kill him the day after. She doesn’t gel there for me. Doesn’t gain her anything, and she’s in it for what she can get.”

“If we bought this, she could cop a little revenge. That’s what she’s after now.”

“Yeah, and so’s DeMorney.” Claremont rose. “Let’s see how tight we can link them.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Rene slithered onto the sofa beside Jerry and accepted the flute of champagne. "I got some very interesting information at the salon today."

"What might that be?"

"I'll tell you." She ran a fingertip down the center of his shirt. "But it'll cost you."

"Really?" He took her hand, lifted it to bite gently on her wrist.

"Oh, that's nice, too, but I want something a little different. Let's go out, lover. I'm so tired of staying in. Take me out to a club where there're people and music and wicked things going on."

"Honey, you know I'd love to. It's not smart for us to be seen together in public quite yet."

She pouted, nuzzled against him. "We'll go somewhere nobody knows us. And even if they do, Tony's been dead for months and months. No one expects me to grieve alone forever."

From the reports that had winged back across the Atlantic, Rene hadn't grieved alone for a week. "Just a little while longer. I'll make it up to you. When we're finished here with everything and everyone, we'll go to Paris. Now what did you find out today?"

"To borrow from that slut Kris's lexicon, bitch number three is giving bitch number two a little party on Friday night—wedding eve. All females. She's setting up a damn spa in the villa for the night. Facials, body treatments, massages, the works."

"And what will the men be doing while the women are getting themselves scrubbed and rubbed?"

“Watching porno flicks and jerking off, I suppose. They’re holding their bachelor-night deal at the MacMillan place. The bride and groom aren’t allowed to do the dirty the night before the wedding. Hypocrites.”

“This is interesting.” And exactly what he’d been waiting for. “We’ll know just where everyone is. And the timing couldn’t be better, right before the happy event. Rene, you’re a jewel.”

“I don’t want to be one. I just want to have them.”

“A week from now, we’ll be in Paris, and I’ll take care of that. But first, you and I have a date on Friday night at Villa Giambelli.”

She wanted it to be perfect, the kind of night they’d all remember and laugh about for years. She’d planned it, organized it, fine-tuned the details right down to the scent of the candles for the aromatherapy treatments. In twenty-four hours, Sophia thought, her mother would be dressing for her wedding, but for her last evening as a single woman, she was going to bask in a world of females.

“When we have our products, maybe we should sell direct to spas for a while.” Maddy sniffed at the oils already arranged by the massage table. “Make them, like, exclusive so people are dying for them.”

“You’re a clever girl, Madeline. But no business tonight. Tonight is for female ritual. We’re the handmaidens.”

“Do we get to talk about sex?”

“Of course. This isn’t about exchanging recipes. Ah, there’s the woman of the hour.”

“Sophie.” Already in her long white wrap, Pilar circled the pool house. “I can’t believe you went to all this trouble.”

Various stations were set up, with lounging sofas and salon chairs. The evening light shimmered toward sunset while scents from the gardens clung to the air. Tables held abundant platters of fruit and chocolate, bottles of wine and sparkling water, baskets and bowls of flowers.

Along the wall, water spilled down the brass sculpture and into the pool to add sensuous music.

“I was shooting for a Roman bath thing. Do you like it, really?”

“It’s wonderful. I feel like a queen.”

“When you’re finished, you’ll feel like a goddess. Where are the others? We’re wasting pampering time.”

“Upstairs. I’ll get them.”

“No, you won’t. Maddy, pour Mama some wine. She’s not to lift a finger except to pick up a chocolate strawberry. I’ll get everyone.”

“What kind do you want?” Maddy asked her.

“Just water for now, honey, thanks. It’s such a lovely evening.” She wandered toward the open doors, then laughed lightly. “Massage tables on the patio. Only Sophie.”

“I never had a massage before.”

“Mmm. You’ll love it.”

As she spoke, as she looked out over the garden, Pilar ran a hand absently over Maddy’s hair, left it lying on her shoulder. The gesture made everything inside the girl go warm. And made her sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Maddy passed Pilar the glass. “Nothing’s wrong. I guess I’m looking forward to . . . everything.”

“You’re bluffing.” David said around the cigar clamped in his teeth and tried to stare Eli down.

“Yeah? Put your money up, son, and call me.”

“Go ahead, Dad.” Theo had a cigar, unlit, in his teeth as well, and felt like a man. “No guts, no glory.”

David tossed chips in the pot. “Call. Show ’em”

“Three little deuces,” Eli began and watched David’s eyes gleam. “Standing watch over two pretty ladies.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“A Scotsman doesn’t bluff over money, son.” Eli, jubilant, raked in his chips.

“The man’s scalped me so many times over the years, I wear a helmet when we sit down to cards.” James gestured with his glass. “You’ll learn.”

Linc’s head came up at the knock on the door. “Somebody ordered a stripper, right? I knew you guy’s wouldn’t let me down.”

“It’s the pizza.” Theo leaped up.

“More pizza? Theo, you can’t possibly want more pizza.”

“Sure I can,” he shouted over his shoulder to his father. “Ty said I could.”

“I said he could order it for me. He inhaled the last order.”

Linc sent Tyler a sorrowful look. “You couldn’t arrange for a stripper to deliver the pizza?”

“They were all out of strippers. Shriners’ convention.”

“Likely story. Well, I hope he got pepperoni at least.”

“My God, Sophie, this was a brilliant idea.”

“Thanks, Aunt Helen.” They sat side by side, tipped back with purifying masks thick and green covering their faces. “I wanted Mama to feel relaxed and completely female.”

“This’ll do it. Can you see Tereza and Maddy over there getting pedicures and arguing.”

“Mmm,” Sophia mused. “They disagree about the name for the beauty products we don’t even have yet. I don’t know if it’s Maddy or the concept, but it’s boosted *Nonna’s* morale.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ve been worried about her, all of you, since we talked last. The idea of Rene trying to make Tony a hero and you a villain over the Cardianili business; it fries my cookies.”

Sophia tensed, deliberately relaxed again. “It was a stupid move. De-Morney’s behind it, and it’s one of the first truly stupid moves he’s made. He’s cracking.”

“That may be. But it caused more upset.” She held up a hand. “And that’s all I’m going to say about it. Tonight’s not about problems. It’s about indulgence. Where’s Pilar?”

Don’t think about it, Sophia ordered herself. Think pure thoughts. “Treatment Room B—otherwise known as the lower-level guest bath. Full-body facial. You need to be near a shower.”

“Fabulous. I’m next.”

“Champagne?”

“Maria.” Sophia roused herself enough to sit up. “You’re not to serve. You’re a guest.”

“My manicure’s dry.” She showed off her nails. “I have a pedicure next. You can bring me champagne then.”

“That’s a deal.”

Maria glanced over as Pilar, looking soft and relaxed, came back in. “You’ve made your mama happy tonight. Everything’s going to be all right now.”

"You sure know how to show a woman a good time."

Jerry ran a hand over the butt of Rene's snug black pants. "You haven't seen anything yet. This is going to be a night to remember. For everyone."

They moved through the vineyard now. It had been a long hike from the car, and the sack he carried seemed to gain weight with every step. Still, there was something to be said for doing the job himself that he hadn't experienced before. Not just the amused gratification he'd felt at other times, but a deep and personal excitement.

And if anything went wrong, he'd simply sacrifice Rene. But he didn't intend for anything to go wrong.

He knew the setup here. Between Don and Kris and his own observations, he was aware of the security setup, and how to avoid setting off alarms. It was simply a matter of patience and care. And a single driving ambition.

Before the night was over, Giambelli would, one way or another, be in ruins.

"Stay close," he told her.

"I am. Not to spoil the party, but I wish I was as sure as you are this is going to work."

"No second thoughts now. I know what I'm doing and how to do it. Once the winery's on fire, they'll come spilling out like ants at a picnic."

"I don't care if you burn the whole fucking vineyard to ashes." In fact, she got a thrill out of the image, and of her dancing at the edge of the flames. "I just don't want to get caught."

"Do what I tell you and you won't. Once they're out here busy trying to put out the fire, we go in, plant the package in Sophia's room, get out. We're in the car and heading back five minutes later. We call the cops from a pay phone, give them an anonymous tip, and we're back at your place popping champagne before the smoke clears."

"The old lady'll pay off the cops. She won't let her precious granddaughter go to prison."

"Maybe. Let her try, it won't matter. They'll be ruined. Sooner or later you find the right straw, and that's the one that breaks the back. Isn't that what you want?"

Something in his voice had a chill snaking up her spine, but she nodded. "It's exactly what I want."

When he reached the winery, he took out the keys. Don had been slick enough to make copies, and he'd been smart enough to duplicate those. "These get tossed in the bay when we're done." He slid the key into the first lock. "No one's going to need them after tonight. They'll have a hell of a time explaining how a fire started inside a locked building." With that statement, he opened the door.

Sophia lay on the massage table and looked up at the stars. "Mama, am I obsessive?"

"Yes."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Pilar glanced back from her stance at the edge of the patio. "No. Occasionally annoying, but not bad."

"Do I miss the big picture because I'm drilling on the details?"

"Rarely. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering what I'd change about myself if I could. If I should."

"I wouldn't change anything."

"Because I'm perfect?" Sophia asked with a grin.

"No, because you're mine. Is this about Ty?"

"No, it's about me. Up until . . . well, I'm not exactly sure when, but up until I was sure I had everything figured out. Knew what I wanted and how I was going to get it."

"Not sure anymore?"

"Oh no, I'm still sure. I still know what I want and how I'm going to get it. But the things I want changed on me. I was wondering if they were there all along, and I was just missing the big picture. I . . . could you give us a minute," she said to the therapist. She sat up, holding the sheet to her breast when she was alone with Pilar. "Please don't get upset."

"I won't."

"Not that long ago I still wanted you and Dad to get back together. I wanted it because I didn't know how to want anything else, I think. Because I felt if you did, he'd be what I needed him to be. Not what you needed or what he was, but what *I* needed. That was the detail I kept obsessing over, and I missed the big picture. I'd change that if I could."

"I wouldn't. You would've been a good daughter to him if he'd let you. You were willing to be, you needed to be. No, I wouldn't change that."

“That helps.” She took Pilar’s wrist, turned it to check the time on her watch. “It’s just midnight. Happy wedding day, Mama.” She pressed Pilar’s hand to her cheek, then started to lie back.

“What’s that? It looks like . . . Oh my God. The winery! The winery’s on fire. Maria! Maria, call nine-one-one. The winery’s on fire.”

She rolled off the table, and snagged her robe on the run.

As Jerry had predicted, they poured out of the house. Raised voices, running feet. From the shadows of the garden he counted the figures wrapped in white robes that raced down the path and out across the vineyard.

“In and out,” he whispered to Rene. “Piece of cake. You lead the way.”

She’d given him the location and setup of Sophia’s room, but he wanted her going in first. She might have made a mistake. She claimed she’d only slipped into Sophia’s room once, but that was once more than he’d managed.

He couldn’t risk turning on the light, though he was sure his flashlight would be enough. He only needed to plant the package at the back of her closet where the police, even if they were idiots, would find it.

He moved up behind Rene, up the terrace steps, glancing over his shoulder. He could see the bright orange and gold of the fire against the night sky. A brilliant sight. It illuminated the figures rushing like frightened moths toward the flame.

They’d put it out, of course, but not quickly. It would take time for them to realize the water had been turned off for the sprinkler system, time for them to gather their wits, time for them to watch helplessly as precious bottles exploded, as equipment was ruined, as their god of tradition burned to hell.

So he didn’t have the guts to do his own dirty work? Gingerly he flexed his hand. It still twinged now and then. They’d see who had the guts when the sun came up.

“Jerry, for God’s sake.” Rene hissed at him from the terrace outside Sophia’s room. “This isn’t a tourist attraction. You said we had to hurry.”

“Always time for a moment of pleasure, darling.” He stepped, swaggered, up to the terrace door. “Sure this is hers?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Well then.” He pushed open the doors, stepped inside. And drew a

deep, satisfied breath of her scent just as Sophia dashed through the opposite door and slapped on the lights.

The sudden glare slashed across his eyes, the shock froze his brain. Before he could recover from either, he was fighting off a hundred and ten pounds of enraged woman.

She leaped at him, blind fury catapulting her across the room. Even as she sank her teeth into him, the edges of her vision glowed red with blood lust. Her only clear thought was to inflict pain, monstrous pain. And when he howled, the feral thrill of it spurting through her like lava.

He struck out, caught her across the cheekbone, but she didn't even feel it. She went for his eyes, freshly manicured nails already tipped red, slashed out, missed by a breath and scored like the tongs of a rake down his cheek.

The burn of it maddened. With no goal but to free himself, he tossed her aside and sent her into a shrieking Rene. He could smell his own blood. Intolerable. She'd ruined all his careful plans. Unforgivable. Even as she scrambled to her feet, prepared to leap at him again, the gun was out of the pouch, in his hand, with his finger sweaty on the trigger.

He nearly ended it then, with one quick twitch of his nervous finger. Then her body jerked to a halt and her eyes cleared of rage and filled with shock and fear.

Finally, he thought, face-to-face. And he wanted more than survival. He wanted satisfaction.

"Now. Isn't this interesting? You should've run out with the others, Sophia. But maybe it's fate you end like your worthless father. With a bullet in the heart."

"Jerry, we have to get out of here. Just go." Rene pushed herself to her feet, stared at the gun. "My God! What're you doing? You can't just shoot her."

"Oh?" He thought he could, and that was a revelation. He didn't believe he'd have any trouble with it at all. "And why not?"

"That's crazy. It's murder. I'm not having any part of murder. I'm getting out. I'm getting out now. Give me the keys to the car. Give me the damn keys."

"Shut the fuck up." He said it coolly, and in an almost absent gesture smashed the gun into the side of her head. When she went down like a stone, he didn't even glance at her, but kept his eyes locked on Sophia's.

"She was a pain in the ass, on that we can agree. But she's useful. And

this is perfect. You'll appreciate the spin on this, Sophia. Rene started the fire. She's had it in for you all along. She went to the cops a few days ago, tried to convince them you'd killed your father. And tonight, she came here, fired the winery and broke into your room to plant evidence against you. You caught her, you struggled, the gun went off. The gun," he added, "used to shoot David Cutter. I had it sent to me. Forward-thinking, which I'm sure you'll appreciate. You're dead, and she hangs for it. Very tidy."

"Why?"

"Because nobody screws with me and gets away with it. You Giambellis think you can have it all, and now you'll end up with nothing."

"Because of my father?" She could see the bright orange glow from the fire through the open doors behind him. "All of this because my father embarrassed you?"

"*Embarrassed?* He stole from me—my wife, my pride, my life. And what did any of you lose? Nothing. Just another bump to you. I've taken my own back, and more. I'd have been satisfied to ruin you, but dead's better. You're the key. Tereza, well, she's not as young as she was. Your mother, she hasn't got what it takes to bring the company back. Without you, the heart and the brains are dead. Your father was a user, a liar and a cheat."

"Yes, he was." No one would come for her, she thought. There would be no one to race back from the fire to save her. She would face death on her own. "You're all that, and so much less."

"If there was time, we'd debate that. But I'm a little pressed so . . ." He brought the gun up another inch. "*Ciao, bella.*"

"*Vai a farti fottere.*" She cursed him in a steady voice. She wanted to close her eyes—to find a prayer, an image of something to take with her. But she kept them open. Waited. When the gun exploded, she stumbled back. And watched blood seep through the tiny hole in his shirt.

Baffled shock crossed his face, then another shot jerked his body to the side and dropped him. In the doorway, Helen lowered the gun to her side.

"Oh my God. Oh God. Aunt Helen." Her legs gave out. Sophia stumbled to the bed, lowered herself to it. "He was going to kill me."

"I know." Slowly, Helen came into the room, sat heavily on the bed beside Sophia. "I came back to tell you the men had come. I saw . . ."

"He was going to kill me. Just like he killed my father."

"No, honey. He didn't kill your father. I did. I did," she repeated, and dropped the gun she held to the floor. "I'm so sorry."

“No. That’s crazy.”

“I used that gun. It was my father’s. It was never registered. I don’t know why I took it that night. I don’t think I planned to kill him. I . . . wasn’t thinking at all. He wanted money. Again. It was never going to end.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophia took her shoulders. She could smell gunpowder, and blood. “What are you saying?”

“Linc. He was using Linc against me. Linc, God help me. Linc is Tony’s son.”

“They’ve got it under control. It’s—” Pilar rushed in the terrace doors, stopped cold. “Oh dear God. Sophie!”

“No, wait.” Sophia sprang to her feet. “Don’t come in. Don’t touch anything.” Her breath came out in pants, but she was thinking, thinking fast. “Aunt Helen, come with me. Come with me now. We can’t stay in here.”

“It’ll destroy James, and Linc. I’ve ruined them after all.”

Moving quickly now, Sophia dragged Helen up, pulled her out onto the terrace. “Tell us. Tell us quickly, we can’t have much time.”

“I killed Tony. Pilar, I betrayed you. Myself. Everything I believe in.”

“That’s not possible. For God’s sake, what happened here?”

“She saved my life,” Sophia said. A blast rent the air as bottles exploded in the winery. She barely flinched. “He was going to kill me, with the gun that shot David. He’d sent for it, kept it like a souvenir. Helen, what happened with my father?”

“He wanted money. Over the years he’d contact me when he needed money. He never actually demanded, never actually threatened. He’d just mention Linc—what a fine boy he was, what a bright and promising young man. Then he’d say he needed a bit of a loan. I slept with Tony.” She began to weep then, silently. “All those years ago. We were all so young. James and I were having problems. I was so angry with him, so confused. We separated for a few weeks.”

“I remember,” Pilar murmured.

“I ran into Tony. He was so understanding, so sympathetic. You and he weren’t getting along, either. You were considering a separation. He was charming, and he paid attention. The way James hadn’t been. There’s no excuse. I let it happen. After, I was so ashamed, so disgusted with myself. But it was done, and couldn’t be changed. I found out I was pregnant. It wasn’t James’s because we hadn’t been together that way. So I made my second hideous mistake, and I told Tony. I might as well have told him I’d decided

to change my hairstyle. He could hardly be expected to pay for one night's indiscretion, could he? So I paid." Tears dripped down her cheeks. "And I paid."

"Linc is Tony's child."

"He's James's." Helen looked pleadingly at Pilar. "In every way but that one. He doesn't know, neither of them know. I did everything I could to make up for that night. To James, to Linc—God, Pilar, to you. I slept with my best friend's husband. I was young and angry and stupid, and I've never forgiven myself for it. But I did everything I could to make it up. I gave him money, every time he asked for it. I don't even know how much over the years."

"And you couldn't give any more," Pilar concurred.

"The night of the party, he told me he had to see me, told me when and where. I refused. It was the first time I'd done so. It made him angry, and that frightened me. If I didn't do as he said, he'd go inside, then and there, and tell James, tell Linc, tell you.

"I couldn't risk it, couldn't bear it. My baby, Pilar. My little boy with the loose shoelaces. When I went home, I got the gun out of the safe. It's been there for years, I don't know why I thought of it. Don't know why I took it. It was like a veil over my mind. He had music on in the apartment, and a good bottle of wine. He sat and told me his financial troubles. Charmingly, as if we were old, dear friends. I don't remember everything he said; I'm not even sure I heard him. He needed what he liked to call a loan. A quarter of a million this time. He'd be willing, of course, to take half by the end of the week, and give me another month for the rest. It wasn't too much to ask, after all. He'd given me such a fine son.

"I didn't know the gun was in my hand. I didn't know I'd used it until I saw the red against his white tuxedo shirt. He looked at me, so surprised, just a little annoyed. I could almost imagine him saying, 'Damn, Helen, you've ruined my shirt.' But he didn't, of course. He didn't say anything. I went home and tried to convince myself it had never happened. Never happened at all. I've carried the gun around with me ever since. Everywhere."

"You could have thrown it away," Pilar said quietly.

"How could I? What if one of you were arrested? I'd need it then to prove I'd done it myself. I couldn't let him hurt my baby, or James. I thought it could be over. And now . . . I need to tell James and Linc first. I need to tell them before I talk to the police."

Cycles, Sophia thought. Sometimes, they needed to be stopped. "If you

hadn't used that gun to save my life tonight, you wouldn't have to tell them anything."

"I love you," Helen said simply.

"I know it. And this is what happened here tonight. Just exactly what happened." She took Helen by the shoulders. "Pay attention to me. You came back, saw Jerry holding me at gunpoint. He'd brought both guns with him—he'd intended to plant them in my room to implicate me. We'd struggled, and the other gun, the one that killed my father, was on the floor near the doorway. You picked it up, and you shot him before he shot me."

"Sophia."

"That's what happened." She took Helen's hand, squeezed it. Took her mother's. "Isn't it, Mama?"

"Yes. That's exactly what happened. You saved my child. Do you think I wouldn't save yours?"

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. You want to make it up to me?" Pilar demanded. "Then you'll do this. I don't care about what happened one night almost thirty years ago, but I care about what happened tonight. I care about what you've been to me most of my life. I'm not going to let someone I love be destroyed. Over what? Over money, over pride, over image? If you love me, if you want to make up for that mistake so long ago, you'll do exactly what Sophia's asking you to do. Tony was her father. Who has more right to decide than she?"

"Jerry's dead," Sophia said. "He killed, threatened, destroyed, all because of one selfish act by my father. And it ends here. I'm going to go call the police. Someone should take a look at Rene." She leaned forward, brushed her lips over Helen's cheek. "Thank you. For the rest of my life."

Late, late into the night, Sophia sat in the kitchen sipping tea laced with brandy. She'd given her statement, had sat, her hand holding Helen's, as Helen had given hers.

Justice, she thought, didn't always come as you expected. Helen had said that once. And here it was. Unexpected justice. It hadn't hurt that Rene had been hysterical, had babbled to everyone, including Claremont and Maguire when they'd arrived, that Jerry was a madman, a murderer, and had forced her at gunpoint to come with him.

Some snakes slithered through, Sophia supposed. Because life was a messy business.

Now at last, the police were gone, the house was quiet. She looked up as her mother and grandmother came in. "Aunt Helen?"

"She's finally sleeping." Pilar went to the cupboard, got two more cups. "We've talked. She'll be all right. She's going to resign her judgeship. I suppose she needs to." Pilar set the cups on the table. "I've told Mama everything, Sophia. I felt she had a right to know."

"*Nonna.*" Sophia reached for her hand. "Did I do the right thing?"

"You did the loving thing. That often matters more. It was brave of you, Sophia. Brave of both of you. It makes me proud." She sat down, sighed. "Helen took a life, and gave one back. That closes the circle. We won't speak of it again. Tomorrow my daughter's getting married, and we'll have joy in this house again. Soon, the harvest—the bounty. And another season ends. The next is yours," she said to Sophia. "Yours and Tyler's. Your life, your legacies. Eli and I are retiring the first of the year."

"*Nonna.*"

"Torches are meant to be passed. Take what I give you."

The faint irritation in her grandmother's voice made her smile. "I will. Thank you, *Nonna.*"

"Now, it's late. The bride needs her sleep, and so do I." She got to her feet, leaving her tea untouched. "Your young man went back to the winery. You don't need so much sleep."

True enough, Sophia thought as she raced across the grounds toward the winery. She had so much energy, so much life inside her, she didn't think she'd ever need to sleep again.

He'd set up lights, and the old building hulked under them. She could see the sparkle of broken glass from the windows, the smears from smoke, the chars from flame. But still, it stood.

It withstood.

Perhaps he sensed her. She liked to think so. He stepped out of the broken doorway as she ran up. And he caught her, held her close and tight and inches off the ground.

"There you are, Sophia. I figured you needed a little time with your mother, then I was coming to get you."

"I got you first. Hold on, okay? Just keep holding on."

"You can count on it." Even as he did, the ice skimmed through his belly again. He pressed his face to her hair. "God. God. When I think—"

"Don't think. Don't," she said and turned her mouth to his.

"I'm not going to be able to let you out of my sight for the next, oh, ten or fifteen years."

"Right now that suits me fine. You all alone here?"

"Yeah. David needed to get the kids home, and I sent Granddad back before he keeled over. He was exhausted. James was still pretty shaken, so Linc took him back to my place since your mom's with Helen."

"Good. Everything's as it should be." She rested her head on his shoulder, looked toward the winery. "It could have been worse."

He eased her back, touched his lips gently to the bruise on her cheek. "It could have been a hell of a lot worse."

"You should've seen the other guy."

He managed a strangled laugh as he held her tight again. "That's a little sick."

"Maybe, but it's the way I feel. He died with my mark on his face, and I'm glad of it. I'm glad I caused him some pain. And now I can put it away. All of it. Lock it away and everything starts now. Everything, Ty," she said. "We'll rebuild the winery, rebuild our lives. And make them ours. Giambelli-MacMillan is going to come back, bigger and better than ever. That's what I want."

"That's handy, because that's what I want, too. Let's go home, Sophie."

She tucked her hand in his and walked away from the damage and the scars. The first hints of dawn lightened the sky in the east. When the sun broke through, she thought, it was going to be a beautiful beginning.

Midnight
Bayou

NORA ROBERTS



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

MIDNIGHT BAYOU

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For Leslie Gelbman,
a woman who understands
the value of time

God stands winding His lonely horn,
And time and the world are ever in flight;
And love is less kind than the gray twilight,
And hope is less dear than the dew of the morn.

William Butler Yeats

Midnight
Bayou

Prologue

Death, with all its cruel beauty, lived in the bayou. Its shadows ran deep. Cloaked by them, a whisper in the marsh grass or rushes, in the tangled trap of the kudzu, meant life, or fresh death. Its breath was thick and green, and its eyes gleamed yellow in the dark.

Silent as a snake, its river swam a sinuous line—black water under a fat white moon where the cypress knees broke the surface like bones piercing skin.

Through the dark, moon-dappled water, the long, knobby length of an alligator carved with barely a ripple. Like a secret, its threat was silent. When it struck, its tail whipping a triumphant slice through the water, when it clamped the unwary muskrat in its killing jaws, the bayou echoed with a single short scream.

And the gator sank deep to the muddy bottom with its prey.

Others had known the cruel, silent depths of that river. Knew, even in the vicious summer heat, it was cold, cold.

Vast with secrets, the bayou was never quite still. In the

night, under a high hunter's moon, death was busy. Mosquitoes, voracious vampires of the swamp, whined in a jubilant cloud of greed. Players of the marsh music, they blended with the buzzes, hums and drips that were punctuated by the shocked squeals of the hunted.

In the high limbs of a live oak, shadowed by moss and leaves, an owl hooted its two mournful notes. Alerted, a marsh rabbit ran for his life.

A breeze stirred the air, then was gone, like the single sigh of a ghost.

The owl swooped from its perch with a swift spread of wings.

Near the river, while the owl dived and the rabbit died, an old gray house with a swaying dock slept in shadows. Beyond, rising over a long, lush spread of grass, a great white manor stood watchful in the moonlight.

Between them, teeming with life, vigorous with death, the bayou laid its line.

1

Manet Hall, Louisiana

December 30, 1899

The baby was crying. Abigail heard it in dreams, the soft, unsettled whimper, the stirring of tiny limbs under soft blankets. She felt the first pangs of hunger, a yearning in the belly, almost as if the child were still inside her. Her milk came down before she was fully awake.

She rose quickly and without fuss. It gave her such pleasure—that overfull sensation in her breasts, the tenderness of them. The purpose of them. Her baby needed and she would provide.

She crossed to the *recamier*, lifted the white robe draped over its back. She drew in the scent of the hot-house lilies—her favorite—spearing out of a crystal vase that had been a wedding present.

Before Lucian, she'd been content to tuck wildflowers into bottles.

If Lucian had been home, he would have woken as well. Though she would have smiled, have stroked a hand over his silky blond hair as she told him to stay, to sleep,

he would have wandered up to the nursery before she'd finished Marie Rose's midnight feeding.

She missed him—another ache in the belly. But as she slipped into her night wrapper, she remembered he would be back the next day. She would start watching for him in the morning, waiting to see him come galloping down the *allée* of oaks.

No matter what anyone thought or said, she would run out to meet him. Her heart would leap, oh, it always leaped, when he sprang down from his horse and lifted her off her feet into his arms.

And at the New Year's ball, they would dance.

She hummed to herself as she lit a candle, shielding it with her hand as she moved to the bedroom door, out into the corridor of the great house where she had once been servant and was now, well, if not daughter of the house at least the wife of its son.

The nursery was on the third floor of the family wing. That was a battle she'd fought with Lucian's mother, and lost. Josephine Manet had definite rules about behavior, domestic arrangements, traditions. Madame Josephine, Abigail thought as she moved quickly and quietly past the other bedroom doors, had definite ideas on everything. Certainly that a three-month-old baby belonged in the nursery, under the care of a nursemaid, and not in a cradle tucked into the corner of her parents' bedroom.

Candlelight flickered and flew against the walls as Abigail climbed the narrowing stairs. At least she'd managed to keep Marie Rose with her for six weeks. And had used the cradle that was part of her own family's traditions. It had been carved by her *grand-père*. Her own mother had slept in it, then had tucked Abigail in it seventeen years later.

Marie Rose had spent her first nights in that old cradle, a tiny angel with her doting and nervous parents close at hand.

Her daughter would respect her father's family and their ways. But Abigail was determined that her child would also respect her mother's family, and learn their ways.

Josephine had complained about the baby, about the homemade cradle, so constantly that she and Lucian had given in. It was, Lucian said, the way water wears at rock. It never ceases, so the rock gives way or wears down.

The baby spent her nights in the nursery now, in the crib made in France, where Manet babies had slept for a century.

It was a proper if not cozy arrangement, Abby comforted herself. Her *petite* Rose was a Manet. She would be a lady.

And as Madame Josephine had pointed out, again and again, other members of the household were not to have their sleep disturbed by fretful cries. However such matters were done in the bayou, here in Manet Hall, children were tended in the nursery.

How her lips curled when she said it. *Bayou*—as if it were a word to be spoken only in brothels and bars.

It didn't matter that Madame Josephine hated her, that Monsieur Henri ignored her. It didn't matter that Julian looked at her the way no man should look at his brother's wife.

Lucian loved her.

Nor did it matter that Marie Rose slept in the nursery. Whether they were separated by a floor or a continent, she felt Marie Rose's needs as she felt her own. The bond was so strong, so true, it could never be broken.

Madame Josephine may win battles, but Abigail knew she herself had won the war. She had Lucian and Marie Rose.

There were candles glowing in the nursery. Claudine, the nursemaid, didn't trust the gaslight. She already held Marie Rose and was trying to quiet her with a sugar tit,

but the baby's fists were shaking, little balls of rage.

"Such a temper she has." Abigail set the candle down and was laughing as she crossed the room, her arms already outstretched.

"Knows what she wants, and when she wants it." Claudine, a pretty Cajun with sleepy dark eyes, gave the baby a quick cuddle, then passed her off. "She hardly made a fuss yet. Don't know how you hear her way off downstairs."

"I hear her in my heart. There now, *bébé*. Maman's here."

"Diaper's wet."

"I'll change her." Abigail rubbed her cheek on the baby's and smiled. Claudine was a friend—a battle won. Having her established in the nursery, in the household, gave Abigail comfort and the companionship none of Lucian's family would offer her.

"Go on back to bed. Once she's nursed, she'll sleep till morning."

"Good as gold, she is." Claudine brushed fingertips over Marie Rose's curly hair. "If you don't need me, maybe I'll take a walk down to the river. Jasper, he's gonna be there." Her dark eyes lit. "I told him maybe, if I can get away, I come down around midnight."

"You oughta make that boy marry you, *chère*."

"Oh, I'm gonna. Maybe I run down for an hour or two, if you don't mind, Abby."

"I don't mind, but you be careful you don't catch nothing more than some crawfish. Anything more," she corrected as she prepared to change Marie Rose's soiled linen.

"Don't you worry. I'll be back before two." She started out through the connecting door and glanced back. "Abby? You ever think, when we were kids, that you'd be mistress of this house one day?"

"I'm not mistress here." She tickled the baby's toes

and had Marie Rose gurgling. "And the one who is'll probably live to a hundred and ten off of spite just to make sure I never am."

"If anybody could, it'd be that one. But you will be, one day. You fell into the luck, Abby, and it looks real fine on you."

Alone with the baby, Abby tickled and cooed. She powdered and smoothed, then tidily fastened the fresh diaper. When Marie Rose was tucked into a fresh gown and swaddled, Abby settled in the rocker, bared her breast for that tiny, hungry mouth. Those first greedy tugs, the answering pull in her womb, made her sigh. Yes, she'd fallen into the luck. Because Lucian Manet, the heir of Manet Hall, the shining knight of every fairy tale, had looked at her. And loved.

She bent her head to watch the baby nurse. Marie Rose's eyes were wide open, fixed on her mother's face. A tiny crease of concentration formed between her eyebrows.

Oh, she had such hope those eyes would stay blue, like Lucian's. The baby's hair was dark like her own. Dark and curling, but her skin was milk white—again like her papa's rather than the deeper tone, the dusky gold of her Cajun mama's.

She would have the best of both of them, Abby thought. She would have the best of everything.

It wasn't only the money, the grand house, the social position, though she wanted that for her children now that she had tasted it herself. It was the acceptance, the learning, the *knowing* you belonged in such a place. Her daughter, and all the children who came after, would read and write, would speak proper English, proper French, in fine voices.

No one would ever look down on them.

"You'll be a lady," Abigail murmured, stroking the baby's cheek as Marie Rose's hand kneaded her breast as

if to hurry the milk along. “An *educated* lady with your papa’s sweet heart and your mama’s good sense. Papa’ll be home tomorrow. It’s the very last day of a whole century, and you have your whole life to live in it.”

Her voice was quiet, a singsong rhythm to lull both of them.

“It’s so exciting, Rosie, my Rosie. We’re going to have a grand ball tomorrow night. I have a new gown. It’s blue, like your eyes. Like your papa’s eyes. Did I tell you I fell in love with his eyes first? So beautiful. So kind. When he came back to Manet Hall from the university, he looked like a prince coming home to his castle. Oh, my heart just pounded so.”

She leaned back, rocking in the fluttering light of the candles.

She thought of the New Year’s celebration the next evening, and how she would dance with Lucian, how her gown would sweep and swirl as they waltzed.

How she would make him proud.

And she remembered the first time they had waltzed.

In the spring, with the air heavy with perfume from the flowers, and the house alight like a palace. She’d sneaked into the garden, away from her duties, because she’d wanted to see it so much. The way the gleaming white hall with its balusters like black lace stood against the starry sky, the way the windows flamed. Music had spilled out of those windows, out of the gallery doors where guests had stepped out for air.

She’d imagined herself inside the ballroom, whirling, whirling, to the music. And so had whirled in the shadows of the garden. And, whirling, had seen Lucian watching her on the path.

Her own fairy tale, Abby thought. The prince taking Cinderella’s hand and drawing her into a dance moments before midnight struck. She’d had no glass slipper, no pumpkin coach, but the night had turned into magic.

She could still hear the way the music had floated out through the balcony doors, over the air, into the garden.

"After the ball is over, after the break of morn . . ."

She sang the refrain quietly, shifting the baby to her other breast.

"After the dancers leaving, after the stars are gone . . ."

They had danced to that lovely, sad song in the moonlit garden with the house a regal white and gold shadow behind them. Her in her simple cotton dress, and Lucian in his handsome evening clothes. And as such things were possible in fairy tales, they fell in love during that lovely, sad song.

Oh, she knew it had started before that night. For her it had begun with her first glimpse of him, astride the chestnut mare he'd ridden from New Orleans to the plantation. The way the sun had beamed through the leaves and the moss on the live oaks along the *allée*, surrounding him like angel wings. His twin had ridden beside him—Julian—but she'd seen only Lucian.

She'd been in the house only a few weeks then, taken on as an undermaid and doing her best to please Monsieur and Madame Manet so she might keep her position and the wages earned.

He'd spoken to her—kindly, correctly—if they passed each other in the house. But she'd sensed him watching her. Not the way Julian watched, not with hot eyes and a smirk twisting his lips. But, she liked to think now, with a kind of longing.

In the weeks that went by she would come upon him often. He'd sought her out. She knew that now, prized that now, as he'd confessed it to her on their wedding night.

But it had really begun the evening of the ball. After the song had ended, he'd held her, just a moment longer. Then he bowed, as a gentleman bows to a lady. He kissed her hand.

Then, just as she thought it was over, that the magic would dim, he tucked the hand he'd kissed into the crook of his arm. Began to walk with her, to talk with her. The weather, the flowers, the gossip of the household.

As if they were friends, Abby thought now with a smile. As if it were the most natural thing in the world for Lucian Manet to take a turn in the garden with Abigail Rouse.

They'd walked in the garden many nights after that. Inside the house, where others could see, they remained master and servant. But all through that heady spring they walked the garden paths as young lovers, telling each other of hopes, of dreams, of sorrows and joys.

On her seventeenth birthday he brought her a gift, wrapped in silver paper with a bright blue bow. The enameled watch was a pretty circle dangling from the golden wings of a brooch. Time flew, he told her as he pinned the watch to the faded cotton of her dress, when they were together. And he would rather have his life wing by than spend it apart from her.

He'd gotten down on one knee and asked her to be his wife.

It could never be. Oh, she'd tried to tell him through the tears. He was beyond her reach, and he could have anyone.

She remembered now how he'd laughed, how the joy had burst over his beautiful face. How could he be beyond her reach when she had his hand in hers even now? And if he could have anyone, then he would have her.

"So now we have each other, and you," Abby whispered and shifted the drowsing baby to her shoulder. "And if his family hates me for it, what does it matter? I make him happy."

She turned her face into the soft curve of the baby's neck. "I'm learning to speak as they speak, to dress as

they dress. I will never think as they think, but for Lucian, I behave as they behave, at least when it shows.”

Content, she rubbed the baby’s back and continued to rock. But when she heard the heavy footsteps on the stairs, the stumbling climb, she rose quickly. Her arms tightened in a circle of protection around the baby as she turned toward the crib.

She heard Julian come through the door and knew without seeing he would be drunk. He was nearly always drunk or on his way to becoming so.

Abby didn’t speak. She lay the baby in the crib, and when Marie Rose whimpered restlessly, stroked her quiet again.

“Where’s the nursemaid?” he demanded.

Still, Abby didn’t turn. “I don’t want you in here when you’ve been drinking.”

“Giving orders now?” His voice was slurred, his balance impaired. But he was thinking clearly enough. Liquor, he’d always believed, helped clarify the mind.

And his was clarified when it came to his brother’s wife. If Lucian had a thing—and what was a woman but a thing?—Julian wanted it.

She was small, almost delicate of build. But she had good strong legs. He could see the shape of them where the firelight in the nursery grate shimmered through her thin nightclothes. Those legs would wrap around him as easily as they did his brother.

Her breasts were high and full, fuller now since she’d had the whelp. He’d gotten his hands on them once, and she’d slapped him for it. As if she had a say in who touched her.

He closed the door at his back. The whore he’d bought that night had only whetted his appetite. It was time to sate it.

“Where’s the other bayou slut?”

Abby’s hand fisted at her side. She turned now, guard-

ing the crib with her body. He looked so like Lucian, but there was a hardness in him Lucian lacked. A darkness.

She wondered if it was true, what her *grand-mère* said. That with twins, sometimes traits get divvied up in the womb. One gets the good, the other the bad.

She didn't know if Julian had come into the world already spoiled. But she knew he was dangerous when drunk. It was time he learned she was dangerous as well.

"Claudine is my friend, and you have no right to speak of her that way. Get out. You have no right to come in here and insult me. This time Lucian will hear of it."

She saw his gaze slide down from her face, watched lust come into his eyes. Quickly, she tugged her wrapper over the breast still partially exposed from nursing. "You're disgusting. *Cochon!* To come in a child's room with your wicked thoughts for your brother's wife."

"Brother's whore." He thought he could smell her anger and her fear now. A heady perfume. "You'd have spread your legs for me if I'd been born fifteen minutes sooner. But you wouldn't have stolen my name the way you stole his."

Her chin came up. "I don't even see you. No one does. You're nothing beside him. A shadow, and one that stinks of whiskey and the brothel."

She wanted to run. He frightened her, had always frightened her on a deep, primal level. But she wouldn't risk leaving him with the baby. "When I tell Lucian of this, he'll send you away."

"He has no power here, and we all know it." He came closer, easing his way like a hunter through the woods. "My mother holds the power in this house. I'm her favorite. Timing at birth doesn't change that."

"He *will* send you away." Tears stung the back of her throat because she knew Julian was right. It was Josephine who reigned in Manet Hall.

"Lucian did me a favor marrying you." His voice was a

lazy drawl now, almost conversational. He knew she had nowhere to run. "She's already cut him out of her will. Oh, he'll get the house, she can't change that, but I'll get her money. And it's her money that runs this place."

"Take the money, take the house." She flung out her hands, dismissing them, and him. "Take it all. And go to hell with it."

"He's weak. My sainted brother. Saints always are, under all the piety."

"He's a man, so much more a man than you."

She'd hoped to make him angry, angry enough to strike her and storm out. Instead he laughed, low and quiet, and edged closer.

When she saw the intent in his eyes, she opened her mouth to scream. His hand whipped out, gripped a hank of the dark hair that curled to her waist. And yanking had her scream gurgling into a gasp. His free hand circled her throat, squeezed.

"I always take what's Lucian's. Even his whores."

She beat at him, slapped, bit. And when she could draw in air, screamed. He tore at her wrapper, pawed at her breasts. In the crib, the baby began to wail.

Fueled by the sound of her child's distress, Abby clawed her way free. She spun, stumbled over the torn hem of her nightgown. Her hand closed over the fireplace poker. She swung wildly, ramming it hard against Julian's shoulder.

Howling in pain, he fell back against the hearth, and she flew toward the crib.

She had to get the baby. To get the baby and run.

He caught her sleeve, and she screamed again as the material ripped. Even as she reached down to snatch her daughter from the crib, he dragged her back. He struck her, slicing the back of his hand over her cheek and knocking her back into a table. A candle fell to the floor and guttered out in its own wax.

“Bitch! Whore!”

He was mad. She could see it now in the feral gleam in his eyes, the drunken flush on his cheeks. In that instant fear turned to terror.

“He’ll kill you for this. My Lucian will kill you.” She tried to gain her feet, but he hit her again, using his fist this time so the pain radiated from her face, through her body. Dazed, she began to crawl toward the crib. There was blood in her mouth, sweet and warm.

My baby. Sweet God, don’t let him hurt my baby.

His weight was on her—and the stench of him. She bucked, called for help. The sound of the baby’s furious screams merged with hers.

“Don’t! Don’t! You damn yourself.”

But as he yanked up the skirt of her nightgown, she knew no amount of pleading, no amount of struggle, would stop him. He would debase her, soil her, because of who she was. Because she was Lucian’s.

“This is what you want.” He drove himself into her, and the thrill of power spurted through him like black wine. Her face was white with fear and shock, and raw from the blows of his hands. Helpless, he thought, as he pounded out his raging envy. “This is what all of you want. Cajun whores.”

Thrust after violent thrust, he raped her. The thrill of forcing himself into her spumed through him until his breathing turned to short bursts grunted between clenched teeth.

She was weeping now, huge choking sobs. But screaming, too. Somehow screaming as he hammered his fury, his jealousy, his disgust into her.

As the great clock began to chime midnight, he closed his hands around her throat. “Shut up. Damn you.” He rammed her head against the floor, squeezed harder. And still the screaming pierced his brain.

Abby heard it, too. Dimly. The baby’s frantic cries

pealed through her head along with the slow, formal bong of the midnight hour. She slapped, weak protests against the hands that cut off her air, tried to shut her body off from the unspeakable invasion.

Help me. Mother of Jesus. Help me. Help my baby.

Her vision dimmed. Her heels drummed wildly on the floor as she convulsed.

The last thing she heard was her crying daughter. The last thing she thought was, *Lucian*.

The door of the nursery burst open. Josephine Manet stood just inside the nursery. She summed up the scene quickly. Coldly.

“Julian.”

His hands still vised around Abby’s throat, he looked up. If his mother saw madness in his eyes, she chose to ignore it. With her gilt hair neatly braided for the night, her robe sternly buttoned to the neck, she stepped over, stared down.

Abby’s eyes were wide and staring. There was a trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth, and bruises blooming along her cheeks.

Dispassionately, she leaned down, laid her fingers against Abby’s throat.

“She’s dead,” Josephine announced and moved quickly to the connecting door. She opened it, glanced into the maid’s room. Then closed it, locked it.

She stood for a moment, her back against it, her hand at her own throat as she thought of what could come. Disgrace, ruin, scandal.

“It was . . . an accident.” His hands began to shake as they slid away from Abby’s throat. The whiskey was whirling in his head now, clouding it. It churned in his belly, sickening it.

He could see the marks on her skin, dark and deep and damning. “She . . . tried to seduce me, then, she attacked . . .”

She crossed the room again, her slippers clicking on wood. Crouching down, Josephine slapped him, one hard crack of flesh on flesh. "Quiet. Be quiet and do exactly as I say. I won't lose another son to this creature. Take her down to her bedroom. Go out through the gallery and stay there until I come."

"It was her fault."

"Yes. Now she's paid for it. Take her down, Julian. And be quick."

"They'll . . ." A single tear gathered in the corner of his eye and spilled over. "They'll hang me. I have to get away."

"No. No, they won't hang you." She brought his head to her shoulder, stroking his hair over the body of her daughter-in-law. "No, my sweet, they won't hang you. Do what Mama says now. Carry her to the bedroom and wait for me. Everything's going to be all right. Everything's going to be as it should be. I promise."

"I don't want to touch her."

"Julian!" The crooning tone snapped into icy command. "Do as I say. Immediately."

She rose, walked over to the crib, where the baby's wails had turned to miserable whimpers. In the heat of the moment, she considered simply laying her hand over the child's mouth and nose. Hardly different than drowning a bag of kittens.

And yet . . .

The child had her son's blood in her, and therefore her own. She could despise it, but she couldn't destroy it. "Go to sleep," she said. "We'll decide what to do about you later."

As her son carried the girl he'd raped and murdered from the room, Josephine began to set the nursery to rights again. She picked up the candle, scrubbed at the cooling wax until she could see no trace.

She replaced the fireplace poker and, using the ruin of

Abby's robe, wiped up the splatters of blood. She did it all efficiently, turning her mind away from what had caused the damage to the room, keeping it firmly fixed on what needed to be done to save her son.

When she was certain all was as it should be, she unlocked the door again, left her now-sleeping grandchild alone.

In the morning, she would fire the nursemaid for dereliction of duty. She would have her out of Manet Hall before Lucian returned to find his wife missing.

The girl had brought it on herself, Josephine thought. No good ever came from trying to rise above your station in life. There was an order to things, and a reason for that order. If the girl hadn't bewitched Lucian—for surely there was some local witchery involved—she would still be alive.

The family had suffered enough scandal. The elopement. Oh, the embarrassment of it! Of having to hold your head high when your firstborn son ran off with a penniless, barefoot female who'd grown up in a shack in the swamp.

Then the sour taste of the pretense that followed. It was essential to save face, even after such a blow. And hadn't she done all that could be done to see that creature was dressed as befitted the family Manet?

Silk purses, sow's ears, she thought. What good were Paris fashions when the girl had only to open her mouth and sound of the swamp? For pity's sake, she'd been a servant.

Josephine stepped into the bedroom, shut the door at her back, and stared at the bed where her son's dead wife lay staring up at the blue silk canopy.

Now, she thought, Abigail Rouse was simply a problem to be solved.

Julian huddled in a chair, his head in his hands. "Stop screaming," he muttered. "Stop the screaming."

Josephine marched to him, clamped her hands on his shoulders. "Do you want them to come for you?" she demanded. "Do you want to drag the family through disgrace? To be hanged like a common thief?"

"It wasn't my fault. She enticed me. Then she attacked me. Look. Look." He turned his head. "See how she clawed my face?"

"Yes." For a moment, just for a moment, Josephine wavered. The heart inside the symbol she'd become reared up in protest against the horror of the act all women fear.

Whatever she was, she'd loved Lucian. Whatever she was, she'd been raped and murdered within feet of her own child's crib.

Julian forced her, struck her, defiled her. Killed her.

Drunk and mad, he'd killed his brother's wife. God's pity.

Then she shoved it viciously aside.

The girl was dead. Her son was not.

"You bought a prostitute tonight. Don't turn away from me," she snapped. "I'm not ignorant of the things men do. Did you buy a woman?"

"Yes, Mama."

She nodded briskly. "Then it was the whore who scratched you, should anyone have the temerity to ask. You were never in the nursery tonight." She cupped his face in her hands to keep his eyes level with hers. And her fingers dug into his cheeks as she spoke in low, clear tones. "What reason would you have to go there? You went out, for drink and women and, having your fill of both, came home and went to bed. Is that clear?"

"But, how will we explain—"

"We'll have nothing to explain. I've told you what you did tonight. Repeat it."

"I—I went into town." He licked his lips. Swallowed. "I drank, then I went to a brothel. I came home and went to bed."

“That’s right. That’s right.” She stroked his scored cheek. “Now we’re going to pack some of her things—some clothes, some jewelry. We’ll do it quickly, as she did it quickly when she decided to run off with a man she’d been seeing in secret. A man who might very well be the father of that child upstairs.”

“What man?”

Josephine let out a long sigh. He was the child of her heart, but she often despaired of his brain. “Never mind, Julian. You know nothing of it. Here.” She went to the chifforobe, chose a long black velvet cloak. “Wrap her in this. Hurry. Do it!” she said in a tone that had him getting to his feet.

His stomach pitched, and his hands trembled, but he wrapped the body in velvet as best he could while his mother stuffed things in a hatbox and a train case.

In her rush she dropped a brooch of gold wings with a small enameled watch dangling from it. The toe of her slipper struck it so that it skittered into a corner.

“We’ll take her into the swamp. We’ll have to go on foot, and quickly. There are some old paving bricks in the garden shed. We can weigh her down with them.”

And the gators, she thought, the gators and fish would do the rest.

“Even if she’s found, it’s away from here. The man she ran away with killed her.” She dabbed her face with the handkerchief in the pocket of her robe, smoothed a hand over her long, gilded braid. “That’s what people will believe if she’s found. We need to get her away from here, away from Manet Hall. Quickly.”

She was beginning to feel a little mad herself.

There was moonlight. She told herself there was moonlight because fate understood what she was doing, and why. She could hear her son’s rapid breathing, and the sounds of the night. The frogs, the insects, the night birds all merging together into one thick note.

It was the end of a century, the beginning of the new. She would rid herself of this aberration to her world and start this new century, this new era, clean and strong.

There was a chill in the air, made raw with wet. But she felt hot, almost burning hot as she trudged away from the house, laden with the bags she'd packed and weighed down. The muscles of her arms, of her legs, protested, but she marched like a soldier.

Once, just once, she thought she felt a brush against her cheek, like the breath of a ghost. The spirit of a dead girl who trailed beside her, accusing, damning, cursing her for eternity.

Fear only made her stronger.

"Here." She stopped and peered out over the water. "Lay her down."

Julian obeyed, then rose quickly, turned his back, covered his face with his hands. "I can't do this. Mama, I can't. I'm sick. Sick."

He tumbled toward the water, retching, weeping.

Useless boy, she thought, mildly annoyed. Men could never handle a crisis. It took a woman, the cold blood and clear mind of a female.

Josephine opened the cloak, laid bricks over the body. Sweat began to pour down her face, but she approached the grisly task as she would any other. With ruthless efficiency. She took the rope out of the hatbox, carefully tied hanks around the cloaked body, top, bottom, middle. Using another, she looped the line through the handles of the luggage, knotted it tight.

She glanced over now to see Julian watching her, his face white as bone. "You'll have to help. I can't get her into the water alone. She's too heavy now."

"I was drunk."

"That's correct, Julian. You were drunk. Now you're sober enough to deal with the consequences. Help me get her into the water."

He felt his legs buckle and give with each step, like a puppet's. The body slid into the water almost soundlessly. There was a quiet plop, a kind of gurgle, then it was gone. Ripples spread on the surface, shimmered in the moonlight, then smoothed away again.

"She's out of our lives," Josephine stated calmly. "Soon, she'll be like those ripples. Like she never was. See that you clean your boots thoroughly, Julian. Don't give them to a servant."

She slid her arm through his, smiled, though her smile was just a little wild. "We need to get back, get some rest. Tomorrow's a very busy day."

2

Manet Hall, Louisiana

January 2002

His mother was right—as always. Declan Fitzgerald stared through the mud-splattered windshield into the driving winter rain and was glad she wasn't there to gloat.

Not that Colleen Sullivan Fitzgerald ever stooped to a gloat. She merely raised one perfect eyebrow into one perfect arch and let her silence do the gloating for her.

She'd told him, very succinctly, when he'd stopped by before driving out of Boston, that he'd lost his mind. And would rue the day. Yes, he was pretty sure she'd said "rue the day."

He hadn't sunk as low as ruing—yet—but studying the jungle of weeds, the sagging galleries, the peeling paint and broken gutters of the old plantation house, he was no longer confident of his mental health.

What had made him think he could restore this rambling old derelict into its former splendor? Or, more to the point, that he should? For God's sake, he was a

lawyer, a Fitzgerald of the Boston Fitzgeralds, and more tuned to swinging a nine-iron than a hammer.

Rehabbing a town house in his spare time over a two-year period was a far cry from relocating to New Orleans and pretending he was a contractor.

Had the place looked this bad the last time he'd been down here? Could it have? Of course that was five, no, six years before. Certainly it couldn't have looked this bad the first time he'd seen it. He'd been twenty and spending a crazed Mardi Gras interlude with his college roommate. Eleven years, he thought, dragging his fingers through his dark blond hair.

The old Manet Hall had been a niggling germ in his brain for eleven years. As obsessions went, it was longer than most relationships. Certainly longer than any of his own.

Now the house was his, for better or for worse. He already had a feeling there was going to be plenty of worse.

His eyes, as gray, and at the moment as bleak, as the rain, scanned the structure. The graceful twin arches of the double stairs leading to the second-floor gallery had charmed him on that long-ago February. And all those tall arched windows, the whimsy of the belvedere on the roof, the elegance of the white columns and strangely ornate iron balusters. The fanciful mix of Italianate and Greek Revival had all seemed so incredibly lush and Old World and *southern*.

Even then he'd felt displaced, in a way he'd never been able to explain, in New England.

The house had pulled him, in some deep chamber. Like a hook through memory, he thought now. He'd been able to visualize the interior even before he and Remy had broken in to ramble through it.

Or the gallon or two of beer they'd sucked down had caused him to think he could.

A drunk boy barely out of his teens couldn't be trusted. And neither, Declan admitted ruefully, could a stone-sober thirty-one-year-old man.

The minute Remy had mentioned that Manet Hall was on the block again, he'd put in a bid. Sight unseen, or unseen for more than half a decade. He'd *had* to have it. As if he'd been waiting all his life to call it his own.

He could deem the price reasonable if he didn't consider what he'd have to pour into it to make it habitable. So he wouldn't consider it—just now.

It was his, whether he was crazy or whether he was right. No matter what, he'd turned in his briefcase for a tool belt. That alone lightened his mood.

He pulled out his cell phone—you could take the lawyer out of Boston, but . . . Still studying the house, he put in a call to Remy Payne.

He went through a secretary, and imagined Remy sitting at a desk cluttered with files and briefs. It made him smile, a quick, crooked grin that shifted the planes and angles of his face, hollowed the cheeks, softened the sometimes-grim line of his mouth.

Yes, he thought, life could be worse. He could be the one at the desk.

"Well, hey, Dec." Remy's lazy drawl streamed into the packed Mercedes SUV like a mist over a slow-moving river. "Where are you, boy?"

"I'm sitting in my car looking at this white elephant I was crazy enough to buy. Why the hell didn't you talk me out of it or have me committed?"

"You're here? Son of a bitch! I didn't think you'd make it until tomorrow."

"Got antsy." He rubbed his chin, heard the scratch of stubble. "Drove through most of last night and got an early start again this morning. Remy? What was I thinking?"

“Damned if I know. Listen, you give me a couple hours to clear some business, and I’ll drive out. Bring us some libation. We’ll toast that rattrap and catch up.”

“Good. That’d be good.”

“You been inside yet?”

“No. I’m working up to it.”

“Jesus, Dec, go on in out of the rain.”

“Yeah, all right.” Declan passed a hand over his face. “See you in a couple hours.”

“I’ll bring food. For Christ’s sake, don’t try to cook anything. No point burning the place down before you’ve spent a night in it.”

“Fuck you.” He heard Remy laugh before he hung up.

He started the engine again, drove all the way to the base of what was left of those double stairs that framed the entranceway. He popped the glove compartment, took out the keys that had been mailed to him after settlement.

He climbed out and was immediately drenched. Deciding he’d leave the boxes for later, he jogged to the shelter of the entrance gallery, felt a few of the bricks that formed the floor give ominously under his weight, and shook himself like a dog.

There should be vines climbing up the corner columns, he thought. Something with cool blue blossoms. He could see it if he concentrated hard enough. Something open, almost like a cup, with leaves shaped like hearts.

Must’ve seen that somewhere, he mused, and turned to the door. It was a double, with carvings and long arched panels of glass on either side and a half-moon glass top-
per. And tracing his fingers over the doors, he felt some of the thrill sneak into him.

“Welcome home, Dec,” he said aloud and unlocked the door.

The foyer was as he remembered it. The wide loblolly pine floor, the soaring ceiling. The plaster medallion

overhead was a double ring of some sort of flowers. It had probably boasted a fabulous crystal chandelier in its heyday. The best it could offer now was a single bare bulb dangling from a long wire. But when he hit the wall switch, it blinked on. That was something.

In any event, the staircase was the focal point. It rose up, wide and straight to the second level, where it curved right and left to lead to each wing.

What a single man with no current prospects or intentions of being otherwise needed with two wings was a question he didn't want to ask himself at the moment.

The banister was coated with gray dust, but when he rubbed a finger over it, he felt the smooth wood beneath. *How many hands had gripped there? How many fingers had trailed along it?* he wondered. These were the sort of questions that fascinated him, that drew him in.

The kind of questions that had him climbing the stairs with the door open to the rain behind him, and his possessions still waiting in the car.

The stairs might have been carpeted once. There probably had been runners in the long center hallway. Some rich pattern on deep red. Floors, woodwork, tabletops would have been polished religiously with beeswax until they gleamed like the crystal in the chandeliers.

At parties, women in spectacular dresses would glide up and down the stairs—confident, stylish. Some of the men would gather in the billiard room, using the game as an excuse to puff on cigars and pontificate about politics and finance.

And servants would scurry along, efficiently invisible, stoking fires, clearing glasses, answering demands.

On the landing, he opened a panel. The hidden door was skillfully worked into the wall, the faded wallpaper, the dulled wainscoting. He wasn't certain how he'd

known it was there. Someone must have mentioned it.

He peered into the dim, dank corridor. Part of the rabbit warren of servants' quarters and accesses, he believed. Family and guests didn't care to have underfoot those who served. A good servant left no trace of his work, but saw to his duties discreetly, silently and well.

Frowning, Declan strained his eyes to see. Where had that come from? His mother? As tight-assed as she could be from time to time, she'd never say something that pompous.

With a shrug, he closed the door again. He'd explore that area another time, when he had a flashlight and a bag of bread crumbs.

He walked along the corridor, glancing in doorways. Empty rooms, full of dust and the smell of damp, gray light from the rain. Some walls were papered, some were down to the skeletal studs.

Sitting room, study, bath and surely the billiard room he'd imagined, as its old mahogany bar was still in place.

He walked in to circle around it, to touch the wood, to crouch down and examine the workmanship.

He'd started a love affair with wood in high school. To date, it was his most lasting relationship. He'd taken a summer job as a laborer even though his family had objected. *He'd* objected to the idea of spending those long summer days cooped up in a law office as a clerk, and had wanted to work outdoors. To polish his tan and his build.

It had been one of the rare times his father had overruled his mother and sided with him.

He'd gotten sunburns, splinters, blisters, calluses, an aching back. And had fallen in love with building.

Not building so much, Declan thought now. Rebuilding. The taking of something already formed and enhancing, repairing, restoring.

Nothing had given him as big a kick, or half as much satisfaction.

He'd had a knack for it. A natural, the Irish pug of a foreman had told him. Good hands, good eyes, good brain. Declan had never forgotten that summer high. And had never matched it since.

Maybe now, he thought. Maybe he would now. There had to be more for him than just getting from one day to the next doing what was expected and acceptable.

With pleasure and anticipation growing, he went back to exploring his house.

At the door to the ballroom he stopped, and grinned. "Wow. Cool!"

His voice echoed and all but bounced back to slap him in the face. Delighted, he walked in. The floors were scarred and stained and spotted. There were sections damaged where it appeared someone had put up partitions to bisect the room, then someone else had knocked them out again.

But he could fix that. Some moron had thrown up dry-wall and yellow paint over the original plaster walls. He'd fix that, too.

At least they'd left the ceiling alone. The plasterwork was gorgeous, complicated wreaths of flowers and fruit. It would need repairing, and a master to do it. He'd find one.

He threw open the gallery doors to the rain. The neglected, tumbled jungle of gardens spread out, snaked through with overgrown and broken bricked paths. There was likely a treasure of plantings out there. He'd need a landscaper, but he hoped to do some of it himself.

Most of the outbuildings were only ruins now. He could see a portion of a chimney stack, part of a vine-smothered wall of a derelict worker's cabin, the pocked bricks and rusted roof of an old *pigeonnier*—Creole planters had often raised pigeons.

He'd only gotten three acres with the house, so it was likely other structures that had belonged to the plantation were now tumbling down on someone else's land.

But he had trees, he thought. Amazing trees. The ancient live oaks that formed the *allée* dripped with water and moss, and the thick limbs of a sycamore spread and twisted like some prehistoric beast.

A wash of color caught his attention, had him stepping out into the rain. Something was blooming, a tall, fat bush with dark red flowers. What the hell bloomed in January? he wondered, and made a mental note to ask Remy.

Closing his eyes a moment, he listened. He could hear nothing but rain, the whoosh and splash of it on roof, on ground, on tree.

He'd done the right thing, he told himself. He wasn't crazy after all. He'd found his place. It *felt* like his, and if it wasn't, what did it matter? He'd find another. At least, finally, he'd stirred up the energy to look.

He stepped back in and, humming, walked back across the ballroom toward the family wing, to check out each of the five bedrooms.

He caught himself singing under his breath as he wandered through the first of them.

*"After the ball is over, after the break of morn;
After the dancers leaving, after the stars are gone . . ."*

He stopped examining baseboard and looked over his shoulder as if expecting to see someone standing behind him. Where had that come from? he wondered. The tune, the lyrics. With a shake of his head, he straightened.

"From the ballroom, idiot," he mumbled. "Ballroom on the mind, so you start singing about a ball. Weird, but not crazy. Talking to yourself isn't crazy, either. Lots of people do it."

The door to the room across the hall was closed. Though he expected the creak of hinges, the sound still danced a chill up his spine.

That sensation was immediately followed by bafflement. He could have sworn he smelled perfume. Flowers. Lilies. Weddings and funerals. And for an instant he imagined them, pure and white and somehow feral in a tall crystal vase.

His next feeling was irritation. He'd only sent a few pieces ahead, including his bedroom furniture. The movers had dumped it in the wrong room, and he'd been very specific. His room would be the master at the corner, overlooking the garden and pond at the rear, and the avenue of oaks from the side.

Now he'd have to settle for this room, or haul the damn stuff himself.

The scent of lilies was overpowering when he shoved the door all the way open. Almost dizzying. Confused, he realized it wasn't even *his* furniture. The bed was a full tester draped in deep blue silk. There was a carved chifforobe, a tall chest of drawers, all gleaming. He caught the scent of beeswax under the floral. Saw the lilies in that tall, crystal vase on a woman's vanity table, its legs curved like the necks of swans. The chair was delicate, its seat an intricate needlepoint pattern of blue and rose.

Silver-backed brushes, a brooch of gold wings with an enameled watch. Long blue draperies, ornate gaslight sconces set on a low, shimmering light. A woman's white robe tossed over the back of a blue chaise.

Candlesticks on the mantel, and a picture in a silver frame.

He saw it all, snapshot clear. Before his brain could process the how of it, he was staring into an empty room where rain streamed outside uncurtained windows.

"Jesus Christ." He gripped the doorjamb for balance. "What the hell?"

He drew in a breath. There was nothing in the air but must and dust.

Projecting, he told himself. Just projecting what the room might have looked like. He hadn't seen anything, or smelled anything. He'd just gotten caught up in the charm of the place, in the spirit of it.

But he couldn't make himself step over the threshold.

He closed the door again, walked directly down to the corner room. His furniture was there, as ordered, and the sight of it both relieved and steadied him.

The good, solid Chippendale bed with its headboard and footboard unadorned. The one point of agreement he'd had, always, with his mother was a love of antiques, the respect for the workmanship, the history.

He'd bought the bed after he and Jessica had called off the wedding. Okay, after he'd called it off, he admitted with the usual tug of guilt. He'd wanted to start fresh, and had searched out and purchased the pieces for his bedroom.

He'd chosen the bachelor's chest not only because it appeared he was going to remain one, but also because he'd liked the style of it, the double herringbone inlay, the secret compartments, the short, turned legs. He'd selected the armoire to conceal his television and stereo, and the sleek Deco lamps because he'd liked the mix of styles.

Seeing his things here in the spacious room with its handsome granite fireplace in dark green, the arched gallery doors, the gently faded wallpaper, the pitifully scarred floors, clicked him back into place again.

The adjoining dressing area made him smile. All he needed was a valet, and white tie and tails. The connecting bath, modernized from the look of it sometime in the woeful seventies, had him wincing at the avocado-green decor and yearning for a hot shower.

He'd take a quick walk through the third floor, he decided, do the same on the main level, then take the ugly green tub for a spin.

He headed up. The tune was playing in his head again. Around and around, like a waltz. He let it come. It was company of sorts until Remy showed up.

Many the hopes that have vanished, after the ball.

The staircase was narrower here. This level was for children and staff, neither of whom required fancy touches.

He'd save the servants' wing for later, he decided, and circled around toward what he assumed were nursery, storage, attics.

He reached for a doorknob, the brass dull with time and neglect. A draft, cold enough to pierce bone, swept down the corridor. He saw his breath puff out in surprise, watched it condense into a thin cloud.

As his hand closed over the knob, nausea rose up so fast, so sharp, it stole his breath again. Cold sweat beaded on his brow. His head spun.

In an instant he knew a fear so huge, so great, he wanted to run screaming. Instead he stumbled back, braced himself against the wall while terror and dread choked him like murderous hands.

Don't go in there. Don't go in.

Wherever the voice in his head came from, he was inclined to listen to it. He knew the house was rumored to be haunted. He didn't mind such things.

Or thought he didn't mind them.

But the idea of opening that door to whatever was behind it, to whatever waited on the other side, was more than he cared to face alone. On an empty stomach. After a ten-hour drive.

"Just wasting time anyway," he said for the comfort of his own voice. "I should be unloading the car. So, I'm going to unload the car."

"Who you talking to, *cher*?"

Declan jumped like a basketball center at the tip-off, and barely managed to turn a scream into a more accept-

able masculine yelp. “God *damn* it, Remy. You scared the shit out of me.”

“You’re the one up here talking to a door. I gave a few shouts on my way up. Guess you didn’t hear.”

“Guess I didn’t.”

Declan leaned back against the wall, sucked in air and studied his friend.

Remy Payne had the cocky good looks of a con artist. He was tailor-made for the law, Declan thought. Slick, sharp, with cheerful blue eyes and a wide mouth that could, as it was now, stretch like rubber into a disarming smile that made you want to believe everything he said, even as you caught the distinctive whiff of bullshit.

He was on the skinny side, never had been able to bulk up despite owning the appetite of an elephant. In college he’d worn his deep-brown hair in a sleek mane over his collar. He’d shortened it now so it was almost Caesarean in style.

“I thought you said a couple hours.”

“Been that. Damn near two and a half. You okay there, Dec? Look a little peaky.”

“Long drive, I guess. God, it’s good to see you.”

“’Bout time you mentioned that.” With a laugh, he caught Declan in a bear hug. “Whoo, boy. You been working out. Turn around, lemme see your ass.”

“You idiot.” They slapped backs. “Tell me one thing,” Declan remarked as he took a step back. “Am I out of my fucking mind?”

“’Course you are. Always have been. Let’s go on down and have ourselves a drink.”

*T*hey settled in what had once been the gentlemen’s parlor, on the floor with a pepperoni pizza and a bottle of Jim Beam.

The first shot of bourbon went down like liquid silk

and untied all the knots in Declan's belly. The pizza was good and greasy, and made him decide the strangeness he'd experienced had been a result of fatigue and hunger.

"You planning on living like this for long, or buying yourself a chair or two?"

"Don't need a chair or two." Declan took the bottle back from Remy, swigged down bourbon. "Not for now anyway. I wanted to cut things down to the bone for a while. I got the bedroom stuff. Might toss a table up in the kitchen. I start buying furniture, it'll just be in the way while I'm working on this place."

Remy looked around the room. "Shape this place is in, you'll need a fucking wheelchair before you're finished."

"It's mostly cosmetic. People who bought it last got a good start on the big work, from what I hear. Seems they had an idea about turning it into a fancy hotel or some such thing. Gave it nearly six months before they turned tail. Probably they ran out of money."

Lifting his eyebrows, Remy ran a finger over the floor, studied the layer of dust he picked up. "Too bad you can't sell this dirt. You'd be filthy rich. Ha. Oh yeah, I forgot. You already are filthy rich. How's your family?"

"About the same as always."

"And they think, our boy Dec, *il est fou*." Remy circled a finger by his ear. "He's gone round the bend."

"Oh yeah. Maybe they're right, but at least it's finally *my* damn bend. If I'd gone to one more deposition, faced one more meeting, handled one more pretrial negotiation, I'd have drowned myself in the Charles."

"Corporate law's what stifled you, *cher*." Remy licked sauce from his fingers. "You should've tried criminal, like me. Keeps the blood moving. You say the word, we'll hang out a shingle together tomorrow."

"Thanks for the thought. You still love it."

"I do. I love the slippery, sneaking angles of it, the

pomp and ceremony, the sweaty wrestling, the fancy words. Every damn thing.” Remy shook his head, tipped back the bottle. “You never did.”

“No, I never did.”

“All those years busting ass through Harvard, tossed aside. That what they’re saying to you?”

“Among other things.”

“They’re wrong. You know that, Dec. You’re not tossing anything aside. You’re just picking up something different. Relax and enjoy it. You’re in New Orleans now, or close enough. We take things easy here. We’ll wear some of that Yankee off you soon enough. Have you doing the Cajun two-step and stirring up some red beans and rice on wash day.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

“You come on into town once you’re settled in, Effie and I’ll take you out to dinner. I want you to meet her.”

Remy had pulled off his tie, shucked his suit jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his lawyerly blue shirt. Except for the hair, Declan thought, he didn’t look that different than he did when they’d been at Harvard sucking down pizza and bourbon.

“You’re really doing it? Getting married.”

Remy let out a sigh. “Twelfth of May, come hell or high water. I’m settling my bad ass down, Dec. She’s just what I want.”

“A librarian.” It was a wonder to Declan. “You and a librarian.”

“Research specialist,” Remy corrected and hooted out a laugh. “Damn prettiest bookworm I ever did see. She’s a smart one, too. I’m crazy in love with her, Dec. Out of my mind crazy for her.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“You still got the guilts over . . . what was her name? Jennifer?”

“Jessica.” Wincing, Declan took another swig to cut the taste her name brought to his tongue. “Calling off a wedding three weeks before you’re due to walk down the aisle ought to give you the guilts.”

Remy acknowledged this with a quick shrug. “Maybe so. Feel worse if you’d gone through with it.”

“Tell me.” Still, his gray eyes remained broody as he stared at the bottle. “But I think she’d have handled it better if we’d done the thing, then gone for a divorce the next day.” It still gave him a twinge. “Couldn’t have handled it any worse, anyway. She’s seeing my cousin James now.”

“James . . . James . . . That the one who squeals like a girl or the one with the Dracula hair?”

“Neither.” Declan’s lips twitched. Jesus, he’d missed this. “James is the perfect one. Plastic surgeon, polo player, collects stamps.”

“Short guy, receding chin, broad Yankee accent.”

“That’s him, but the chin doesn’t recede anymore. Implant. According to my sister, it’s starting to look serious between them, which just serves me right, I’m told.”

“Well, hell, let your sister marry Jennifer.”

“Jessica, and that’s what I told her,” he said, gesturing with the bottle for emphasis. “She didn’t speak to me for two weeks. Which was a relief. I’m not very popular with the Fitzgeralds right now.”

“Well, you know, Dec, I’d have to say, given the circumstances and such . . . screw ’em.”

With a laugh, Declan handed Remy the bottle. “Let’s drink to it.”

He took another slice of pizza from the box. “Let me ask you something else, about this place. I’ve researched the history, did a chunk of it way back after we came here the first time.”

“Stumbling around like drunken fools.”

“Yeah, which we may do again if we keep hitting this bourbon. Anyway, I know it was built in 1879—after the

original structure burned down in an unexplained fire, which was very likely set due to politics, Reconstruction and other post-Civil War messiness.”

“That’s the War of Northern Aggression, son.” Remy pointed a warning finger. “Remember which side of the Mason-Dixon Line you’re plopping your Yankee ass down on now.”

“Right. Sorry. Anyway. The Manets scooped up the land, cheap, according to the old records, and built the current structure. They farmed sugar and cotton primarily and divvied off plots to sharecroppers. Lived well for about twenty years. There were two sons, both died young. Then the old man died and the wife held on until she apparently stroked out in her sleep. No heirs. There was a granddaughter on record, but she was cut out of the will. Place went to auction and has passed from hand to hand ever since. Sitting empty more than not.”

“And?”

Declan leaned forward. “Do you believe it’s haunted?”

Remy pursed his lips, copped the last piece of pizza. “That whole history lesson was your way of working around to asking that one question? Boy, you got the makings for a fine southern lawyer. Sure it’s haunted.” His eyes danced as he bit into the pizza. “House been here this long and isn’t, it’d have no self-respect whatsoever. The granddaughter you mentioned. She was a Rouse on her mama’s side. I know that, as I’m fourth or fifth cousins with the Simones, and the Simones come down from that line. Girl was raised, I believe, by her maternal grandparents after her mama took off with some man—so it’s said. Don’t know if I recollect what happened to her daddy, but others will if you want to know. I do know that Henri Manet, his wife, Josephine, and the one son—damned if I know what his name was—all died in this house. One of them doesn’t have the gumption to haunt it, that’s a crying shame.”

“Natural causes? The people who died here?”

Curious, Remy frowned. “Far as I know. Why?”

“I don’t know.” Declan had to fight off a shudder. “Vibes.”

“You want someone to come through here? Little gris-gris, little voodoo, chase off your ghost, or maybe summon the spirit for a little conversation? You can find yourself a witch or psychic every second corner in town.”

“No, thanks.”

“You let me know if you decide different.” Remy winked. “I’ll put you onto somebody who’ll give you a fine show.”

He didn’t want a show, Declan decided later. But he did want that shower, and bed. With Jim Beam buzzing pleasantly in his blood, he hauled in boxes, pawed through them to find sheets and towels. He carted what he figured he’d need for the night upstairs.

It was good old Catholic guilt rather than any need for order that had him making the bed. He treated himself to a ten-minute shower, then climbed into the fresh sheets to the sound of the incessant rain.

He was asleep in thirty seconds.

There was a baby crying. It didn’t strike him as odd at all. Babies tended to cry in the middle of the night, or whenever they damn well pleased. It sounded fretful and annoyed more than alarmed.

Someone ought to go pick it up . . . do whatever people did with crying babies. Feed it. Change it. Rock it.

When he’d waked from nightmares as a child, his mother or his nanny, sometimes his father, had come in to stroke his head and sit with him until the fear faded away again.

The baby wasn't frightened. The baby was hungry.

It didn't strike him as odd that he thought that. That he knew that.

But it did strike him as odd, very odd, to wake, bathed in sweat, and find himself standing outside the door with the dull brass knob on the third floor.

3

*S*leepwalking. That was something he hadn't done since childhood. But in the watery light of day it was simple enough to see how it had happened. Jim Beam, pepperoni pizza and talk of ghosts.

A little harder to accept was the gut-clenching terror he'd felt when he'd surfaced and found himself outside that third-level door. He'd snapped out of the fugue and into a nightmare of panic—one where he'd been certain he'd heard the fading echoes of a baby's restless crying.

He'd run. He couldn't have opened that door if he'd had a gun to his head. So he'd run, with his own bright fear chasing him, to lock himself back in the bedroom. Like a mental patient, he thought now over a lukewarm cup of instant coffee.

At least there'd been no one around to see it.

But if you thought about it, it was a rather auspicious first night. Cold spots, baby ghosts, fugues. It sure beat sitting in his empty town house in Boston, sucking on a beer and watching ESPN.

Maybe he would spend some time digging deeper into

the history of the house. His house, he corrected, and with his coffee, he leaned on the damp iron rail of the gallery outside his bedroom.

His view. And it was a beaut once you skimmed over the wreck of the gardens.

Leaves dripped from the rain in steady, musical plops, and the air shimmered with the weight the storm had left behind. Mists crawled over the ground, smoky fingers that trailed and curled around the trees to turn them into romantic and mysterious silhouettes.

If the sun broke through, the glittery light would be spectacular, but it was nothing to sneeze at now.

There was a pond, a small one, choked with lily pads, and fields—some fallow, some already planted for a spring that came so much sooner here. He could see the thin curve of the river that ribboned its way through the deep shadows of the bayou.

A rickety little bridge crossed the water in a hump, then a dirt road pushed into the trees toward a house mostly hidden by them. He could just make out a puff of smoke that rose up to mix with the hazy air.

He'd already been up on the belvedere that morning, and had been relieved to find it, the roof, the chimneys, all in good repair. The last owners had seen to that and this second-floor gallery before they'd thrown in the towel.

It looked as if they'd started on the rear gallery as well, had started preliminary work on closing it into a screened porch.

Which might not be a bad idea. He'd think about it.

Declan wasn't certain if they'd run out of money or energy, or both, but he considered it his good fortune.

He had plenty of money, and just now, watching the steam rising over the weeds and water, plenty of energy.

He lifted the cup to his lips, then lowered it again as he saw a woman—a girl?—slip through the trees toward the

curve of the river. A huge black dog lumbered along beside her.

She was too far away from him to make out features. He saw she wore a red checked shirt and jeans, that her hair was long and dark and madly curling. Was she old? he wondered. Young? Pretty or plain?

He decided on young and pretty. It was, after all, his option.

She tossed a ball in the air, fielded it smartly when the dog gave a leap. She tossed it twice more while the dog jumped and ran in circles. Then she reared back like a pitcher in the stretch and bulleted it through the air. The dog gave chase and didn't hesitate, but leaped toward the pond, shagging the ball with a snap of teeth an instant before he hit the water.

Hell of a trick, Declan thought and, grinning, watched the girl applaud.

He wished he could hear her. He was sure she was laughing, a low, throaty laugh. When the dog swam to the edge, scrambled out, he spit the ball at her feet, then shook himself.

It had to have drenched her, but she didn't dance away or brush fussily at her jeans.

They repeated the routine, with Declan a captive audience.

He imagined her walking with the dog closer to the Hall. Close enough that he could wave from the gallery, invite her in for a cup of bad coffee. His first shot at southern hospitality.

Or better yet, he could wander down. And she'd be wrestling with the dog. She'd slip on the wet grass, tumble into the pond. He'd be right at hand to pull her out. No, to dive in after her and save her because she couldn't swim.

Then one thing would lead to another, and they'd have sex on that damp grass, in the watery sunlight. Her body,

wet and sleek, would rise over his. He'd fill his hands with her breasts, and . . .

"Jeez." He blinked, saw her disappearing into the trees again.

He wasn't sure if he was embarrassed or relieved to find himself hard. He'd had sex only once in the six months since he'd broken things off with Jessica. And that had been more a reflex than real desire.

So if he could find himself fully aroused over some ridiculous fantasy of a woman whose face he hadn't seen, that area was coming back to normal.

He could check worry over his manhood off his list of concerns.

He tossed the last swallows of cold coffee away. He didn't mind starting the day with a stray erotic fantasy, but he did mind starting it with bad coffee. It was time to get down to practicalities.

He went back in, grabbed his wallet and keys, and headed into town for supplies.

*I*t took him most of the day. Not just to get the supplies, but to reacquaint himself with the city he was going to call his own.

If Boston was a respectable wife, with a few seamy secrets, New Orleans was a sensual mistress who celebrated her darker sides.

He treated himself to an enormous breakfast, so loaded with cholesterol he imagined his heart simply keeling over from the shock.

He bought coffee beans and a grinder. Bagels and beignets. He loaded up on the single-male cuisine of packaged dinners, frozen pizza, dry cereal. Hit the liquor store for beer, bourbon and some good wine.

He loaded it into his car, then struck out again, as much for the joy of wandering the streets as the recollection he

needed something to eat on and with. He settled for paper plates and plastic ware, and stopped to watch a street musician set out his trumpet case, prime it with a few coins, then fill the air with a stream of magic.

Declan gave him his first dollar of the day.

He avoided the temptation of the antique shops and the lure of the Quarter. Lunchtime music was already pumping out of clubs and exotic scents wafted from restaurants. He bought himself a muffuletta—that marvel of meat and cheese and oil on Italian bread—to take back home for later.

As he walked to his car again, he noted the tourists with their bags from Café du Monde or the Riverwalk shops, the card readers sitting at folding tables around the perimeter of Jackson Square who would tell your fortune for ten dollars a pop. He caught the faint drift of marijuana under the ripening stench of garbage as he walked by an alleyway.

And saw an enormous black woman, smoking in indolent puffs, on the plant-jammed gallery above a shop that advertised erotic candles.

He bought one for Remy of a naked woman with breasts like torpedoes, and grinned over it all the way back to his car.

He drove home energized. He hauled in supplies, stuffed them wherever seemed logical at the time, then began a serious room-by-room inspection of the main level. He made notes on problems, on potentials, on plans and on priorities.

The kitchen was a definite first. He had experience there from his own house in Boston, and from two remodels where he'd assisted friends.

He couldn't claim to cook more than the occasional omelette or toasted sandwich, but he thought of the

kitchen as the heart of any home. The latest transition of the Manet Hall kitchen was early eighties—stark white and chrome with a slablike island work counter and blinding white flooring.

The good points were the generous windows, the old and serviceable brick hearth and the pretty coffered ceiling. He liked the enormous pantry, but thought it would serve better as a mudroom. He'd hack down to the original wood flooring, strip off the overly sweet teapot-themed wallpaper, yank out the island in favor of an antique baker's table or some such thing.

Decorating wasn't his strong point. He'd left that to Jessica, who'd favored pale colors and classic lines.

And now that he thought about it, he preferred stronger colors and the charm of the fanciful. He *liked* details and fuss. It was his house, damn it, and he'd do it his way. Top to bottom.

He'd put in some old glass-fronted cabinets where he could display antique kitchen appliances. Cracked, mismatched dishes, bottles and Mason jars. Cluttered.

Good solid surface countertops. Copper faucets. He didn't care if they tarnished. They'd just look more real.

Big-ass refrigerator. State-of-the-art dishwasher and range. All fronted with distressed wood.

Now, we're cooking.

He took reams of notes, measured, remeasured. He dragged out his research books and pored over them on the floor of the empty library while he ate half his sandwich and drank enough coffee to make his ears ring.

He could see it, so perfectly. The floor-to-ceiling shelves jammed with books, the deep green walls and the soft cream of the plaster ceiling and trim. Thick silver candlesticks on the mantel. He'd have to have all the chimneys checked professionally so he could start building fires, knock the chill out of the air.

The trim would be restored where it needed it, sanded

smooth as satin. The pocket doors here, and the massive ones separating the gentlemen's and ladies' parlors, were in excellent shape.

Someone along the way had refinished the library flooring.

He crawled around, running his hands over the wood. Sand it down lightly, slap on a couple coats of clear varnish, and they'd be set. The area rugs had protected it well—the good, thick Aubussons Josephine had ordered from Paris.

He smelled brandy, leather, beeswax and roses, but thought nothing of it. His eyes were cloudy and distant when he stopped at the tiled hearth, flicked his thumb over the chip at the corner. That section would have to be replaced, or if it couldn't be matched, rounded off. They'd been hand painted and glazed in Italy, at considerable expense.

Julian had knocked the candlestick off the mantel, and it had chipped the tile. Drunk again. Raging again.

The cell phone in his pocket rang and had Declan sitting back on his heels. Blinking, displaced, he gazed around the empty room. What had he been doing? Thinking? He glanced down at his thumb and saw he'd rubbed it raw on the jagged tile. Disoriented, he dragged out his phone.

"Yeah. Hello?"

"There he is. I was about to give you up." Remy's cheerful voice jangled in his head as Declan stared at the tile. He'd been thinking about the tile. Something . . .

"I'm, ah, doing a room by room. Measuring. Stuff."

"How about you get yourself out of there for a while? I got me a late meeting, thought you could meet me for a drink after. Effie, too, if I can drag her out."

"What time is it?" Declan turned his wrist to check his watch. "Midnight? It's midnight?"

"Not yet it's not. You been drinking already?"

“Just coffee.” He frowned at his watch, tapped the face. “Battery must’ve gone.”

“It’s just after six. I should be able to wiggle loose by nine. Why don’t you come on in? I’ll meet you at Et Trois, in the Quarter, on Dauphine about a block off Bourbon.”

“Yeah.” Absently, he shoved at his hair, found his forehead was lightly beaded with sweat. “Yeah, that sounds fine.”

“You need directions, Yankee boy?”

“I’ll find it.” He rubbed his throbbing thumb. “Remy?”

“That’s my name.”

Declan shook his head, laughed at himself. “Nothing. See you later.”

He drove in early. He wasn’t particularly interested in drinking, but wanted to see the metamorphosis of New Orleans from day to night. The streets gleamed under the carnival of lights, teemed with the crowds who streamed along, looking for entertainment.

It was neither the tourists nor the merchants who ran the show, in Declan’s opinion. It was the city itself. And its wheels turned on music.

It pumped from doorways, cool jazz, hot rock, melting blues. Overhead, restaurant galleries were thick with diners who warded off the January chill with spicy sauce and alcohol. The strip club hawkers promised all manner of visual delights, and in the shops cash registers rang as tourists gorged on T-shirts and Mardi Gras masks. The bars served hurricanes to the Yankees, and beer and liquor to those who knew better.

But it was the music that kept the parade marching.

He soaked it in as he strolled down Bourbon, past doorways, bright lights, and sudden, unexpected courtyards. He skirted around a group of women who clutched together on the sidewalk chattering like magpies.

He caught the scent of them—flowers and candy—and felt the typical male reaction of pleasure and panic when they burst into giggles.

“Nice ass,” one of them commented, and Declan kept on walking.

Women in packs were dangerous and mysterious entities.

It occurred to him that if he were going to meet Effie, he should take her a token. Some sort of engagement gift. He didn’t know what she liked, or what she *was* like, come to think of it. But if there was one thing he was good at, it was buying gifts.

Wishing he’d thought of it earlier, he poked through a couple of shops without much hope. Nearly everything in this section was geared for the tourist trade, and he didn’t think a wind-up, plastic penis was quite the thing for a first introduction. A gift could wait, he reflected, or he could just fall back on the basket of girl lotions and potions.

Then he saw it. The silver frog squatted on all fours as if it was about to take a good, springy hop. It had a cheerfully wicked face and a big, smart-ass grin. And reminded Declan instantly of Remy.

If this Effie had fallen for his old college pal, she had to appreciate whimsy. He had it wrapped in fancy paper with a big red bow.

It was still shy of nine when he turned onto Dauphine.

He was ready to sit in a bar, away from the center ring of the circus. Maybe listen to some music and work on a beer. For the next several weeks, he was going to have to tow the line. Spend his days tearing into the kitchen, his evenings planning his next point of attack. He had to track down specific craftsmen. Get bids. Get started.

For tonight, he’d spend some time with friends, then go home and get a solid eight hours’ sleep.

He spotted the sign for Et Trois. It was hard to miss as

it danced cheerfully in cool blue over the scarred wooden door of a building barely two good strides from the street.

The second floor boasted the typical gallery and lacy iron baluster. Someone had decked it out with fat clay pots of hot pink geraniums and strung little white fairy lights along the eaves. It made a pretty, feminine picture. The kind of spot where you might sit, drink a glass of wine and contemplate the people strolling by below.

He opened the door to a blast of jumpy zydeco, the scent of garlic and whiskey.

On the small stage was a five-piece band—washboard, fiddle, drums, guitar, accordion. The little dance floor was already packed with people executing the quick, fancy two-step the music cried for.

Through the dim light he could see that none of the round wooden tables scooted to the side were free. He turned toward the bar. The wood was nearly black with age, but it gleamed. A dozen backless stools were jammed together. Declan copped the single one left before someone beat him to it.

Bottles lined the mirror behind the bar, and interspersed with them were salt and pepper shakers in a variety of themes. An elegant couple in evening dress, dogs, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Porky and Petunia, the round, naked breasts of a reclining woman, carnival masks and winged fairies.

He contemplated them, considered the sort of person who would collect and display fairies and body parts, and decided it was someone who understood New Orleans.

Onstage, the fiddle player began to sing in Cajun. She had a voice like a rusty saw that was inexplicably appealing. Tapping his foot, Declan glanced down to the end of the bar. The man tending had dreadlocks down to his waist, a face that might have been carved by a very skilled hand out of a polished coffee bean, and hands that

moved with balletic grace as he worked taps and poured shots.

He started to lift his hand to get the bartender's attention. And then she walked out of the door behind the bar.

Later, when he could think clearly, he would decide it had been like having a sledgehammer plowed into his chest. Not stopping his heart, but jump-starting it. His heart, his blood, his loins, his brain. Everything went from holding pattern to quick march in an instant.

There you are! something in his mind shouted. *Finally.*

He could hear the race of his body like a hard hum that drowned out the music, the voices. His vision focused in on her so completely it was as if she were spotlighted on a black stage.

She wasn't beautiful, not in any classic sense. What she was, was spectacular.

Her hair was midnight black, a gypsy mane that spilled wild curls over her shoulders. Her face was fox-sharp—the narrow, somewhat aristocratic nose, the high, planed cheeks, the tapered chin. Her eyes were long and heavy-lidded, her mouth wide, full and painted blood-lust red.

It didn't quite go together, he thought as his brain jumbled. The elements in the face shouldn't work as a whole. But they were perfect. Striking, sexy, superb.

She was small, almost delicately built, and wore a tight scooped-neck shirt the color of poppies that showed off the lean muscles of her arms, the firm curve of her breasts. Tucked into the valley of those breasts was a silver chain with a tiny silver key.

Her skin was dusky, her eyes, when they flicked to his, the deep, rich brown of bitter chocolate.

Those red lips curved—a slow, knowing smile as she strolled over, leaned on the bar so their faces were close enough for him to see the tiny beauty mark just above the right curve of her top lip. Close enough for him to catch

the scent of night-blooming jasmine, and start to drown in it.

“Can I do something for you, *cher*?”

Oh yeah, he thought. *Please*.

But all that came out was: “Um . . .” She gave her head a little toss, then angled it as she sized him up. She spoke again, in that easy Cajun rhythm. “You thirsty? Or just . . . hungry tonight?”

“Ah . . .” He wanted to lap his tongue over those red lips, that tiny mole, and slurp her right up. “Corona.”

He watched her as she got the bottle, snagged a lime. She had a walk like a dancer, somewhere between ballet and exotic. He could literally feel his tongue tangling into knots.

“You want to run a tab, handsome?”

“Ah.” *God, Fitzgerald, pull yourself together*. “Yeah, thanks. What’s it unlock?” When she lifted her eyebrows, he picked up the bottle. “Your key?”

“This?” She reached down, trailed a finger over the little key and sent his blood pressure through the roof. “Why, my heart, *cher*. What’d you think?”

He reached out a hand for hers. If he didn’t touch her, he was afraid he might break down and sob. “I’m Declan.”

“Is that right?” She left her hand in his. “Nice name. Not usual.”

“It’s . . . Irish.”

“Uh-huh.” She turned his hand over, leaned down as if reading the palm. “What do I see here? You haven’t been in New Orleans long, but you hope to be. Got yourself out of the cold, cold North, did you, Declan?”

“Yeah. Guess that’s not hard to figure.”

She looked up again, and this time his heart did stop. “I can figure more. Rich Yankee lawyer down from Boston. You bought Manet Hall.”

“Do I know you?” He felt something—like a link forged onto a chain—when his hand gripped hers. “Have we met before?”

“Not in this life, darling.” She gave his hand a little pat, then moved down the bar filling more orders.

But she kept an eye on him. He wasn’t what she’d expected from Remy’s description. Though she was damned if she knew what she’d expected. Still, she was a woman who liked surprises. The man sitting at her bar, watching her out of storm-gray eyes, looked to be full of them.

She liked his eyes. She was used to men looking at her with desire, but there’d been more in his. A kind of breathless shock that was both flattering and sweet.

And it was appealing to have a man who looked like he could handle anything you tossed at him fumble when you smiled at him.

Though he’d barely touched his beer, she worked her way back to him, tapped a finger to the bottle. “Ready for another?”

“No, thanks. Can you take a break? Can I buy you a drink, coffee, a car, a dog?”

“What’s in there?”

He glanced at the little gift bag he’d set on the bar. “It’s just a present for someone I’m meeting.”

“You buy gifts for lots of women, Declan?”

“She’s not a woman. I mean, not my woman. I don’t actually have one—it’s just . . . I used to be better at this.”

“Better at what?”

“At hitting on women.”

She laughed—the low, throaty sound of his fantasies.

“Can you take a break? We’ll kick somebody away from a table and you can give me another chance.”

“You’re not doing so bad with the first one. I own the place, so I don’t get breaks.”

“This is your place?”

“That’s right.” She turned as one of the waitresses came to the bar with a tray.

“Wait. Wait.” He reached for her hand again. “I don’t know your name. What’s your name?”

“Angelina,” she said softly. “But they call me Lena, ’cause I ain’t no angel. *Cher*.” She trailed a finger down his cheek, then stepped away to fill orders.

Declan took a deep, long swallow of beer to wash back the saliva that had pooled in his mouth.

He was trying to work out another approach when Remy slapped him on the back. “We’re going to need us a table, son.”

“View’s better from here.”

Remy followed the direction of Declan’s gaze. “One of the best the city offers. You meet my cousin Lena?”

“Cousin?”

“Fourth cousins, I’m thinking. Might be fifth. Angelina Simone, one of New Orleans’s jewels. And here’s another. Effie Renault. Effie darling, this is my good friend Declan Fitzgerald.”

“Hello, Declan.” She wiggled between him and Remy and kissed Declan’s cheek. “I’m so happy to meet you.”

She had a cloud of blond hair around a pretty, heart-shaped face, and eyes of clear summer blue. Her lips had a deep, Kewpie doll curve and were a rosy pink.

She looked like she should be leading cheers at the local high school.

“You’re too pretty to waste yourself on this guy,” Declan told her. “Why don’t you run away with me instead?”

“When do we leave?”

With a chuckle, Declan slid off the stool and returned her kiss. “Nice job, Remy.”

“Best work I ever did.” Remy pressed his lips to Effie’s hair. “Sit on down there, darling. Place is packed. Bar might be the best we do. You want wine?”

“The house white’ll be fine.”

“Get you a refill there, Declan?”

“I’ll get it. I’m buying.”

“If that’s the case, get my girl here the good chardonnay. I’ll have what you’re having.”

“Look what the cat dragged.” Lena sent Remy a grin. “Hey, Effie. What’s everybody drinking tonight?”

“A glass of chardonnay for the lady. And two more Coronas,” Declan told her. “Then maybe you can call nine-one-one. My heart stops every time I look at you.”

“Your friend’s got himself a smooth way once he gets rolling, Remy.” Lena took a bottle of wine from the cooler.

“Those Harvard girls were putty in his hands.”

“We southern girls are too used to the heat to melt easy.” She poured wine, topped the beers with lime wedges.

“I do know you.” It bounced back in his memory. “I saw you, this morning, playing with your dog. Big black dog, near the pond.”

“Rufus.” It gave her a little jolt to realize he’d watched her. “He’s my grandmama’s dog. That’s her house back the bayou. I go out sometimes and stay with her if she’s feeling poorly. Or just lonely.”

“Come by the Hall next time you’re out. I’ll give you the tour.”

“Just might. I’ve never been inside.” She set a fresh bowl of pretzels on the bar. “Y’all want something from the kitchen?”

“We’ll think about that,” Remy said.

“Just let us know.” She swung around and through the back door.

“You gonna want to mop that drool off your chin, Dec.” Remy squeezed Declan’s shoulder. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t tease him, Remy. A man doesn’t get a little worked up around Lena, he’s got some essential parts missing.”

“You definitely should run away with me,” Declan decided. “But meanwhile. Best wishes.” He nudged the gift bag in front of her.

“You bought me a present? Aren’t you the sweetest thing!” She tore into it with an enthusiasm that made Declan grin. And when she held up the frog, she stopped, stared. Then threw back her head and let out a hooting laugh. “It looks like Remy. Look here, honey, he’s got your smile.”

“I don’t see it.”

“I do. Dec did.” She swiveled on the stool and beamed up into Declan’s face. “I like you. I’m so glad I like you. I love this moron here so much I can hardly stand it, so I’d’ve pretended I liked you even if I didn’t. But I don’t have to pretend.”

“Oh now, don’t start watering up, Effie.” Remy dug out a handkerchief as she sniffled. “She does that when she’s happy. Night I asked her to marry me, she cried so much it took her ten minutes to say yes.”

He pulled her off the stool. “Come on, *chère*, you dance with me till you dry up again.”

Declan got back on the stool, picked up his beer and watched them circle the floor.

“They look good together,” Lena commented from behind him.

“Yeah. Yeah, they do. Interested in seeing how we look together?”

“You are persistent.” She let out a breath. “What kind of car you going to buy me?”

“Car?”

“You offered to buy me a drink, coffee, a car or a dog. I can buy my own drinks, and I like my own coffee. I got

a dog, more or less. A car, too. But I don't see why I shouldn't have two cars. What car are you buying me?"

"Your choice."

"I'll let you know," she replied, then moved down the bar once more.

4

He worked solidly for three days. There was little, in Declan's opinion, more satisfying than tearing something apart. Even putting it back together again didn't reach into the gut with that same primal zing.

He gutted the kitchen, ripping out the center island, the counters and cabinets. He steamed off wallpaper and yanked up linoleum.

He was left with a shell of plaster and wood, and endless possibilities.

In the evenings he nursed his blisters and strained muscles, and pored through design books.

Every morning, before he started the day, he took his first cup of coffee out on the gallery and hoped for a glimpse of Lena and the big black dog she'd called Rufus.

He contacted workmen and craftsmen, ordered materials, and in a frenzy of enthusiasm, bought a full-sized pickup truck straight off the lot.

The first night he was able to build a fire in the down-

river parlor, he toasted the occasion, and himself, with a solitary glass of Merlot.

There'd been no more sleepwalking, but there had been dreams. He could remember only snatches of them upon waking. Music—often the tune had seemed to be lodged in his brain like a tumor. Or raised voices.

Once he'd dreamed of sex, of soft sighs in the dark, of the lazy glide of flesh over flesh, and the need rising up like a warm wave.

He'd woken with his muscles quivering and the scent of lilies just fading from his senses.

Since dreaming about sex seemed to be the best he could manage, he put his energies into the work.

When he did take a break, it was to pay a call, and he went armed with a bouquet of white daisies and a rawhide bone.

The bayou house was a single-story cypress, shotgun style. Tobacco-colored water snaked around it on three sides. A small white boat swayed gently at a sagging dock.

Trees hemmed it in where the water didn't. The cypress and live oak and pecan. From the limbs hung clear bottles half-filled with water. And nestled into the gnarled roots of a live oak stood a painted statue of the Blessed Virgin.

There were purple pansies at her feet.

A little porch faced the dirt drive, and there were more potted flowers on it along with a rocking chair. The shutters were painted a mossy green. The screen door was patched in two places, and through the checkerboard net came the strong, bluesy voice of Ethel Waters.

He heard the deep, warning barks of the dog. Still, Declan wasn't prepared for the size and speed as Rufus burst out of the door and charged.

"Oh, Jesus," was all he managed. He had an instant to wonder if he should dive through the window of the

pickup or freeze when the black mass the size of a pony skidded to a halt at his feet.

Rufus punctuated those ear-splitting barks with rumbling growls, liquid snarls and a very impressive show of teeth. Since he doubted he could beat the dog off with a bunch of daisies, Declan opted for the friendly approach.

“Hey, really, really big Rufus. How’s it going?”

Rufus sniffed at his boots, up his leg and dead into the crotch.

“Oh man, let’s not get that personal right off.” Thinking of those teeth, Declan decided he’d rather risk his hand than his dick, and reached out slowly to give the massive head a little shove and pat.

Rufus looked up with a pair of sparkling brown eyes, and in one fast, fluid move, reared up on his hind legs and planted his enormous paws on Declan’s shoulders.

He swiped a tongue about the size of the Mississippi over Declan’s face. Braced against the side of the truck, Declan hoped the long, sloppy licks were a greeting and not some sort of tenderizing.

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“Get on down now, Rufus.”

At the mild order from the front doorway, the dog dropped down, sat, thumped his tail.

The woman standing on the porch was younger than Declan had expected. She couldn’t have been far into her sixties. She had the same small build as her granddaughter, the same sharp planes to her face. Her hair was black, liberally streaked with white, and worn in a mass of curls.

She wore a cotton dress that hit her mid-calf with a baggy red sweater over it. Stout brown boots covered her feet with thick red socks drooping over them. He heard the jangle of her bracelets as she fisted her hands on her narrow hips.

“He liked the smell of you, and the sound of you, so he gave you a welcome kiss.”

“If he didn’t like me?”

She smiled, a quick flash that deepened the lines time had etched on her face. “What you think?”

“I think I’m glad I smell friendly. I’m Declan Fitzgerald, Mrs. Simone. I bought Manet Hall.”

“I know who you are. Come on inside and sit for a spell.” She stepped back, opened the rickety screen door.

With the dog plodding along beside him, Declan walked to the porch. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Simone.”

She studied him, a frank and cagey stare out of dark eyes. “You sure are a pretty one, aren’t you?”

“Thanks.” He held out the flowers. “You, too.”

She took the flowers, pursed her lips. “You come courting me, Declan Fitzgerald?”

“Can you cook?”

She laughed, a thick foggy sound, and he fell a little in love. “I got some fresh corn bread, so you can see for yourself.”

She led the way in, down the wire-straight center hall. He caught glimpses of the parlor, of bedrooms—one with an iron crucifix over a simple iron bed—a sewing room, that all managed to be cozily cluttered and pin-neat.

He smelled furniture polish and lavender, then a few steps from the kitchen, caught the country scent of baking.

“Ma’am? I’m thirty-one, financially solvent, and I got a clean bill of health my last physical. I don’t smoke, I usually drink in moderation, and I’m reasonably neat. If you marry me, I’ll treat you like a queen.”

She chuckled and shook her head, then waved to the kitchen table. “Sit yourself down there and stretch those long legs under the table so they don’t trip me up. And since you’re sparking me, you can call me Miss Odette.”

She uncovered a dish on the counter, got plates out of a

cupboard. While she cut squares of corn bread, Declan looked out her kitchen door.

The bayou spread, a dream of dark water and cypress knees with the shadowy reflection of trees shimmering on the surface. He saw a bird with bright red wings spear through the air and vanish.

“Wow. How do you get anything done when you could just sit here and look all day?”

“It’s a good spot.” She took a pitcher of dark tea from an old refrigerator that was barely taller than she was. “My family’s been here more’n a hundred-fifty years. My grandpapa, he had him a good still out back that stand of oaks. Revenuers never did find it.”

She set the glass, the plate in front of him. “*Manger*. Eat. What your grandpapa do?”

“He was a lawyer. Actually, both of them were.”

“Dead now, are they?”

“Retired.”

“You, too, huh?” She got out a fat, pale blue bottle as he took the first bite of corn bread.

“Sort of, from the law anyway. This is wonderful, Miss Odette.”

“I got a hand with baking. I like daisies,” she added as she put them in the bottle she’d filled with water. “They got a cheerful face. You gonna give Rufus that bone you brought along, or make him beg for it?”

As Rufus was currently sitting at his feet with one weighty paw on his thigh, Declan decided he’d begged enough. He pulled the bone out of its bag. The dog took it with a surprisingly delicate bite, wagged his tail from side to side twice, like a whip, then plopped down and began to gnaw.

Odette put the flowers in the center of the table, then sat in the chair next to Declan’s. “What’re you going to do with that big old place, Declan Fitzgerald?”

“All kinds of things. Put it back the way it used to be, as much as I can.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. Live there.”

She broke off a corner of her corn bread. She’d already decided she liked the look of him—the untidy hair, the stone-gray eyes in a lean face. And the sound of him—Yankee, but not prim. And his manners were polished but natural and friendly.

Now she wanted to see what he was made of.

“Why?”

“I don’t know that, either, except I’ve wanted to since the first time I saw it.”

“And how’s the Hall feel about you?”

“I don’t think it’s made up its mind. Have you ever been inside?”

“Hmm.” She nodded. “Been some time ago. Lotta house for one young man. You got you a girl back up there in Boston?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Handsome boy like you, past thirty. Not gay, are you?”

“No, ma’am.” He grinned as he lifted his glass of tea. “I like girls. Just haven’t found the right fit yet.”

“Let me see your hands.” She took one in hers, turned it over. “Still got city on them, but you’re taking care of that right quick.” Her thumb passed over healing blisters, scrapes, the ridge of forming callus. “I got some balm I’ll give you before you go, keep these blisters from troubling you. You got a strong hand, Declan. Strong enough that you changed your fate. Took yourself a new road. You didn’t love her.”

“I’m sorry?”

“This woman.” Odette smoothed her fingernail over the side of his palm. “The one you stepped back from. She wasn’t for you.”

Frowning, he leaned closer, stared down at his own hand. "You see Jessica on there?" Fascinating. "Does she end up with James?"

"What do you care? She didn't love you, either."

"Well, ouch," he said and laughed a little.

"You've got love coming, the kind that'll knock you flat on your behind. It'll be good for you."

Though she continued to stroke her thumb over his palm, her gaze lifted to his face. Her eyes seemed to deepen. It seemed he could see worlds in them.

"You've got strong ties to Manet Hall. Strong, old ties. Life and death. Blood and tears. Joy, if you're strong enough, smart enough. You're a clever man, Declan. Be clever enough to look front and back to find yourself. You're not alone in that house."

His throat went dry, but he didn't reach for his tea. He didn't move a muscle. "It's haunted."

"What's there's kept others from settling in. They'd say it was the money, the time or some such, but what's in that house frightened them away. It's been waiting for you."

The chill shot up his spine in a single, icy arrow. "Why?"

"That's for you to find out." She gave his hand a squeeze, then released it, picked up her tea.

He curled his fingers into his tingling palm. "So you're, like, a psychic?"

Amused, she rose to bring the pitcher of tea to the table. "I see what I see from time to time. A little kitchen magic," she said as she refilled the glasses. "It doesn't make me a witch, just a woman." She noted his glance at the silver cross she wore, tangled with colored beads around her neck. "You think that's a contradiction? Where do you think power comes from, *cher*?"

"I guess I never thought about it."

"We don't use what the good Lord gave us, whatever

talent that might be, we're wasting his gift." She angled her head, and he saw she wore earrings as well. Fat blue stones dangling from tiny lobes. "I hear you called Jack Tripadoe about maybe doing some plumbing work in that place of yours."

"Ah . . ." He struggled to shift his brain from the fantastic to the practical, while his palm continued to vibrate from the skim of her fingers. "Yes. My friend Remy Payne recommended him."

"That Remy." Her face lit, and any mystery that had been in it vanished. "He's a caution. Jack, he's a cousin of my sister's husband's brother's wife. He'll do good work for you, and if he doesn't give you a fair price, you tell him Miss Odette's gonna want to know why."

"I appreciate that. You wouldn't happen to know a plasterer? Somebody who can handle fancy work?"

"I'll get you a name. It'll cost you a pretty bag of pennies to put that place back to what it was and keep it that way."

"I've got a lot of pennies. I hope you'll come by sometime so I can show you around. I can't make corn bread, but I can manage the tea."

"You got a nice manner, *cher*. Your mama, she raised you right."

"Would you mind writing that down, signing it? I can mail it to her."

"I'm going to like having you around," she declared. "You come back to visit anytime."

"Thank you, Miss Odette." Reading his cue, he got to his feet. "I'm going to like having you around, too."

The sun beamed across her face as she looked up at him. The angle of it, the amusement in her dark eyes, the teasing curve of lips, shot him back to the dim bar in the Quarter. "She looks so much like you."

"She does. You got your eye on my Lena already?"

He was a little flustered to realize he'd spoken out

loud, so he tried a grin. “Well, we established I like girls, right?”

She gave the table a little slap to punctuate the laugh as she rose. “I like you just fine, Declan.”

He liked her, too. Enough that he decided to buy a couple of chairs after all, so she’d have somewhere to sit when she came by. He’d find something on Saturday, he thought as he went back to prepping the kitchen walls. He could hunt some down in the afternoon, before he was due to have dinner with Remy and Effie.

Then, he’d cap off the evening with a drink at Et Trois.

And if Lena wasn’t working that night, he’d just walk back out and throw himself in front of a speeding car.

He worked until well after dark, then treated himself to a beer along with his Hungry-Man chicken dinner. He ate sitting on a sawhorse and admiring the progress of the kitchen.

The walls were stripped, repaired and prepped for paint. His pencil marks on them indicated the measurements of the cabinets he would start to build the next day. He’d even tried his hand at pointing up the bricks in the hearth, and didn’t think he’d done a half-bad job of it. The old pine flooring was exposed and protected now with drop cloths. He’d finally settled on the traffic pattern, and had earmarked the spots for the range and the refrigerator.

If he couldn’t find the right china cabinet for the long wall, he’d damn well build that, too. He was on a roll.

He carried a bottle of water upstairs, took his now-traditional nine-minute shower, then stretched out on the bed with his notes, drawings and books. Halfway through adjusting his plans for the front parlor, he conked out.

And woke, shivering with cold, in full dark. The baby had wakened him. The thin cries were still in his ears as he sat straight up with his heart banging like a hammer against his ribs.

He didn't know where he was, only that he was on the floor instead of in bed. And it was cold enough that he could see the white mist of his own breath pluming into the inky dark.

He rolled over, gained his feet. Reaching out like a blind man, he felt at the air as he took a cautious step forward.

Lilies. His body shuddered as he registered the scent. He knew where he was now—in the room down the hall from his own. The room, like the one on the third floor, he'd so carefully avoided over the last several days.

He was in it now, he thought as he took another shuffling step. And though it was insane, he knew he wasn't alone.

“You can scare me. But you won't scare me away.”

His fingers brushed something solid. He yelped, snatched them back an instant before he realized it was a wall. Taking several steadying breaths, he felt his way along it, bumped over trim, tapped over glass. Fumbling, he found the knob for the gallery doors and flung them open.

The January air felt warm and heavy against his chilled skin. He stumbled forward, gripped the rail. The night was like the inside of a cave. The old adage was true, he decided. There was no dark like country dark.

When his eyes adjusted to it, he turned back, pulled the door to the room firmly closed.

“This is my house now.” He said it quietly, then walked down the gallery, opened the door of his bedroom, and went back inside.

“Sleepwalking?” Remy scooped up another forkful of rice.

“Yeah. I went through it for about six months when I was around eleven.” Declan shrugged, but couldn’t quite dismiss the weight of it.

He hadn’t meant to bring it up, at least no more than in passing. The dinner Effie had fixed in Remy’s Garden District apartment was welcome, as was the company. But somehow he’d gone from telling them about the progress of the rehab to his nighttime adventures.

“It must be terrifying,” Effie said, “to wake up and find yourself somewhere else.”

“Spooky anyway. It’s funny I’d end up in the two rooms that make me the most uneasy. Or, I guess it’s logical. Some subconscious deal.”

“As long as you stay inside the house,” Remy put in. “I don’t want to hear you’ve sleepwalked your way into the swamp.”

“That’s a nice thought. Thanks.”

“Remy.” Effie slapped his hand. “I think you should see a doctor,” she told Declan. “You could take something to help you sleep better.”

“Maybe. Been there a week, and it’s only happened twice. Anyway, taking a couple of tranqs isn’t going to do anything about the ghost.”

“It’s just drafts and old wood settling.”

Remy grinned. “Effie doesn’t believe in ghosts.”

“Or in tarot cards or reading tea leaves or any such nonsense.” Her voice was prim, and just a little defensive.

“My girl, she’s very grounded in the here and the now.”

“Your girl just has good sense,” she shot back. “Dec, it just stands to reason you’d have some strange feelings, staying way out there in that big old house all alone. And I bet you’re not eating right, either. You ought to live here with Remy for a while, until you get used to things.”

“She won’t.” Remy jerked his head in Effie’s direction.

“I’ll live with you when we’re married, and not before.”

“Oh, but, *chère*. May’s so far away. I miss you when you’re not here.” He took her hand, kissing it lavishly as he spoke.

“Tell you what, Effie, you come out and stay with me for a few nights. Strictly platonic,” he said with a grin as Remy narrowed his eyes. “I bet you shift your stand on ghosts after one or two nights.”

“Sorry. I’m a city girl. What do you do out there all by yourself, Declan, when you’re not working?”

“Read. And speaking of that, I need to come by the library, see if you can help me dig up more about Manet Hall. I’ve been taking a few whacks at the garden, too. Take walks. Drove over to visit Miss Odette.”

“You met Miss Odette?” Remy asked as he polished off his dinner. “Something, isn’t she?”

“I really liked her. Truth is, the house is keeping me so busy I usually drop off by ten at night. I finally got a TV hooked up, and I never think to turn it on. But I did buy a table and chairs this afternoon, and some other things.”

It was always a mistake, he chided himself, to let him through the door of an antique shop.

“We’re not going to have you locking yourself out there and working yourself to the bone,” Effie decided. “I expect you to come into town and see us at least once a week from now on. And Remy, you should start going out there on Saturdays and giving Dec a hand. Spending too much time alone,” she declared as she pushed back from the table. “That’s what’s wrong with you. Now, y’all ready for pie?”

Maybe she was right, Declan thought as he hunted up a place to park. If she wasn’t right, Effie was certainly

definite. He'd try mixing it up a little more. He could drive into town once or twice a week for a real meal. Maybe have Remy and Effie out for one—a very informal one.

He could spend an evening reading something other than research.

More, he thought. He was going to gear himself up soon and push himself through the mental block he'd erected about the third-floor room.

He had to park a block and a half from Et Trois, but when he stepped in, saw Lena at the bar, he thought the walk had been worth it.

He couldn't even snag a stool tonight, but he did manage to squeeze between customers and claim a corner of the bar. The music was loud and lively, and so was the crowd.

There was a blond behind the bar tonight in addition to its owner and Dreadlock Guy. Each of them was hopping.

Lena flicked him a glance as she served two drafts and a gin fizz.

“Corona?”

“Better make it a Coke.”

She looked just as good as he remembered. Just exactly as good. She wore blue tonight—a shirt that was unbuttoned low and rolled to the elbows. Her lips were still red, but she'd scooped her hair back on the sides with silver combs. He could see the glint of hoops at her ears.

She set a tall glass in front of him. “Where y'at?”

“Ah, I think I'm right here.”

“No.” She gave him that quick, smoky laugh. “Don't you speak New Orleans, *cher*? When I say ‘where y'at,’ I'm asking how you're doing.”

“Oh. Fine, thanks. Where you at?”

“There you go. Me, I'm fine, too. Busy. Let me know if you want anything else.”

He had to content himself with watching her. She

worked her third of the bar, filling orders, having a quick word, slipping into the kitchen and out again without ever seeming to rush.

He never considered going home. When a stool freed up, he climbed on, settled in.

It was like being studied by a big, handsome cat, Lena thought. Steady and patient and just a little dangerous. He nursed his Coke, took a refill, and was still sitting when the place began to thin out.

She swung by again. “You waiting for something, handsome?”

“Yeah.” He kept his eyes on hers. “I’m waiting.”

She wiped up a spill with her bar rag. “I heard you went by to see my grandmama.”

“A couple of days ago. You look like her.”

“They say.” Lena tucked the end of the rag in her back pocket. “You go over there so you could lay on your Yankee charm and she’d put in a good word for you with me?”

“I was hoping that’d be a side benefit, but no. I went over because she’s a neighbor. I expected she was an *old* neighbor—elderly woman, living alone—and thought she’d like to know someone was around who could give her a hand with things. Then I met her and realized she doesn’t need me to give her a hand with anything.”

“That’s nice.” Lena let out a breath. “That was nice. Fact is, she could do with a strong back now and again. Dupris, honey?” she called out with her gaze locked on Declan’s. “You close up for me, okay? I’m going on home.”

She pulled a small purse from behind the bar, slung its long strap over her shoulder.

“Can I walk you home, Lena?”

“Yeah, you can do that.”

She came out from behind the bar, smiled when he opened the door for her.

“So, I hear you’re working hard on that house of yours.”

“Night and day,” he agreed. “I started on the kitchen. I’ve made serious progress. Haven’t seen you near the pond in the mornings.”

“Not lately.” The truth was she’d stayed away deliberately. She’d been curious to see if he’d come back. She strolled down the sidewalk.

“I met Rufus. He likes me.”

“So does my grandmama.”

“What about you?”

“Oh, they like me fine.”

She turned toward the opening of a tall iron gate when he laughed. They moved into a tiny, paved courtyard with a single iron table and two chairs.

“Lena.” He took her hand.

“This is where I live.” She gestured back toward the steps leading to the second-floor gallery he’d admired the first night.

“Oh. Well, so much for seducing you with my wit and charm on the long walk home. Why don’t we—”

“No.” She tapped a finger on his chest. “You’re not coming up, not tonight. But I think we’ll get this out of the way and see what’s what.”

She rose on her toes, swayed in. Her hand slipped around to the back of his neck as she brought his mouth down to hers.

He felt himself sink. As if he’d been walking on solid ground that had suddenly turned to water. It was a long, steep drop that had a thousand impressions rushing by his senses.

The silky slide of her lips and tongue, the warm brush of her skin, the drugging scent of her perfume.

By the time he’d begun to separate them, she eased back.

“You’re good at that,” she murmured, and laid a fingertip on his lips. “I had a feeling. ’Night, *cher*.”

“Wait a minute.” He wasn’t so shell-shocked he

couldn't function. He grabbed her hand. "That was practice," he told her, and spun her stylishly into his arms.

He felt the amused curve of her lips against his and, running his hands up her back, into her hair, let himself drown.

Whoops! That single thought bounced into her head as she felt herself slip. His mouth was patient, but she felt the quick flashes of hunger. His hands were gentle, but held her firmly against him.

The taste of him, like something half remembered, began to seep into her blood.

Someone opened the door of the bar. Music jumped out, then shut off again. A car gunned by on the street behind her, another blast of music through the open windows.

Heat shimmered over her skin, under it, so that the hands she rested on his shoulders trailed around, linked behind his neck.

"Very good at it," she repeated, and turned her head so her cheek rubbed his. Once, then twice. "But you're not coming up tonight. I have to think about you."

"Okay. I'll keep coming back."

"They always come back for Lena." *For a while*, she thought as she eased away. "Go on home now, Declan."

"I'll just wait until you get inside."

Her brows lifted. "Aren't you the one." Because it was sweet, she kissed his cheek before she walked to the steps and headed up.

When she unlocked her door and glanced back, he was still there. "You have sweet dreams now, *cher*."

"That'd be a nice change," he muttered when she closed the door behind her.

5

Manet Hall

January 2, 1900

It was lies. It had to be lies, of the cruelest, coldest nature. He would not believe, *never* believe that his sweet Abby had run away from him. Had left him, left their child.

Lucian sat on the corner of the bed, trapped in the daze that had gripped him since he'd returned home two days before. Returned home to find the Hall in an uproar, and his wife missing.

Another man. That's what they were saying. An old love she'd met in secret whenever Lucian had gone into New Orleans on business.

Lies.

He had been the only man. He had taken an angel to wife, a virgin to their wedding bed.

Something had happened to her. He opened and closed his hand over the watch pin he'd given her when he'd asked her to marry him. Something terrible.

But what? What could have pushed her to leave the house in the night?

A sick relation, he thought as he rose to pace and pace and pace.

But he knew that wasn't the case. Hadn't he ridden like a wild man into the marsh, to ask, to demand, to beg her family, her friends, if they knew what had become of her?

Even now people were searching for her, on the road, in the swamp, in the fields.

But the rumors, the gossip, were already rushing along the river.

Lucian Manet's young wife had run off with another man.

And he could hear the whispers behind the whispers. *What did he expect? Cajun trash. Likely that girl-child got started in the bayou and she passed it off as his.*

Horrible, vicious lies.

The door opened. Josephine hadn't bothered with even a cursory knock. Manet Hall was hers, now and always. She entered any room at her whim.

"Lucian."

He spun around. "They've found her?" He'd yet to change the clothes soiled from his last search, and hope shone through the dirt on his face.

"They have not." She closed the door at her back with a testy snap. "Nor will they. She is gone, and is probably at this moment laughing at you with her lover."

She could almost believe it. Soon, she thought, it would be the truth.

"She did not run away."

"You're a fool. You were a fool to marry her, and you remain a fool." She strode to the armoire, threw it open. "Can't you see some of her clothes are missing? Hasn't her maid reported as much?"

All he could see was the blue ball gown with the flounces and rosettes she'd been so proud of.

“The maid is mistaken.” But his voice shook.

“You’re mistaken. What of her jewelry?” Josephine pulled the leather box from the shelf, tossed the lid up. “Where are the pearls you gave her for Christmas? The diamond bracelet you bought her when she had the child?”

“Someone stole them.”

On a sound of disgust, Josephine upended the jewelry on the bed. “She took whatever sparkled the most. A girl of her type knows nothing but glitter. She bewitched you, caused you to embarrass your family, your name, now she has disgraced us all.”

“No.” He squeezed his eyes shut as his heart ripped to pieces. “She wouldn’t leave me. She would never leave Marie Rose.”

“However much affection she might have had for the child, I doubt either she or her lover wanted to be saddled with a baby. How do you know, Lucian, that the child is yours?”

The red rage of fury stained his cheeks. “How can you ask such a question? How could you have lived in the same house with her for a year, and say such a thing about her?”

The doubt, Josephine thought coldly, had been planted. She would help it bloom. “Because I did live in the same house with her, but I wasn’t blinded by lust or bewitched by whatever spell she put on you. This is your fault as much as hers. If you had satisfied your appetites as other men, paid her, given her a few trinkets, we would not have this new scandal on our hands.”

“Paid her. Like a whore. Like Julian pays his women.” Lucian stepped forward, so angry his hands trembled. “My wife is not a whore.”

“She used you,” Josephine said in a vicious whisper. “She took your dignity, and smeared ours. She came into this house a servant, and left it with the spoils of her de-

ception. Like a thief in the night, with her child crying behind her.”

She gripped his arms and shook. “You tried to change what cannot be changed. You expected too much of her. She could never have been mistress of Manet Hall.” *I am.* “At least she had the sense to know it. Now, she’s gone. We will hold our heads up until the gossip dies down. We are Manets, and we will survive this.”

She turned away, walked to the door. “I expect you to make yourself presentable and join the family for dinner. Our lives have been disrupted long enough.”

Alone, Lucian sat on the bed and, with the watch pin in his hand, fell to weeping.

“*I* gotta hand it to you, boy.” With his hands on his hips, Remy turned a circle in the kitchen. “You made a hell of a mess here.”

“Come back in a couple weeks,” Declan called out from the adjacent dining room, where he’d set up what he thought of as his carpentry shop.

Effie lifted a corner of the drop cloth. “The floor’s going to be beautiful. It’s a blank canvas,” she said as she looked around the gutted kitchen. “He had to wipe it clean so he could paint the right picture.”

“Effie, ditch that moron and come live here with me.”

“You stop trying to make time with my girl.” Remy walked to the doorway. Declan stood at a power saw, a tool belt slung at his hips and a carpenter’s pencil behind his ear. It looked to Remy as if his friend hadn’t used a razor in a good three days.

And damned if the scruffy, handyman look didn’t suit him.

“You got something you want me to do around here, or should we just stand around admiring how manly you look?”

“I could sure use one or two laborers.” He ran the saw through wood with a satisfying buzz and a shower of sawdust, switched it off before he glanced over. “You really up for it?”

“Sure.” Remy slung an arm around Effie’s shoulder. “We’ll work for beer.”

Four hours later, they sat on the gallery outside the freshly painted kitchen. Effie, dwarfed in the old denim shirt Declan had given her for a smock, had freckles of paint on her nose. The beer was cold and crisp, and on Declan’s countertop stereo, Foghat was taking a slow ride.

As he worked his latest splinter out of his thumb, Declan decided it didn’t get much better.

“What’s that bush blooming out there?” He gestured toward the wreck of gardens.

“Camellia,” Effie told him. “These gardens are a sin, Dec.”

“I know. I’ve got to get to them.”

“You can’t get to everything. You ought to get someone out here to clean it up.”

“Big Frank and Little Frankie.” Remy took a long swallow of beer. “They’d do the job for you. Do good work.”

“Family business?” He always trusted family businesses. “Father and son?”

“Brother and sister.”

“A brother and sister, both named Frank?”

“Yeah. Frank X.—that’s for Xavier—he’s got him some ego. Named both his kids after him. I’ll give you the number. You tell them Remy told you to call.”

“I’m going to go clean up.” Effie looked down at her paint-speckled hands. “Is it all right if I wander around the house some?”

“Sweetheart.” Declan took her hand, kissed it. “You can do anything you want.”

“Good thing I saw her first,” Remy commented as Effie went inside.

“Damn right.”

“Seems to me you got your mind on another woman, the way you keep looking toward the bayou.”

“I can’t have Effie unless I kill you, so I’m courting Miss Odette as a testament to our friendship.”

“Yeah, you are.” With a laugh, Remy leaned back on his elbows. “That Lena, she tends to stir a man up, get him thinking all kinds of interesting things.”

“You got a girl.”

“Don’t mean my brain stopped working. Don’t you worry, though, Effie’s all I want.” He let out a long sigh of a contented man. “Besides, Lena and me, we did our round some time back.”

“What do you mean?” Declan set his beer back down and stared at his friend. “You and Lena. You . . . and Lena?”

Remy winked. “One hot, sweaty summer. Must’ve been close to fifteen years ago. Ouch.” He leaned up to rub his heart. “That hurts. I was about . . . yeah, I was seventeen, just graduated high school. That’d make her fifteen, seems to me. We spent some memorable evenings in the backseat of my old Chevy Camaro.”

He noted Declan’s brooding look. “Hey, I saw her first, too. I was in a hot trance over that girl, a good six months. Thought I’d die if I didn’t have her. You know how it is at seventeen.”

“Yeah. I know how it is at thirty-one, too.”

Remy chuckled. “Well, I mooned over her, danced around her, sniffed at her heels. Took her to the movies, for long drives. To my senior prom. God, what a picture she was. Then one moonstruck June night, I finally got her clothes off in the back of that Camaro. It was her first

time.” He shot Declan a look. “You know, they say a woman never forgets her first. You got your work cut out for you, *cher*.”

“I think I can do better than a randy teenager.” Despite, he admitted, the fact that she made him feel like one. “What happened between you?”

“Drifted is all. I went up North to school, she stayed here. Fever burned itself out, and we slid into being friends. We are friends, Dec. She’s one of my favorite people.”

“I know a warning when I hear one. You want all the girls, Remy?”

“Just thinking to myself that I’d hate to see two of my friends hurt each other. The two of you, boy, you come with a lot of baggage.”

“I know how to store mine.”

“Maybe. God knows she’s worked hard to keep hers locked in the attic. Her mother—” He broke off when Effie screamed.

Beer spewed over the floor when Remy kicked the bottle over as he leaped up. He was through the kitchen door one stride ahead of Declan and shouting Effie’s name.

“Upstairs.” Declan veered left and charged up the kitchen stairway. “She’s upstairs.”

“Remy! Remy, come quick!”

She sat on the floor, hugging her arms, and threw herself into Remy’s the instant he crouched beside her. “Baby, what happened? Are you hurt?”

“No. No. I saw . . .” She turned her face into his shoulder. “In there. On the bed in there.”

Declan looked at the open door. The only bed in there was the one he’d imagined. Slowly, he pushed the door open the rest of the way. He could see the layer of dust on the floor, where it had been disturbed when Effie had started to go in. The sun beamed through the windows onto nothing but wood and faded wallpaper.

“What did you see, Effie?” Declan asked.

“On the bed. A woman—her face. She was dead.”

“Baby.” Staring into the room, Remy stroked her hair. “There’s nothing in there. Look now. There’s nothing there.”

“But I saw . . .”

“Tell me what you saw.” Declan knelt down beside her. “What did you see in there?”

“I saw . . .” She shuddered, then pressed her lips into a firm line. “Help me up, Remy.”

Though her face was stark white, she got to her feet and stepped to the doorway.

“Effie darling, you’re shaking. Let’s get you downstairs.”

“No. No, wait.” Her eyes were wide, and her heart continued to beat wildly as she scanned the room. “I couldn’t have seen anything. It’s an empty room. Just an empty room. I must’ve imagined . . .”

“A tester bed? Blue drapes? A chest of drawers and mirrored bureau. A woman’s vanity and a blue chaise. Gaslight sconces, candles on the mantel and a framed picture.”

“How do you know what I saw?”

“Because I saw it, too. The first day I was here. I smelled lilies.”

“White lilies in a tall vase,” Effie continued, and a tear trickled down her cheek. “I thought it was odd, and sort of sweet, that you’d have flowers in there. Then I thought, for just a minute, well, how did he fix this room up so beautifully, why didn’t he mention it? And I stepped in and saw her on the bed. I’m sorry. I really need some air.”

Without a word, Remy scooped her off her feet.

“My hero,” she murmured as he carried her toward the stairs.

“You gave me a hell of a fright, *chère*. Declan, you get my girl some water.”

For a long moment, Declan stared into the room. Then he followed them down.

He fetched a glass of water, took it out to the gallery where Remy sat with Effie cradled in his lap.

“How do you feel about ghosts now?”

She took the water, sipped while she studied Declan over the rim. “I imagined it.”

“A white robe over the chaise. A silver brush set, some sort of gold and enamel pin.”

“Watch pin,” she said quietly. She let out a shuddering breath. “I can’t explain it.”

“Can you tell me about the woman?”

“Her face was all bruised and bloody. Oh, Remy.”

“Ssh now.” He stroked her hair, gathered her closer. “You don’t have to think about it. Let her be, Declan.”

“No, it’s all right.” Taking slow breaths, Effie laid her head on Remy’s shoulder. Her eyes met Declan’s and held. “It’s just so strange, so awful and strange. I think she was young, but it was hard to tell. Dark hair, a lot of dark, curling hair. Her clothes—nightgown—it was torn. There were terrible bruises on her neck—like . . . God, like she’d been strangled. I knew she was dead. I screamed and stumbled back. My legs just gave out from under me.”

“I need to find out who she was,” Declan declared. “There’s got to be a way to find out who she was. Family member, servant, guest. If a young woman died violently in there, there’s a record somewhere.”

“I can do some research.” Effie lowered the water and managed a smile. “That’s my job, after all.”

“If there was a murder, it seems we’d have heard stories over the years.” Remy shook his head. “I never have. Honey, I’m going to take you home.”

“I’m going to let you.” Effie reached out, touched Declan’s arm. “Come on with us. I don’t know if you should be staying here.”

“I’ve got to stay. I want to stay.”

Needed to stay, he thought when he was alone and the whooshing sound of his nail gun echoed through the dining room. He wasn’t just restoring the house, he was making it his own. If a murdered girl was part of it, then she was his, too.

He wanted to know her name, to know her story. Where had she come from? Why had she died? Maybe he’d been meant to come here, to find those things out.

If those images, those feelings, had driven others away, they were only locking him in.

He could live with ghosts, Declan thought as he ran his hand over the side of his first completed cabinet. But he wouldn’t rest until he knew them.

But when he finally called it a day and went to bed, he left the lights on.

*F*or the next few days, he was too busy to think about ghosts or sleepwalking, or even those nights out he’d promised himself. The electrician and plumber he’d hired were hard at work with their crews. The house was too full of noise and people for ghosts.

Frank and Frankie, who were as alike as their names, with beefy shoulders and mud-colored hair, trudged around his gardens, made mouth noises that may have been approval or disgust. Little Frankie seemed to be the brains of the operation, and after an hour’s survey gave Declan a bid for clearing out underbrush and weeds. Though he wondered if they intended to retire on the profit from the job, Declan trusted Remy and hired them.

They came armed with shovels, pickaxes and mile-long clippers. From the dining room where he worked on cabinets, Declan could hear the lazy rise and fall of their voices, the occasional thump and tumble.

When he glanced out, he noticed that the tangle was disappearing.

The plasterer Miss Odette sent him was a rail-thin black man whose name was Tibald, and his great-grandpappy, so Declan was told, once worked as a field hand for the Manets.

They toured the house with Tibald scribbling in a tiny, dog-eared notepad. When they reached the ballroom, Tibald looked up at the ceiling with a dreamy expression.

"I always think I've put a picture in my head that isn't there," he said. "Don't think I'd ever get used to seeing this kind of work."

"You've been in here before."

"Have. The Rudickers took a bid for me on plasterwork. They'd be the people you bought the Hall from. They had big, fine ideas, the Rudickers. But they never did much about them. Anyhow, they were going to hire someone from Savannah. So I heard."

"Why?"

Tibald just kept smiling at the ceiling. "They had those big, fine ideas, and didn't see how locals could put a polish on them. Seems to me they figured the more money they spent, the higher the gloss. If you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I get it. The way I look at it, you hire local, you're liable to get people who're more invested in the job. Can you repair and duplicate this kind of work?"

"I did the plasterwork in the Harvest House down on the River Road. I got pictures out in my truck, like a reference. You maybe want to take a look at them, maybe go on down to Harvest House and take a study. They give public tours and hold fancy events there now. Do some work in New Orleans, in Baton Rouge and Metairie. Can give you names."

"Let's take a look at the pictures."

One look at the before and after shots of various cornices, walls, medallions, showed Declan his man was an artist. For form, he asked for a bid, and after promising to have one written up by the end of the week, Tibald offered his hand.

"I admit, I'd love to get my hands on that ballroom." Tibald glanced back over at the house. "You doing any work on the third floor?"

"Eventually."

"Maybe you want to talk to my sister, Lucy. She cleans houses."

"I'm a long way from needing a housekeeper."

Tibald laughed, took out a pack of Big Red chewing gum. "No, sir, I don't mean that kind of clean." He offered Declan a stick before taking one himself, folding it in half, and sliding it into his mouth. "Spirit clean. You got some strong spirits in that place." He chewed contemplatively. "'Specially on the third floor."

"How do you know?"

"Feel it breathing on my neck. Can't you? When the Rudickers were working on the place, they lost two laborers. Those men just hightailed it out and kept on going. Never went back. Could be one of the reasons they looked farther afield for workers here."

Tibald shrugged, chewed his Big Red. "Could be the reason they never finished up those big, fine ideas."

"Do you know what happened on the third floor?"

"Nope. Don't know of anyone who does. Just know a few who wouldn't go up there, no matter what you paid them. Any plasterwork needs doing on the third floor, you give my sister, Lucy, a call first."

They both turned at the sound of a car coming down the drive. "That's Miss Lena's car, and Miss Odette with her." Tibald's grin spread as the ancient MG stopped beside his truck.

“Afternoon, ladies.” Tibald walked to the passenger’s side to open the door for Odette. “Where y’at?”

“Oh, fine and well, Tibald. How’s that family of yours?”

“Nothing to complain about.”

Lena climbed out as Declan opened the door. Her jeans were intriguingly snug, worn with a shirt the color of polished turquoise. “My grandmama thought it was time to pay a call.” She scanned the drive, noted the number of pickups. “What did you do, *cher*? Hire yourself an army?”

“Just a battalion.” She smelled of jasmine, he thought. She smelled of night. He had to concentrate on basic manners or swallow his gum. “Can I give you a tour?”

“Mmm. We’ll get to it. Tibald, you say hey to Mazie for me, won’t you?”

“I will. Gotta be on my way. I’ll get that bid to you, Mr. Fitzgerald.”

“Declan. I’ll be looking for it. Miss Odette.” Declan took her hand as Tibald climbed into his truck. She wore a cotton dress the color of ripe squash, and a dark green sweater against the mid-winter chill. Today’s socks matched it.

She smelled of lavender and jingled with her chains and bracelets. Everything about her relaxed him. “Welcome to Manet Hall. Such as it is.”

Odette winked at Lena when Declan kissed her hand. “We’ll take a look at it when we’ve finished out here. Heard you hired Big Frank and Little Frankie,” she said, nodding toward their pickup. “How’re they working out for you?”

“They seem to be doing the job. I don’t know how.” He studied the patchy front gardens with his thumbs hooked through his belt loops. “I can’t catch them actually doing anything, but I blink and a couple truckloads of underbrush

are gone. Would you like to walk around the grounds?"

"I would. Lena honey, get those spirit bottles out of the trunk. We'll hang them on these live oaks to start."

"Spirit bottles?"

"To keep the evil spirits away." Lena began lifting bottles half filled with water from her trunk.

"Should I be worried about evil spirits?" Declan asked.

"An ounce of prevention." And taking two, Odette moved off toward the trees.

"Spirit bottles," Declan reported, lifting one. He'd seen them hanging outside the shotgun house. "Just how do they work?"

"It's an old voodoo trick," Lena told him. "The clanking sound they make scares the evil spirits away."

Testing, he bumped two together. It sounded pleasant enough, he thought, and not particularly scary. "You believe in voodoo?"

"I believe in that ounce of prevention." She strolled off, small and curvy, to join her grandmother.

Voodoo or old glass bottles, he liked the way they looked hanging from his trees. And when he tapped two together again, he liked the sound they made.

It took nearly an hour to wind their way around the house and into it as there had to be conversations with the landscapers, inquiries about their family, speculation on the weather, discussion of the garden.

When he finally got them into the kitchen, Odette fisted her hands on her hips and nodded. "That's a good color, like a nicely baked pastry crust. Most men, they don't know anything but white. Brings out these good pine floors."

"I should have the cabinets ready to install next week." He gestured toward the dining room. "I'm using pine there, too. With glass fronts."

Lips pursed, Odette walked in, ran her hand over a cabinet. "This is nice work, Declan. You got a talent."

“Thanks.”

“And it makes you happy.”

“It sure does. Would you like to go into the parlor? I’ve got a table in there. We’ll have some tea.” He glanced up as something heavy hit the floor above. “Sorry about the noise.”

“Work’s rarely a quiet activity. Lena and I will just wander along, if you don’t mind. We’ll find the parlor.”

“You can’t miss it. It’s the only room with a table.”

“He’s a very nice young man,” Odette commented as she and Lena walked out of the dining room.

“He is.”

“Good-looking, too.”

“Very.”

“Got a hot eye for you, *chère*.”

Now Lena laughed. “He does.”

“What’re you going to do about it?”

“I’m still thinking. Lord, what a place.” Lena trailed her hands over a wall. “Doorways wide enough to drive a car through. It makes you cry to see how it’s been let go.”

“Let go? I don’t know. Seems to me it’s just been waiting. Isn’t this just like a man,” she said when they stepped into the parlor. “Living with one table and two chairs. Bet he hasn’t fixed a decent meal for himself since he got here.”

Lena cocked an eyebrow. “Grandmama, you’re not going to make me feel sorry enough for him to cook his dinner.” Amused, Lena wandered to the window. “It’s beautiful, what you see from here. Imagine what it would’ve been like to stand here when the house was in its glory. Horses coming through the *allée*, those funny old cars rumbling up the drive.”

“It’ll be beautiful again. But it needs a woman—just like that boy needs one.”

Lena toyed with the little key that hung around her

neck. "I said I'm still thinking. Chilly in here yet," she added. "Needs a fire going."

"I'll build one," Declan told her as he came in with a pitcher of over-steeped tea and plastic cups.

6

It was a good hour, Declan thought. And not counting Remy and Effie, his first real company.

He liked having them there, the female presence in his parlor with the fire he'd built crackling cheerfully and the late afternoon sun fighting through the dust on the windows.

"I'm going to come back," Odette told him, "to see your kitchen when it's finished."

"I hope you'll come back often. I'd be glad to show you the rest of the house."

"You go on and show Lena. Me, I'm going to walk on home."

"I'll take you home, Grandmama."

"No, you stay awhile." However casual her tone, there was a sly look in her eye. "I want to walk, then it'll be time for my nap." As she started to rise, Declan got up, offered his hand. And made her smile. "You got a pretty manner about you. You come back and see me when you're not busy. I'll make you some *sauce patate*—po-

tato stew—before you get so skinny your clothes fall off your bones.”

“I got the phones hooked up.” He dug in his pocket for a scrap of paper, found a pencil in his shirt pocket and wrote down the number. “If you need anything, just call.”

“Yes, indeed, a very pretty way.” She turned her cheek up, inviting his kiss. When he walked her to the door, she gestured for him to lean down again. “I approve of you sparking my Lena. You’ll have a care with her, and most don’t.”

“Is that your way of telling me I don’t have a chance with you, Miss Odette?”

She laughed and patted his cheek. “Oh. If I was thirty years younger, she’d have a run for her money. Go on now, and show her your house.”

He watched her walk by the trees with the spirit bottles dangling.

“You like my grandmama,” Lena said from the parlor doorway.

“I’m love-struck. She’s wonderful. Listen, it’s a long walk to her place. You ought to—”

“If she wants to walk, she walks. There’s no stopping her from doing anything.” She wandered to the front door to stand beside him. “Look there, it’s Rufus come to walk her home. I swear, that dog has radar when it comes to her.”

“I kept hoping he’d come around.” He turned to Lena. “Bring you with him. I started out two nights this week to go to your place, and talked myself out of it.”

“Why’s that?”

“There’s persistence, and there’s stalking.” He reached up to twirl her hair around his finger. “I figured if I could hold out until you came by here, you wouldn’t consider getting a restraining order.”

“If I want a man to go away, I tell him to go away.”

“Do men always do what you tell them?”

Her lips curved into that cat smile that made him want to lick at the little black mole. “Mostly. You going to show me this big house of yours, *cher*?”

“Yeah.” He caught her chin in his hand, kissed her. “Sure. By the way.” Now he took her hand as he led her toward the staircase. “I have Miss Odette’s permission to spark you.”

“Seems you need my permission, not hers.”

“I intend to charm you so completely, we’ll slip right by that step. Fabulous staircase, isn’t it?”

“It is.” She trailed a red-tipped finger along the banister. “Very grand, this place of yours, Declan. And from what I’ve seen of it, I realize you’re not a rich lawyer after all.”

“Ex-lawyer. And I don’t follow you.”

“You got enough to put this place back, to keep it—you do mean to keep it?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then you’re not rich. Step up from rich. You’re wealthy. Is that the case?”

“Well, money’s not a problem. It doesn’t buy happiness, either.”

She stopped on the landing and laughed. “Oh, *cher*, you think that, you just don’t know where to shop.”

“Anytime you want to help me spend some of it.”

“Maybe.” She looked down over the banister toward the grand foyer. “You’ll be needing furniture eventually. There’s some places I know.”

“You have a cousin?”

“One or two.” She lifted her eyebrows at the noise and cursing from the end of the long hall.

“Plumber,” Declan explained. “I had him start on the master bath. It was . . . well, it was an embarrassment of avocado. If you know anyone who wants some really ugly bathroom fixtures, let me know.”

He started to steer her away from the door of what he

now thought of as his ghost room. But she turned the knob, opened it. Declan found himself holding his breath as she stepped inside.

“Cold in here.” She hugged her arms, but couldn’t stop the shiver. “You ought to try to save the wallpaper. It’s a pretty pattern. Violets and rosebuds.”

She was halfway to the gallery doors when she stopped, and the shiver became a shudder. The feeling that poured into her was grief. “It’s a sad room, isn’t it? It needs light. And life.”

“There’s a ghost. A woman. I think she was killed here.”

“Do you?” She turned back to him. Her face was a little pale, her eyes a little wide. “It doesn’t feel . . . violent. Just sad. Empty and sad.”

Her voice had thickened. Without thinking, he went in, went to her. “Are you all right?”

“Just cold.”

He reached down to rub her arms, and at the contact, felt a quick shock.

With a half-laugh, she stepped back. “I don’t think that’s what Grandmama meant by you sparking me, *cher*.”

“It’s this room. There’s something strange in this room.”

“Ghosts don’t worry me. Shouldn’t worry you. They can’t hurt you.” But she walked to the door, had to fight a need to rush her steps.

She wandered through the other bedrooms, but experienced none of that grief, the dread, the dragging loneliness that had driven her out of the first.

At the door to Declan’s room, she smiled. “Well, not so rough in here. You got taste, *cher*.” She poked her head in the bathroom, where workmen clanged and cursed. “Which is more than I can say for whoever did this bath-

room. That you there, Tripadoe? Your mama know you eat with that mouth?"

She leaned on the doorjamb, spent a few minutes chatting with his plumbers. And Declan could stand back and just look at her.

It was pathetic, he told himself, this puppy-dog crush he'd developed.

And when she glanced at him over her shoulder, he felt the jolt right down to the soles of his feet.

"Why don't I show you the ballroom. It's going to be the showcase."

"Sure, I'd like to see that." But when they started out, she gestured toward the stairs. "What's up there?"

"More empty rooms. Storage, some of the servants' quarters."

"Let's have a look."

"It's nothing special." He made a grab for her hand, but she was already going up.

"Can you get to the belvedere from here?" she asked. "I used to look over at that and imagine standing up there."

"It's easier from the—don't!"

His sharp order had her hand freezing on the dull brass knob of the nursery. "What's wrong? You got a woman chained in here? All your secrets locked inside here, *cher*?"

"No, it's just . . ." He could feel the panic rising, burning the base of his throat. "There's something wrong with that room."

"Something wrong with most of them," she tossed back, and opened the door.

He was right. It hit her immediately, that same throbbing sense of grief and loss and loneliness. She saw walls and floor and windows, dust and neglect. And felt as if her heart were breaking.

Even as she started to speak, the cold swept in. She felt it blow over her skin like breath, pass through her hair like fingers.

“It’s the center,” she declared, though she was far from sure what she meant, or how she knew. “Can you feel it? Can you?”

He swayed in the doorway. Bearing down, he dug his fingers into the jamb. His fear was unreasonable, spearing like knives into bones. It was his house, he reminded himself grimly. His goddamn house. He took a step inside, then a second.

The room spun. He heard a scream, saw Lena’s face, the alarm that leaped over it. He thought he saw her mouth move, form his name. Then his vision grayed, white spots dancing through the mist.

“Declan. Here now, *cher*. Here, darling.”

Someone was stroking his hair, his face. He felt lips brush over his. He opened his eyes to a blur, so simply closed them again.

“No, you don’t.” She tapped his cheeks now with fingers that trembled lightly. He’d gone down like a tree under the ax, right after his face had drained of color and his eyes had rolled back white. “Open your eyes.”

“What the hell happened?”

“You fainted.”

His eyes opened now, focused on her face. Mortification warred with a vague nausea. “Excuse me, men don’t faint. We do, on occasion, pass out or lose consciousness. But we do not faint.”

The breath she let out was a shudder of relief. He may have cracked his head, she thought, but he’d come to with his wits about him. “I beg your pardon. You passed out. Cold. Hit the floor hard enough to bounce your head off it.” She leaned down again, brushed her lips over the raw scrape on his forehead. “You’re going to have a bruise,

bébé. I couldn't catch you. I guess if I had, you'd've taken us both down."

She had managed to roll him over, and now stroked her fingers over his pale cheeks. "You do a lot of passing out?"

"Usually I have to drink myself into oblivion first, which I haven't done since college. Look, at the risk of embarrassing myself twice in a matter of minutes, I really have to get the hell out of this room."

"Okay. All right. Can you stand? I don't think I can haul you up, *cher*. You're a pretty big guy."

"Yeah." He got to his knees, tried to catch his breath, but it was clogging again. It felt like a semi had parked on his chest, and his heart was tripping to try to find a beat. He staggered up, stumbled.

Lena wrapped an arm around his waist, took as much of his weight as she could manage. "One step, two steps. We'll just get you downstairs so you can lie down."

"It's okay. I'll be okay." His ears were ringing. The minute he got out of the room, he headed for the steps, then just sank down and put his head between his knees. "Jesus."

"There now, sweetheart." She stroked his hair.

"Close that door, would you? Just close it."

She hurried back, slammed it shut. "You get your breath back, then we'll get you down and into bed."

"I've been wanting to hear you say that since the first time I laid eyes on you."

The clutching in her belly eased a bit. "You're coming back, aren't you?"

"Better." He could breathe again, and the nausea was fading. "I'll just have to go beat someone up, or shoot some small mammal so I can regain my manhood."

"Let me see your face." She tipped his head back, studied him. "Still a little pale, but you got some color again."

I bet Grandmama's right. You don't eat. What'd you eat today, *cher*?"

"Wheaties. Breakfast of champions." He managed a wan smile. "Doesn't seem to have worked."

"I'm going to fix you a sandwich."

"Really?" The simple pleasure of the idea trickled through him. "You're going to cook for me?"

"A sandwich isn't cooking."

"In my world it is. Lena, that room . . ."

"We'll talk about that—after you get something in your stomach."

The pickings were sparse. One look in the secondhand refrigerator currently gracing the dining room had Lena sending Declan one long, pitying look. "How old are you? Twelve?"

"I'm a guy," he replied with a shrug. "Guys' grocery habits never age. I've got peanut butter to go with that jelly." He glanced around the room. "Somewhere."

He also had one lonely slice of deli ham, two eggs, some anemic-looking cheese and a half bag of pre-cut salad. "Looks like I'm going to cook for you after all. Where's the stove?"

"Right here." He tapped the top of a microwave.

"Well, we'll make do. Bowl? Knife? Fork?"

"Ah . . ." He rooted through the box of his current kitchen supplies and came up with the plastic ware.

"Honey, this is just sad. Sit yourself down, and Lena'll take care of you. This one time," she added.

He hitched onto a sawhorse and watched her beat some eggs, shred in the ham, the cheese, sprinkle in some of the contents of the salad bag.

"You got any herbs, *cher*? Any spices?"

"I got salt and pepper. That counts," he muttered when she sighed. "Explorers discovered whole continents for salt."

"Grew up with a cook, didn't you?"

“Yeah. So?”

“What did you do when you moved out on your own?”

“Takeout, delivery and the microwave. With those three things, no man need starve.”

She set the bowl in the microwave, programmed it, then turned back to him. “Living out here, you’d best hire yourself another cook.”

“Name your price.”

“You’re a funny man, Declan.” His color was good now, his eyes clear. The knot that had been in her belly since he’d pitched over loosened. “How come you don’t have a woman?”

“I had one, but it turned out I didn’t really want her.”

“That so?” She opened the oven when it beeped, whisked the egg mixture around, then programmed it again. “What happened?”

“Remy didn’t tell you?”

“He doesn’t tell me everything.”

“I was engaged. I called it off three weeks before the wedding, which makes me, you know, a cad. A lot of people in Boston are still cursing my name.”

He was trying to make it a joke, she thought, but wasn’t quite pulling it off. “Is that why you left?”

“No, it’s why I realized I could leave.”

“You didn’t love her.”

“No, I didn’t love her.”

“It makes you sad to say that.” She drew out the bowl, got a fresh plastic fork, then handed it to him. His eyes were stormy again, she noted. With regret. “She love you?”

“No. We looked good together. We were used to each other. She thought we wanted the same things.”

“But you didn’t.”

“We never did. And the closer it got to D Day, the more I saw my life just . . . narrowing down until I was squeezed into this tiny slot. No room, no air. No light. I

realized I felt the same way about marrying Jessica as I did about practicing corporate law, and if that was going to be the rest of my life, I could jump off a bridge or get out of the slot while I had the chance.”

She brushed the hair from his forehead. “It was braver to get out than to jump.”

“Maybe. This is good,” he said as he scooped up more egg. “Why don’t you have a man?”

She cocked her head. “Who says I don’t?”

He grabbed her hand before she could turn away. “I need to know if you do.”

She looked down at his hand, back to his face. “Why is that?”

“Because I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t get you out of my head, from under my skin. Because every time I see you, my heart kicks in my chest.”

“You’re good at that, too. At saying things that stir a woman up.” If it had just been that, just a matter of being stirred by him, she might have eased in between those long legs and satisfied them both. But this wasn’t a simple man, she thought.

Being with him wouldn’t be simple.

“Eat your eggs,” she told him, and slid her hand free of his. “Why are you starting with the kitchen if you eat peanut butter and don’t have a single dish to your name?”

“I’ve got dishes, just not the kind you wash. The kitchen’s the heart of a house. The house where I grew up—this big, old wonderful house with big, wonderful rooms. We had that cook, but it was the kitchen where we ended up if there was a crisis or a celebration, or just something to talk over. I guess I want that here.”

“That’s nice.” She leaned back on a cabinet to study him. “You want to have sex with me, *cher*?”

His pulse lurched, but he managed to hop nimbly off the sawhorse. “Sure. Just let me kick the plumber out.” He loved the way she laughed. “Oh, you didn’t mean

right this minute. That was, what, like a true or false type of question. Let me check.” He laid his fingers on his wrist. “Yeah, I’m still alive, so the answer is true.”

She shook her head, took the empty bowl from him and dumped it in the box he was using for trash. “You’re an interesting man, Declan. And I like you.”

“Uh-oh. Hold on a minute.” He glanced around, picked up the screwdriver lying on a plank. “Here you go,” he said as he handed it to her.

“What’s this for?”

“So you can plunge it into my heart when you tell me you just want to be friends.”

“I bet Jessica’s still kicking herself for letting you slip away. I do want to be friends.” She turned the screwdriver in her hand, then set it down again. “I don’t know yet if I just want to be friends. I have to think about it.”

“Okay.” He took her arms, ran his hands up to her shoulders. “Think about it.”

She didn’t try to pull away, but lifted her face so his lips could meet hers. She liked the easy glide from warmth to heat, the fluid ride offered by a man who took his time.

She understood desire. A man’s. Her own. And she knew some of those desires could be sated only in quick, hot couplings in the dark.

From time to time, she’d sated hers in just that fashion.

There was more here, and it came like a yearning. Yearnings, even met, could cause a pain desire never could.

Still, she couldn’t resist laying her hands on his face, letting the kiss spin out.

Inside her, deep inside her, something sighed.

“Angelina.”

He said her name, a whisper of sound, as he changed the angle of the kiss. As he deepened it. A thousand warnings jangled in her brain and were ignored. She gave her-

self over for one reckless moment, to the heat, to the need. To the yearning.

Then she drew back from all of it. "That's something to think about, all right."

She pressed a hand to his chest when he would have pulled her into him again. "Settle down, *cher*." She gave him a slow, sleepy smile. "You've got me worked up enough for one day."

"I was just getting started."

"I believe it." She let out a breath, pushed her hair back. "I've got to go. I'm working the bar tonight."

"I'll come in. Walk you home."

However calm his voice, his eyes had storms in them. The sort, she imagined, that would provide a hell of a thrill before they crashed over your head. "I don't think so."

"Lena. I want to be with you. I want to spend time with you."

"Want to spend time with me? You take me on a date."

"A date?"

"The kind where you pick me up at my door and take me out to a fancy dinner." She tapped a finger on his chest. "Take me dancing after, then walk me back to my door and kiss me good-night. Can you handle that?"

"What time do you want me to pick you up?"

She smiled, shook her head. "I'm working tonight. I got Monday night off. Place isn't so busy Monday nights. You pick me up at eight."

"Monday. Eight o'clock."

He grabbed her arms again, jerked her against him. There was no glide into heat this time, but a headlong dive into it.

Oh yeah, she thought, it would be quite a thrill before the crash.

"Just a reminder," he told her.

A warning, more like, she thought. He wasn't nearly as

tame as he pretended to be. "I won't forget. See you later, *cher*."

"Lena. We didn't talk about what happened upstairs."

"We will," she called back, and kept going.

She didn't breathe easy until she was out of the house. He wasn't going to be as simple to handle as she'd assumed. The good manners weren't a veneer, they went straight through him. But so did the heat, and the determination.

It was a package she admired, and respected.

Not that she couldn't handle him, she told herself as she got into her car. Handling men was one of her best skills.

But this man was a great deal more complicated than he seemed on the surface. And a great deal more intriguing than any she'd met before.

She knew what men saw when they looked at her. And she didn't mind it because there was more to her than what they saw. Or wanted to see.

She had a good brain, a strong back and a willingness to use both to get what she wanted. She ran her life the same way she ran her bar. With an appreciation for color and a foundation of order beneath the chaos.

She glanced in her rearview mirror at Manet Hall as she drove away. It worried her that Declan Fitzgerald could shake that foundation the way no one had before.

It worried her that she might not find it so easy to shore up the cracks when he walked away.

They always walked away. Unless you walked first.

He fell asleep thinking of Lena, and drifted into dreams of her. Strong, full-bodied dreams where she lay beneath him, moved under him with hard, quick jerks of her hips. Damp skin, like liquid gold. Dark chocolate eyes, and red, wet lips.

He could hear the sound of her breath, the catch and release, little gulps of pleasure. He smelled her, that siren's dance of jasmine that made him think of harems and forbidden shadows.

He dropped deeper into sleep, aching for her.

And saw her hurrying along a corridor, her arms full of linens. Her hair, all that gorgeous hair, was ruthlessly pinned back, and that tempting body covered from neck to ankle in a baggy dress covered with tiny, faded flowers.

Her lips were unpainted and pressed tightly together. And in the dream, he could hear her thoughts as if they were his own.

She had to hurry, to get the linens put away. Madame Manet was already up and about, and she didn't care to see any of the undermaids scurrying in the hallways. If she wasn't quick, she could be noticed.

She didn't want Madame to notice her. Servants stayed employed longer when they were invisible. That's what Mademoiselle LaRue, the housekeeper, said, and she was never wrong.

She needed the work. Her family needed the money she could bring in, and oh, but she loved working in the Hall. It was the most beautiful house she'd ever seen. She was so happy and proud to have some part of tending to it.

How many times had she stared at it from the shadows of the bayou? Admiring it, longing for a chance to peek in the windows at all the beauty inside.

And now she *was* inside, responsible in some small way for the tending of that beauty.

She loved to polish the wood, to sweep the floors. To see the way the glass sparkled after she'd scrubbed it.

In his dream, she came out of the corridor through one of the hidden doors on the second level. Her eyes tracked everywhere as she hurried along—the wallpaper, the

rugs, the wood and glass. She slipped into a dressing room, put the linens away in a cupboard.

But as she turned back toward the door, something caught her attention, and she tiptoed to the window.

He saw, as she saw, the riders approaching through the grand oaks of the *allée*. He felt, as she felt, a stumble of heart as her gaze locked on the man who rode a glossy chestnut. His hair was gold, and streamed as he galloped. Straight as a soldier in the saddle, with a gray coat over his broad shoulders and his black boots shining.

Her hand went to her throat, and she thought, quite clearly, *Here is the prince come home to his castle*.

She sighed, as girls sigh when they fall foolishly in love. He smiled, as if smiling at her, but she knew it was the house that caused that joy to fill his handsome face.

With her heart pounding, she hurried out of the room, back to the servants' door and into the maze.

The young master was home, she thought. And wondered what would happen next.

Declan woke with a jolt, in the dark, in the cold. He smelled damp and dust and felt the hard wood of the floor under him.

"What the hell?" Groggy, disgusted, he stretched out a hand and hit wall. Using it for reference, he got to his feet. He felt along, waiting to come to a corner, to a door. It took a moment to register that the wall wasn't papered.

He wasn't in his ghost room this time. He was in one of the servants' passageways, as the girl in his dream had been.

Somehow, he thought, he'd walked as she had walked.

The idea of stumbling around in the dark until he found a way out had little appeal, but slightly more than the idea of spending the next few hours in there, waiting for dawn.

He inched along. By the time he felt the seam of a door, he was drenched in sweat.

He shoved his way out, offered up a prayer of thanksgiving when he gulped in fresher air, saw in the faint light the shape of the second-level corridor.

There were cobwebs in his hair; his hands and feet were filthy.

If this kept up, he told himself, he was going to see a doctor and get some sleeping pills. Hoping the night's adventures were over, he went to wash, to chug down water for his burning throat. And to lock himself in the bedroom.

Declan took the load of books out of Effie's arms, then kissed her cheek. "You didn't have to come all this way to bring me these. I'd've come to you."

"I didn't mind. I had a meeting cancel, and some time to spare. And the fact is . . ." Breathing slowly, she turned a circle. "I had to prove to myself I wouldn't just turn tail and run when I started to come in this place."

"Doing okay?"

"Yeah." She let out one of those slow breaths, then nodded briskly. "Doing just fine." Then she frowned at the shadows dogging his eyes. "Now, you, on the other hand, look worn out."

"Not sleeping so well." But he didn't want to talk about the dreams, the sleepwalking. The sounds that so often wakened him in the dead of night. "Come on back to the kitchen so I can show off. I've got some lemonade—not from actual lemons, but it's wet and it's cold."

"All right." She touched his arm in a kind of silent acknowledgment and, because she understood, lightened

her tone. "I've only got about half an hour, but I've got some information for you. Information and speculation. What's going on in here?"

She glanced into the front parlor. There were papers stacked on the floor, books spread open, a pile of paint and fabric samples.

"My next project. I thought I'd start on a room where people could actually sit down when it was finished. What kind of information?"

"On the Manets. Facts were easy enough," she said as they continued through the house. "Henri Manet married Josephine Delacroix. They both came from wealthy and prominent Creole families. Henri was active politically. It's rumored his father profited handsomely by running supplies during the War Between the States. The family became staunch Republicans during Reconstruction, and again it's rumored they used their power and influence to buy votes and politicians. Oh my goodness, Dec, just look at this!"

She stepped into the kitchen and beamed at the base cabinets he'd installed. "Why, they're beautiful."

He hooked his thumbs in his back pockets, and his grin was crooked. "You sound surprised."

"Well, I am, but in a very complimentary sort of way. Remy can barely hammer a nail in the wall to hang a picture." She ran her hand over the wood, opened and closed a door. "These are really fine. You must be so proud."

"I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself. Counter guys just left. I'm going with solid surface. It'll look like slate. Ordered this giant Sub-Zero refrigerator—for reasons I've yet to explain to myself—and a range, a dishwasher. I'm going to make panels so all you'll see is wood."

He set the books down on a sheet of plywood he had over the top of the base cabinets. "Want that lemonade?"

"That'd be nice." She wandered into the dining room

behind him. He had two of the top cupboards finished, and a third started. "My, aren't they going to be pretty. You must be working night and day."

Losing weight, she thought. Getting a gaunt look in your face.

"Better than sleepwalking." He was jittery, and found himself dipping hands into his pockets again to keep them still. "Tell me more, Effie."

"All right." She suppressed the urge to fuss over him and went back to the facts. "The original owners had lost most of their money during the war. They hung on, selling off parcels of land, or renting it out to sharecroppers. Their politics and the Manets' were in opposition. There was a fire, burned the house down to the ground. Wiped them out. The Manets bought the land, and had this place built. They had two sons, twins. Lucian and Julian. Both went to Tulane, where Lucian did very well and Julian majored, you could say, in drinking and gambling. Lucian was the heir, and was meant to run the family businesses. Most of the Manet money had dwindled, but Josephine had a considerable inheritance. Both sons died before their twenty-third birthday."

Declan handed her a glass. "How?"

"Here we have rumors and speculation." She sipped. "The strongest speculation is they killed each other. No one seems to know why, family argument gone violent. It's said Lucian went into New Orleans, on his mother's orders, to fetch his brother back out of one of the brothels he frequented. Julian didn't want to be fetched, they argued, and one of them—odds are on Julian here—pulled a knife. They fought, struggled for the knife, were both wounded. Julian died on the spot. Lucian lingered about another week, then somehow got out of bed, wandered outside, and fell into the pond, where he drowned."

The pond, he thought, choked with lily pads, steaming

with mists at dawn. "That had to be rough on the parents."

"The father's heart gave out a few years later. Josephine lived several years more, but had a reversal of financial fortune. She had the house, some land, but had all but run out of money. Again, speculation is Julian had gambled a large part of it away, and it was never fully recouped."

"Remy said there was a granddaughter. Lucian's or Julian's?"

"There's speculation there, too. Though the records show that Lucian married an Abigail Rouse in 1898, and that a daughter was born the next year, there's no record of Abigail's death. After Lucian was killed, the Manets declaimed the child, legally. Had her written out of the will. She was, apparently, raised by the Rouses. I can't find anything on Abigail Rouse beyond the legal records of her birth and her marriage."

"Maybe they kicked her out when Lucian died."

"Maybe. I talked to Remy about it." She wandered toward the windows, stared out at the messy gardens. "He's a little vague, but seems to recall hearing stories about how she ran off with another man."

She turned back. "Stories from the Rouse side differ sharply. They lean toward foul play. You'd get a fuller picture of her, and what might've happened, if you talk to someone from the Rouse or Simone families."

"A clear picture about a girl who ran off or died a hundred years ago."

"Honey, this is the South. A hundred years ago was yesterday. She was seventeen when she married Lucian. She was from the bayou. His family could not have approved of such a match. I doubt her life in this house was rosy. Running off might've been just what she did. On the other hand . . . I saw something, someone, in that room upstairs. I don't believe in that sort of thing. Didn't."

Effie fought back a shiver. "I don't know what I think about it now, but I sure would like to find out."

"I'll ask Miss Odette. And Lena. I've got a date with her Monday."

"Is that so?" The idea brightened her mood. "Looks like we'll have more rumor and speculation." She handed him back the glass. "I have to get on. I'm sending Remy out here tomorrow to give you a hand and keep him out of my hair. I've got a fitting for my wedding gown and other bridal things to take care of."

"I'll keep him busy."

"Why don't you come back into town with him?" she said as she headed out. She wanted to lock her arm around his and tug him through the door and away. "We'll have some dinner, go out to the movies."

"Stop worrying about me."

"I can't help it. I think about you way out here, alone in this house, with that room up there." She glanced uneasily up the staircase. "It gives me the shivers."

"Ghosts never hurt anybody." He kissed her forehead. "They're dead."

*B*ut in the night, with the sound of the wind and rain, and the bang of spirit bottles, they didn't seem dead.

*H*e gave himself Sunday. He slept late, woke to a sky fighting to clear, and spent another hour in bed with the books Effie had brought him.

She'd marked pages she felt would have the most interest for him. He scanned and studied old photographs of the great plantation houses. And felt a thrill race through him as he looked at the old black-and-white picture of Manet Hall in its turn-of-the-century splendor.

Formal photographs of Henri and Josephine Manet

didn't bring the same thrill. With those there was curiosity. The woman had been undeniably beautiful, very much in the style of her day with the deep square bodice of her ball gown edged with roses, and the high, feathered comb adorning her upswept hair.

The gown, tucked into an impossibly small waist, gave her a delicacy accented by the sweep of the brocade skirts, the generously poofed sleeves that met the long white gloves.

But there was a coldness to her face, one Declan didn't think was a result of the rigidity of the pose or the quality of the print. It overwhelmed that delicacy of build and made her formidable.

But it was the photograph of Lucian Manet that stopped him in his tracks.

He'd seen that face, in his dream. The handsome young man with streaming gold hair, riding a chestnut horse at a gallop through the moss-laced oaks.

The power of suggestion? Had he simply expected the face in the dream to be real, and was he projecting it now onto the doomed Lucian?

Either way, it gave him the creeps.

He decided he'd drive into New Orleans and treat himself to a few hours' haunting the antique shops.

Instead, less than an hour later, he found himself walking into Et Trois.

It did a strong Sunday-afternoon business, he noted. A mix of tourists and locals. He was pleased he was learning to distinguish one from the other. The jukebox carried the music now, a jumpy number by BeauSoleil that do-si-doed around the chatter from tables and bar.

The scent of food, deeply fried, reminded his stomach he'd skipped breakfast. Recognizing the blond tending bar from his second visit, Declan walked up, tried a smile on her. "Hi. Lena around?"

“Back in the office. Door to the right of the stage.”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime, cutie.”

He gave the door marked PRIVATE a quick knock, then poked his head in. She was sitting at a desk, working at a computer. Her hair was clipped back and made him want to nibble his way up the nape of her neck.

“Hi. Where y’at?”

She sat back, gave a lazy stretch of her shoulders. “You’re learning. What’re you doing at my door, *cher*?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d see if you’d let me buy you lunch. Like a prelude to tomorrow night.”

She’d been thinking about him, more than was comfortable. Now here he was, all tall and rangy and male. “I’m doing my books.”

“And I’ve interrupted you. Don’t you hate that?” He came in anyway, sat on the edge of the desk. “Bought you a present.”

It was then that she noticed the little gift bag he carried. “I don’t see how you could’ve fit a new car in there.”

“We’re working up to the car.”

She kept her eyes on his a moment longer as she took the bag from him. Then she dipped in for the box. It was wrapped in gold paper, with a formal white bow. She took her time with it; she’d always believed the anticipation was as important as the gift.

The bow and ribbon she tucked neatly back into the bag, and after she’d picked at the top, slid the box out, folded the paper precisely.

“How long does it take you to open your presents Christmas morning?” he asked.

“I like taking my time.” She opened the box, felt her lips twitch, but kept her expression sober as she took out the grinning crawfish salt and pepper shakers. “Well now, aren’t they a handsome pair?”

"I thought so. They had alligators, too, but these guys seemed friendlier."

"Are these part of your charm campaign, *cher*?"

"You bet. How'd they work?"

"Not bad." She traced a finger over one of the ugly grins. "Not bad at all."

"Good. Since I've interrupted you, and charmed you, why don't you let me feed you? Pay you back for the eggs."

She eased back in her chair, swiveled it as she considered. "Why do I get the feeling, every time I see you, I should start walking fast in the opposite direction?"

"Search me. Anyway, my legs are longer, so I'd just catch up with you." He leaned over the desk, lifted his brows. She was wearing a skirt, a short one. His legs might've been longer, but they wouldn't look half as good in sheer stockings. "But you could eat up some ground with those. How come you're dressed up?"

"I'm not dressed up. Church clothes. I've been to Mass." Now she smiled. "Name like yours, I figure you for a Catholic boy."

"Guilty."

"You been to Mass today, Declan?"

He could never explain why a question like that made him want to squirm. "I'm about half-lapsed."

"Oh." She pursed her lips. "My grandmama's going to be disappointed in you."

"I was an altar boy for three years. That ought to count."

"What's your confirmation name?"

"I'll tell you if you come to lunch." He reached over for the crawfish, made them dance over her desk. "Come on, Lena, come out and play with me. It's turned into a nice day."

"All right." Mistake, her practical mind said, but she

got to her feet, picked up her purse. “You can buy me lunch. But a quick one.” She leaned over, saved her file, and closed down her computer.

“It’s Michael,” he said, holding out a hand. “Declan Sullivan Michael Fitzgerald. If I was any more Irish, I’d bleed green.”

“It’s Louisa. Angelina Marie Louisa Simone.”

“Very French.”

“*Bien sûr*. And I want Italian.” She put her hand in his. “Buy me some pasta.”

From his previous visits Declan knew you had to work very hard to find a bad meal in New Orleans. When Lena led the way to a small, unpretentious restaurant, he didn’t worry. All he had to do was take one sniff of the air to know they were going to eat very well.

She waved a hand at someone, pointed to an empty table, and apparently got the go-ahead.

“This isn’t a date,” she said to him when he held her chair.

He did his best to look absolutely innocent, and nearly succeeded. “It’s not?”

“No.” She eased back, crossed her legs. “A date is when we have a time arranged and you pick me up at my house. This is a drop-on-by. So tomorrow, that’s our first date. Just in case you’re thinking of that three-date rule.”

“We guys don’t like to think you women know about that.”

Her lips curved. “There’s a lot y’all don’t like to think we know about.” She kept her eyes on his, but lifted up a hand to the dark-haired man who stopped at the table. “Hey there, Marco.”

“Lena.” He kissed her fingers, then handed her a menu. “Good to see you.”

“This is Remy’s college friend from Boston. Declan. I brought him by so he can see how we do Italian food here in the Vieux Carre.”

“You won’t do better.” He shook Declan’s hand, gave him a menu. “My mama’s in the kitchen today.”

“Then we’re in for a treat,” Lena said. “How’s your family, Marco?”

Declan saw how it happened then. When she shifted in her chair, lifted her face, looked at Marco, it was as if the two of them were alone on a little island of intimacy. It was sexual, there was no question about it, but it was also . . . attentive, he decided.

“Good as gold. My Sophie won a spelling bee on Friday.”

“That’s some bright child you got.”

They chatted for a few moments, but Declan entertained himself by watching her face. The way her eyebrows lifted, fell, drew together according to the sentiment. How her lips moved, punctuated by that tiny mole.

When she turned her head, he shook his. “Sorry, did you say something to me? I was looking at you. I get lost.”

“They got some smooth talkers up North,” Marco said.

“Pretty, too, isn’t he?” Lena asked.

“Very nice. Our Lena here’s having the seafood linguini. You know what you want, or you need some time to decide?”

“You don’t get the same.” Lena tapped a finger on the menu Declan had yet to read. “Else it’s no fun for me picking off your plate. You try the stuffed shells, maybe. Mama makes them good.”

“Stuffed shells, then.” He had a feeling he’d have tried crushed cardboard if she’d requested it. “Do you want wine?”

“No, because you’re driving and I’m working.”

“Strict. San Pellegrino?” He glanced at Marco.

“I’ll bring you out a bottle.”

“So . . .” She tucked her hair behind her ear as Marco left them. “What’re you up to today, *cher*?”

“I thought I’d hit some of the antique stores. I’m looking for a display cabinet for the kitchen, and stuff to stick in it. I thought I might go by and see Miss Odette on the way back. What does she like? I want to take her something.”

“You don’t have to take her anything.”

“I’d like to.”

Lena hooked an arm over the back of her chair, drummed her fingers on the table as she studied him. “You get her a bottle of wine, then. A good red. Tell me something, *cher*, you wouldn’t be using my grandmama to get to me, would you?”

She saw the temper flash into his eyes—darker, hotter than she’d expected from him. Should’ve known, she thought, that all that easy manner covered something sharp, something jagged. It was impressive, but more impressive was the lightning snap from mild to fury, and back to mild again.

A man who could rein himself in like that, she decided, had a will of iron. That was something else to consider.

“You’ve got it backwards,” he told her. “I’m using you to get to Miss Odette. She’s the girl of my dreams.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Good, you should be.”

Lena waited until their water and bread were served. His tone had raised her hackles. Mostly, she could admit, because she’d deserved the quick slap. Folding her arms on the table, she leaned toward him.

“I am sorry, because that was nasty. I’m going to tell you something, Declan, nasty words have a habit of popping right out of my mouth. I don’t always regret saying them. I’m not a sweet-mannered, even-tempered sort of

woman. I don't have a trusting nature. I've got good points, but I've got just as many bad. I like it that way."

He mimicked her posture. "I'm single-minded, competitive and moody. I've got a mean temper. It takes a lot to get it going, which is a fortunate thing for the general population. I don't have to have my way in the little things, but when I decide I want something, really want it, I find a way to get it. I want you. So I'll have you."

She'd been wrong. He hadn't snapped back to mild. Anger was still simmering behind his eyes. As the one person she tried to be honest with at all times was herself, she didn't bother to pretend it didn't excite her.

"You're saying that to make me mad."

"No, that's just a side benefit." He eased back, picked up the basket of bread and offered it. "You want to fight?"

Feeling sulky, she picked out a piece. "Maybe later. Getting riled up spoils my appetite. Anyway." She shrugged, bit into the bread. "You don't want to go by Grandmama's today. She's over visiting her sister this afternoon."

"I'll stop in later this week. I got the kitchen counters installed. Remy gave me a hand, so to speak, with the wall units yesterday. It should be finished in a couple of weeks."

"Good for you." She wanted to brood, and could see by his amused expression that he knew it. "You been back up on the third floor?"

"Yeah." He'd had to prime himself with a good shot of Jim Beam first, but he'd gone back. "Didn't fall on my face this time, but I had a major panic attack. I'm not prone to panic attacks. I found out more about the Manet family history, but there are pieces missing. Maybe you've got them."

"You want to know about Abigail Rouse?"

"That's right. How much do—" He broke off because she'd turned her attention away from him and back to

Marco, who brought out their pasta. He reminded himself as they fell into a lazy discussion about the food, that the wheel turned more slowly in the South.

“How much do you know about her?” he asked when they were alone again.

Lena rolled up a forkful of pasta, slid it between her lips. She sighed deep, swallowed. “Mama Realdo. She’s a goddess in the kitchen. Try yours,” she ordered, and leaned over to sample from his plate.

“It’s great. Best meal I’ve had since a microwave omelette.”

She smiled at him, one long, slow smile that lodged in his belly. Then went back to eating. “I know the stories that came down in my family. Nobody can say for sure. Abigail, she was a maid in the big house. Some of the rich families, they hired Cajun girls to clean for them, to fetch and carry. Story is that Lucian Manet came home from Tulane and fell in love with her. They ran off and got married. Had to run off, because nobody’s going to approve of this. His family, hers.”

She broke off a chunk of bread, nibbled on it as she studied him. “Mixing classes is an uneasy business. He moved her into the Hall after, and that was an uneasy business, too. People say Josephine Manet was a hard woman, proud and cold. People started counting on their fingers, but the baby, she don’t come for ten months.”

“That room upstairs. It must’ve been the nursery. They’d have kept the baby there.”

“Most like. There was a nursemaid. She married one of Abigail’s brothers later. Most of the stories about the Hall come from her. It seems a couple days before the end of the year, Lucian was off in New Orleans on business. When he came back, Abigail was gone. They said she’d run off with some bayou boy she’d been seeing on the side. But that doesn’t ring true. The nursemaid, her name was . . . Claudine, she said Abigail never would’ve left

Lucian and the baby. She said something bad had to have happened, something terrible, and she blamed herself because she was off meeting her young man down by the river the night Abigail disappeared.”

A dead girl on the tester bed in a cold room, Declan thought, and the pasta lodged in his throat like glue. He picked up the fizzy water, drank deep. “Did they look for her?”

“Her family looked everywhere. It’s said Lucian haunted the bayou until the day he died. When he wasn’t looking there, he was in town trying to find a trace of her. He never did, and didn’t live long himself. With him gone, and the twin his mother favored by all accounts, dead as well, Miss Josephine had the baby taken to Abigail’s parents. You’ve gone pale, Declan.”

“I feel pale. Go on.”

This time, when she broke off a hunk of bread, she buttered it, handed it to him. Her grandmama was right, Lena thought, the man needed to eat.

“The baby was my grandmama’s grandmama. The Manets cast her out, claiming she was a bastard and no blood of theirs. They brought her to the Rouses with the dress she had on, a small bag of crib toys. Only thing she had from the Hall was the watch pin Claudine gave to her, which had been Abigail’s.”

Declan’s hand shot out to cover hers. “Is the pin still around?”

“We hand such things down, daughter to daughter. My grandmama gave it to me on my sixteenth birthday. Why?”

“Enameled watch, hanging from small, gold wings.”

Color stained her cheeks. “How do you know?”

“I saw it.” The chill danced up his spine. “Sitting on the dresser in the bedroom that must have been hers. An empty room,” he continued, “with phantom furniture. The room where Effie saw a dead girl laid out on the bed. They killed her, didn’t they?”

Something in the way he said it, so flat, so cold, had her stomach dropping. "That's what people think. People in my family."

"In the nursery."

"I don't know. You're spooking me some, Declan."

"You?" He passed a hand over his face. "Well, I guess I know who my ghost is. Poor Abigail, wandering the Hall and waiting for Lucian to come home."

"But if she did die in the Hall, who killed her?"

"Maybe that's what I'm supposed to find out, so she can . . . you know. Rest."

He wasn't pale now, Lena thought. His face had toughened, hardened. That core of determination again. "Why should it be you?"

"Why not? It had to be one of the Manets. The mother, the father, the brother. Then they buried her somewhere and claimed she ran away. I need to find out more about her."

"I imagine you will. You've got a mulish look about you, *cher*. Don't know why that should be so appealing to me. Talk to my grandmama. She might know more, or she'll know who does."

She nudged her empty plate back. "Now you buy us some cappuccino."

"Want dessert?"

"No room for that." She opened her purse, pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"I get one pack a month." She tapped one out, ran her fingers up and down its length.

"One a month? What's the point?"

She put the cigarette between her lips, flicked the flame on a slim silver lighter. As she had with the first bite of pasta, she sighed over that first deep drag. "Pleasure, *cher*. There are twenty cigarettes in a pack, thirty or thirty-one days to a month. 'Cept for February. I dearly

love the month of February. Now, I can smoke up the whole pack in a day, and just about lose my mind for the rest of the month. Or I can dole them out, slow and careful, and make them last. Because there's no buying another pack before the first of the month."

"How many do you bum from other people during the month?"

Her eyes glittered through the haze of smoke. "That would be cheating. I don't cheat. Pleasure's nothing, sugar, unless you got the willpower to hold off until you really appreciate it."

She trailed a fingertip over the back of his hand, and for the hell of it, rubbed the side of her foot against his leg under the table. "How are you on willpower?" she asked.

"We're going to find out."

It was dusk when he got back to the house. The back of his four-wheel was loaded with treasures he'd hunted up in antique shops. But the best was the kitchen cabinet he'd found, and had begged and bribed to have delivered the next day.

He carried what he could on the first trip and, when he stepped inside, set everything down in the foyer. He closed the door behind him, then stood very still.

"Abigail." He said the name, listened to it echo through the house. And waited.

But he felt no rush of cold air, no sudden shift in the silence.

And standing at the base of the grand staircase, he couldn't explain how he knew he wasn't alone.

8

He woke to a crashing thunderstorm, but at least he woke in his own bed. Lightning slashed outside the windows and burst a nova of light through the room.

A glance at the bedside clock showed him a minute to midnight. But that had to be wrong, Declan thought. He hadn't gone to bed until after one. Wondering if the storm had knocked out his power, he turned the switch on the bedside lamp.

Light speared out, half blinding him.

"Damn it." He rubbed his shocked eyes, then grabbed the bottle of water he'd set on the table next to the bed. And rising, went out on the gallery to watch the show.

It was worth the price of a ticket, he decided. Lashing rain, pitchfork lightning, and a wind that was whipping through the trees in moans and howls. He could hear the excited clanging of the spirit bottles and the fierce jungle war of thunder.

And the baby crying.

The water bottle slid out of his fingers, bounced at his feet and soaked them.

He wasn't dreaming, he told himself, and reached out to grip the wet baluster. He wasn't sleepwalking. He was awake, fully aware of his surroundings. And he heard the baby crying.

He had to order himself to move, but he walked back into the bedroom, dragged on sweats, checked his flashlight. Barefoot, shirtless, he left the security of his room and started toward the third floor.

He waited for the panic to come—that clutching in the belly, the sudden shortness of breath, the pounding of his heart.

But it didn't come this time. The steps were just steps now, the door just a door with a brass knob that needed polishing.

And the baby wasn't crying any longer.

"Come this far," he grumbled.

His palms were sweaty, but it was nerves instead of fear. He reached out, turned the knob. The door opened with a whine of hinges.

There was a low fire in the hearth. Its light, and the light of candles, danced in pretty patterns over walls of pale, pale peach. At the windows were deep blue drapes with lacy under-curtains. The floor was polished like a mirror with two area rugs in a pattern of peaches and blues.

There was a crib with turned rails, a small iron cot made up with white linen.

She sat in a rocking chair, a baby at her breast. He could see the baby's hand on it, white against gold. Her hair was down, spilling over her shoulders, over the arms of the rocker.

Her lips moved, in song or story he didn't know. He couldn't hear. But she stared down at the child as she nursed, and her face was lit with love.

“You never left her,” Declan said quietly. “You couldn’t have.”

She looked up, toward the doorway where he stood so that for one heart-stopping second, he thought she’d heard him. Would speak to him. When she smiled, when she held out a hand, he took a step toward her.

Then his knees went loose as he saw the man cross the room—pass through him like air—and walk to her.

His hair was golden blond. He was tall and slim of build. He wore some sort of robe in a deep burgundy. When he knelt by the rocker, he stroked a fingertip over the baby’s cheek, then over the tiny fingers that kneaded at the woman’s breast.

The woman, Abigail, lifted her hand, pressed it over his. And there, surrounded by that soft light, the three of them linked while the baby’s milky mouth suckled and the woman gently rocked.

“No. You never left them. I’ll find out what they did to you. To all of you.”

As he spoke, the door slammed shut behind him. He jolted, spun and found himself plunged back into the dark, with only the lightning blasts and the beam of his flashlight. The weight fell into his chest like a rock, cutting off his air. The room was empty, freezing, and the panic leaped at his throat.

He dragged at the doorknob, his sweat-slicked hands sliding off the icy brass. He could feel his choked gasps wanting to rise into shouts and screams, pleas and prayers. Dizziness drove him down to his knees, where he fumbled frantically with the knob, wrenched and tugged at the door.

When he managed to pull it open, he crawled out on his hands and knees, then lay facedown on the floor with his heart thundering in his chest as the storm thundered over the house.

“Okay, I’m okay. I’m okay, goddamn it, and I’m getting up off the floor and going back to bed.”

He might be losing sleep, Declan thought as he got shakily to his feet, but he’d learned a couple of things.

If what he’d seen inside the nursery was truth and not some self-generated fantasy, Abigail Rouse Manet hadn’t left Manet Hall of her own free will.

And he had more than one ghost on his hands.

She was probably making a mistake, Lena thought as she slicked a little black dress down her body. She’d already made several small mistakes where Declan Fitzgerald was concerned. It irritated her, as she rarely made mistakes when it came to men.

If there was one thing she’d learned from her mother, it was how to handle the male species. It was a reverse tute-lage. She made a habit of doing exactly the opposite of what Lilibeth did and had done when it came to relationships.

The process had kept Lena heart-whole for nearly thirty years. She had no desire, and no intention, of putting herself into a man’s hands. Metaphorically speaking, she thought with a smirk as she painted her lips.

She liked being in the right man’s hands well enough, when she was in the mood to be handled.

A woman who didn’t enjoy sex, in her opinion, just didn’t know how to pick her partners cannily enough. A smart woman culled out men who were willing and able to be shown how that woman wanted to be pleased. And a woman pleased tended to give a man a good, strong ride.

Everybody ended up winning.

The problem was, Declan had the talent for putting her in the mood for sex all the damn time. She was *not* in the habit of being guided by her hormones.

The wisest, safest thing for a woman to do about sex was to be in control of it. To decide the when, the where, the who and how. Men, well, they were just randy by nature. She couldn't blame them for it.

And women who claimed not to try to stir men up were either cold-blooded or liars.

If she'd believed she and Declan were headed toward a simple affair that began and ended with a mutual buzz, she wouldn't have been concerned. But there was more to him than that. Too many layers to him, she thought, and she couldn't seem to get through them all and figure him out.

More, and much more worrying, there was another layer to her reaction to him besides simple lust. That, too, was complicated and mysterious.

She liked the look of him, and the Yankee bedrock sound of his voice. And then he'd gone and hit her soft spot with his obvious affection for her grandmama.

Got her blood heated up, too, she admitted. The man had a very skilled pair of lips.

And when he wasn't paying attention, a wounded look in his eyes. She was a sucker for hurting hearts.

Best to take it slow. She arched her neck and ran the crystal wand of her perfume bottle over her skin. Slow and easy. No point in getting to the end of the road unless you'd enjoyed the journey.

She trailed the wand over the tops of her breasts and imagined his fingers there. His mouth.

It had been a long time since she'd wanted a man quite this . . . clearly, she realized. And since it was too late for a quick, anonymous roll in the sheets, it would be wise to get to know him a little better before she let him think he'd talked her into bed.

"Right on time, aren't you, *cher*?" she commented aloud at the knock on her door. She gave her reflection a last check, blew herself a kiss, and walked to the front door.

He looked good in a suit. Very classy and *GQ*, she decided. She reached out, ran the stone-gray lapel between her thumb and fingers. "Mmm. Don't you clean up nice, *cher*."

"Sorry, all the blood just drained out of my head so the best I can come up with is, wow."

She sent him that sassy, under-the-lashes look and turned a slow circle on stiletto heels. "This work okay for you, then?"

The dress clung, dipped and shimmied. His glands were doing a joyful jig. "Oh yeah. It's working just fine."

She crooked her finger. "Come here a minute."

She stepped back, then slid a hand through his arm and turned toward an old silver-framed mirror. "Don't we look fine?" she said, and her reflection laughed at his. "Where you taking me, *cher*?"

"Let's find out." He picked up a wide, red silk scarf, draped it over her shoulders. "Are you going to be warm enough?"

"If I'm not, then this dress isn't working after all." With this she strode out on her little gallery. She started to hold out a hand for his, then just stared down at the white stretch limo at the curb.

She was rarely speechless, but it took her a good ten seconds to find her voice, and her wits. "You buy yourself a new car, darling?"

"It's a rental. This way, I figure we can both have all the champagne we want."

As first dates went, she thought as he led her down, this one had potential. It only got better when the uniformed driver opened the door and bowed her inside.

There were two silver buckets. One held a bottle of champagne and the other a forest of purple tulips.

"Roses are obvious," he said and pulled a single flower out to offer her. "And you're not."

She twirled the tulip under her nose. "Is this how you charm the girls in Boston?"

He poured a flute of champagne, held it out to her. "There are no other girls."

Off balance, she took a sip. "You're dazzling me, Declan."

"That's the plan." He tapped his glass to hers. "I'm really good at seeing a plan through."

She leaned back, crossed her legs in a slow, deliberate motion she knew would draw his gaze down to them. "You're a dangerous man. You know what makes you really dangerous? It doesn't show unless you take a good look under all the polish."

"I won't hurt you, Lena."

"Oh, hell you won't." But she let out a low, delightful laugh. "That's just part of the trip, sugar. Just part of the trip. And so far, I'm enjoying it."

He went for elegant, Old-World French where the waiters wore black tie, the lighting was muted, and the corner table was designed for intimacy.

Another bottle of champagne arrived seconds after they were seated, telling her he'd prearranged it. And possibly a great deal more.

"I'm told the food is memorable here. The house is early twentieth century," he continued. "Georgian Colonial Revival, and belonged to an artist. A private home until about thirty years ago."

"Do you always research your restaurant's history?"

"Ambience matters. Especially in New Orleans. So does cuisine. They tell me the *caneton a l'Orange* is a house specialty."

"Then one of us should have it." Intrigued, she set her menu aside. He wasn't just fun, she thought. He wasn't just sexy and smart. He was *interesting*. "You choose. This time."

He ordered straight through from appetizers to chocolate soufflé with the ease of a man accustomed to fine dining in exclusive restaurants.

“You have good French, at least for ordering food. Do you speak it otherwise?”

“Yes, but Cajun French can still throw me.”

“Have you been to Paris?”

“Yes.”

She leaned forward in that way she had, her arms folded on the edge of the table, her gaze fastened to his. “Is it wonderful?”

“It is.”

“One day I’d like to go. To Paris and Florence, to Barcelona and Athens.” They were hot, colorful dreams of hers, and the anticipation of them as exciting as the wish. “You’ve been to those places.”

“Not Athens. Yet. My mother liked to travel, so we went to Europe every year when I was growing up. Every other to Ireland. We still have family there.”

“And what’s your favorite?” She rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her laced fingers. “Of all the places you’ve been.”

“Hard to say. The west coast of Ireland, the hills in Tuscany, a sidewalk café in Paris. But at the moment, right here is my favorite place.”

“There’s that silky tongue again. All right then, tell me about Boston.”

“It’s a New England harbor city of great historical importance.” When she laughed, he sat back and soaked it in. “Oh, that’s not what you meant.”

“Tell me about your family. You have brothers, sisters?”

“Two brothers, one sister.”

“Big family.”

“Are you kidding? My parents were pikers in the go-forth-and-multiply area. Mom has six brothers and sis-

ters, my father comes from a family of eight. None of their siblings had less than five kids. We are legion.”

“You miss them.”

“I do? Okay, I do,” he admitted reluctantly. “From this nice, safe distance, I’ve realized I actually like my family.”

“They’ll come visit you?”

“Eventually. Everyone will wait for my mother to start actually speaking to me again. In our house if it’s not one thing, it’s your mother.”

She sampled the appetizer he’d ordered for her. She wore no rings, and he wondered why. She had lovely hands, slim, elegant, delicate. The silver key rested against that smooth, dusky skin, and there was a glint of silver at her ears. But her fingers, her wrists were bare. Beautifully bare, he realized, and wondered if the lack of ornamentation was some sort of female ploy to make a man notice every line, every curve, every sweep of her.

It was sure as hell working that way on him.

“You think she’s mad at you? Your mama?”

He had to blink himself back to the threads of conversation. “Not mad. Irritated, annoyed, baffled. If she was really angry, she’d be down here in my face, chipping away until I crumbled to her terrifying will.”

“Does she want you to be happy?”

“Yes. We love each other like idiots. She’d just be more satisfied if my happiness aligned with her point of view.”

Her head angled, and again he caught that wink of silver through the thick, dark curls of her hair. “Why don’t you let her know she hurts your feelings?”

“What?”

“If you don’t let her know she hurts them, how is she going to stop?”

“I let them down.”

“Oh, you did not,” she replied, with a kind of impatient

sympathy. "You think your family wants you to be miserable and unfulfilled? Married to a woman you don't love, working at a career that you don't want?"

"Yes. No," he answered. "I don't honestly know."

"Then it seems to me you ought to ask them."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"No. And tonight we're going to talk about you. We'll save me for another time. Did you find what you wanted at your antique shops?"

"And then some." More comfortable talking about acquisitions than family, he gave her a blow-by-blow that took them into the main course.

"How do you know what you want before you have the room done?"

"I just do." He moved his shoulders. "I can't explain it. I've got this great davenport on hold for the upriver parlor. That's where I'm starting next, and it's not nearly as big a job as the kitchen. Walls and floors mostly. I want to get a good start on the interiors so I can concentrate on the galleries, the double stairs, have the place painted starting in April, if I'm lucky. That way, we should be able to shift back inside before the summer heat."

"Why are you pushing so hard? The house isn't going anywhere."

"Remember the single-minded, competitive nature I told you about?"

"Doesn't mean you can't relax a bit. How many hours are you putting in in a week?"

"I don't know. Ten, twelve a day generally." Then he grinned and reached for her hand. "You worried about me? I'll take more time off if you'll spend it with me."

"I'm not that worried about you." But she left her hand in his, let it be held against that hard, calloused palm. "Still, Mardi Gras's coming. If you don't take some time

to enjoy that, you might as well be in Boston.” She looked at the double soufflé their waiter set in the middle of the table. “Oh my. My, my.” She leaned forward, closed her eyes, and sniffed. And was laughing when she opened them again. “Where’s yours?”

He took her dancing. He’d found a club that played the slow fox-trots and jazzy swings of the thirties, and surprised her by whirling her around the floor until her legs were weak.

“You’re full of surprises.”

“Bet your ass.” He swung her into his arms, had her blood pressure spiking when he ran his hands down her body and gripped her hips. Her body rolled against his, a wave sliding under a wave while a tenor sax wailed.

He dipped her, had her laughing even as her pulse went thick. She let her head fall back, her hair stream down as he lowered his face toward hers. His lips skimmed over her chin, just a hint of teeth, then he swept her up again, circled her, seduced her.

The lights were a warm, smoky blue, and his movements fluid so it was like moving underwater. The yearning she wasn’t ready for crawled into her belly. With her eyes half closed, she skimmed a hand into his hair, brought his face closer, that last inch closer so his mouth met hers.

“You fit, Lena. We fit.”

She shook her head, turned it so her cheek rested against his. “You make love half as well as you dance, you must have a trail of female smiles in your wake.”

“Let me show you.” He nipped at her earlobe, and felt her quick shiver. “I want to touch you. I know how your skin will feel under my hands. I dreamed about it.”

She kept her eyes closed, tried to lock away the yearn-

ing. "Just dance with me. It's getting late, and I want one more dance."

She rested her head on his shoulder in the limo. The music, the wine, the soft lights were all still playing in her head. She felt drenched in romance, and knowing that had been his intention didn't diminish the effect. It only enhanced it.

He was a man who would trouble himself with the details. The large and the small. With the house he'd chosen, with the woman he wanted.

She admired that. Admired him.

"You show a girl a good time, *cher*."

"Let me show you one tomorrow night."

"I work tomorrow night."

"Your next night off, then."

"I'm going to think about that. I'm not being coy, Declan." She sat up so she could look at him. "I don't like coy. I'm being cautious. I can't say I care much for that, either, but where you're concerned I think it's the smart thing to be. And I do like being smart."

As the limo glided to the curb in front of her home, she trailed a finger down his cheek. "Now you walk me to my door, and kiss me good-night."

He carried the silver bucket with the purple tulips. He set them down in front of her door, then framed her face in his hands.

The kiss was sweeter than she'd expected. She'd been prepared for heat, the persuasive, pervasive heat that might melt her resistance. Instead he gave her the sweet, and the gentle, ending the evening as he'd begun it. With romance.

"How about before you go to work?" He lifted her hand to his lips now. "I'll take you on a picnic."

Undone, she stared at him. "A picnic?"

“It should be warm enough. We can spread a blanket by the pond. You can bring Rufus along as chaperone. I like watching him jump in.”

“Damn it.” She caught his face in her hands now. “Damn it. I want you to go on down to that big white limo.”

“Okay.” He touched her hair. “I’ll just wait until you’re inside.”

“Go down to the limo,” she repeated. “And pay that driver, and tell him to go on home. Then you come back up.”

He closed his hands over her wrists, felt the trip of her pulse. “Five minutes. Don’t change your mind. Two minutes,” he amended. “Time me.”

As he bolted down the stairs, she picked up her flowers, let herself inside. If it was a mistake, she thought, it wouldn’t be her first. Or her last.

She lit the candles, put on some Billie Holiday. Sex should be easy, she reminded herself. When it was between two unattached adults with, well, at least some affection along with the lust, it should be a celebration.

Whether or not she’d been persuaded, the decision was hers. There was no point in regretting it before it had even begun.

He knocked. The idea that he would, rather than just walking in, made her smile. Good manners and hot blood. It was an interesting combination. Irresistible.

She opened the door, and Billie Holiday’s heartbreak streamed out. Declan slid his hands into his pockets and smiled at her.

“Hi.”

“Hi back, handsome.” Lena reached out and grabbed his tie. “Come on in here.” She tugged, and pulled him in the door. And, walking backward, would have pulled him straight into the bedroom.

But he laid his hands on her hips, drew her to him. “I

like your music.” He eased her into a dance. “When I can see something besides you, I’ll tell you if I like your place.”

“Did you take lessons on what to say to have women falling for you?”

“Natural gift.” He brushed his lips at each corner of her mouth. Over that sexy little mole. “The streets of Boston are littered with my conquests. It was playing hell with traffic, so the city council asked me to leave.” He skimmed his cheek over hers. “I smell you in my sleep. And wake up wanting you.”

Her heart began to shiver, like something feeling warmth after a long freeze. “I knew you were trouble, the minute you stepped up to my bar.” She stretched under the hand that ran down her back. “I just didn’t know how much trouble.”

“Plenty.” He scooped her off her feet, crushed his mouth to hers until they both moaned. “Which way?”

“Mmm. I’ve got a number of ways in mind.”

What blood was left in his head shot straight down to his loins. “Ha. I meant which way is your bedroom.”

With a low laugh, she chewed on his bottom lip. “Door on the left.”

He had a number of impressions as he carried her across the room, through the doorway. Vibrant colors, old wood. But most of his senses were wrapped around the woman in his arms. The weight of her, the shape and scent. The surprise that flickered over her face when he set her on her feet beside the bed instead of on it.

“I’d like to take my time with this, if it’s all the same to you.” He trailed a fingertip down her collarbone, over the lovely curve of breast the dress displayed. “You know, like unwrapping a present.”

“I can’t say I mind that.”

She’d expected a rush—fast hands, hungry mouth—to

match the reckless lust she'd seen in his gaze. When his hands took hers, linked fingers, and his lips lay silky on her lips, she remembered how ruthlessly he'd controlled his temper the day before.

It seemed his control reached to other passions as well.

She wasn't prepared for romance. He'd realized it when she'd seen the tulips. More than surprise, there'd been suspicion in her eyes. Just as there was now as he slowed the pace, lingered over the quiet pleasure of a kiss.

Seducing her into bed was no longer enough. He wanted to seduce that suspicion into helpless pleasure.

Her lips were warm and willing. It was no hardship to mate his with them, to float on that lazy slide of tongues while their bodies swayed together as if they were still dancing.

He knew when her fingers went limp in his that she floated with him.

He lowered the zipper of her dress in one slow glide and traced his fingers over the newly exposed flesh. She arched her back, and all but purred.

"You've got good hands, *cher*, and very sexy lips." Watching him now, as he watched her, she loosened the knot of his tie. "Let's see about the rest of you."

There was something about undressing a man in a suit, she thought. The time it took to remove all the layers to get to skin, built anticipation, honed curiosity. He touched her as she unbuttoned his shirt, easing the dress off her shoulders so that it clung, erotically, to the curve of her breasts. He nibbled at her mouth, never hurrying, never groping.

And when she opened his shirt, ran her hands over his chest with a little hum of approval, she felt the heavy beat of his heart under her palms.

"Some build you've got for a lawyer."

“Ex-lawyer.” It was like dying, he thought, dying by inches to have those long, slender fingers with those hot red nails running over him. She pinched lightly at his biceps, licked her lips.

“Yes indeed, you’re just full of surprises. I like a strong man.”

She tapped her nails on his belt buckle, and her smile was female. Feline. “Let’s see what other surprises you’ve got for me.”

They were dancing again, the oldest dance, and somehow she’d taken the lead. His stomach muscles quivered when she whipped the belt off, tossed it over her shoulder.

In his mind he saw himself throwing her down on the bed, pounding himself and this outrageous need into her. She’d accept it.

She’d expect it.

Instead, he took both her hands before she could unhook his trousers and lifted them to his lips. Watching her over them, he saw the surprise—and again the suspicion.

“I seem to be falling behind,” he said playfully. “And since I’ve been wondering what you’ve got on under that dress, I’d like to find out how close my speculations were to reality.”

He laid his lips on her bare shoulder, used them to nudge the material down her arm. And blessed the laws of gravity when it slid down and puddled at her feet.

She wore black lace.

She was every man’s fantasy. Dusky skin, tumbled hair, full, high breasts barely restrained in that fancy of lace. The slim torso, the gently rounded hips with more midnight lace riding low. Shapely legs in sheer black stockings and man-killer heels.

“Close.” The breath was already burning in his lungs. “Very close. What’s this?” He traced a fingertip over the

tattoo on her inner thigh, just above the lacy edge of her stocking.

“That’s my dragon. He guards the gates.” She was trembling, and wasn’t ready to tremble. “A lot of men think they can get past him. A lot of men get burned.”

He stroked his finger up, along that sensitive valley between lace and thigh. “Let’s play with fire.”

He yanked her against him, devoured her mouth. And when that wasn’t enough, whirled her around to scrape his teeth along her shoulder, the side of her neck. With his face buried in her hair he ran his hands up her body, filled them with her lace-covered breasts.

She arched back to him, hooked her arms around his neck and offered. The spin from patient to urgent left her dizzy, brutally aroused and ready to be taken. She felt the greed from him now, and felt her own rise to match it.

His hand slid down, cupped between her legs, pressed, and brought her to the jagged edge of release. Before she could fall, he trailed his fingers down her thigh and with one fast flick, unhooked a garter.

Her breath caught. Her body strained. “*Mon Dieu.*”

“When I’m inside you, you won’t be able to think about anything else.” He unhooked a second garter. “But first, I need to touch you, the way I’ve been dreaming of touching you.” He rubbed his lips over her shoulder, nudged the strap of her bra aside. “Angelina.”

He turned her to face him, let his fingers dive into her hair, draw her head back. “You’re mine tonight.”

Denial, defiance, fought their way through seduction. “I belong to myself.”

He scooped her up, laid her back on the bed. “Tonight, we’re going to belong to each other.”

He closed his mouth over hers, stopping her words, drugging her brain. She turned her head to take a breath, to try to steady herself again. But his lips trailed down to

her breast, over flesh, over lace, under it. The long, liquid tugs in her belly loosened her muscles, melted her will.

She yielded, telling herself she was surrendering to her own needs, and not to him.

He felt her give, the softening of her. Heard it in the low, throaty moan that was pleasure and acceptance.

So he took what he'd been aching for since the first moment he'd seen her in the morning mist.

Her body was a treasure, scented skin, female curves. He fed himself on the taste of it in slow sips and long gulps. Then freed her breasts to his hands, his mouth. His blood raged like a firestorm, but he let himself burn and tortured them both.

When he rolled the lace down her hips, she arched. Opened. He traced his fingers over her, watching her face in the candlelight as her eyes closed, her lips trembled on a groan. And when he slid them into her, into the hot wet velvet of her, she bowed up, cried out. Drove him mad.

Pressing his face to her belly, he sent her flying.

Her body was a mass of aches, of joys, with the sharp edge of sensation slicing through like a bolt of light. It burst in her, sent her helplessly hurtling.

She reached for him, closed her hand around him. He was hard as stone. She wanted him inside her as much as she wanted her next breath.

"Now. I want you." She felt him quiver, even as she quivered. Saw herself in his eyes as he rose over her. "I want you to fill me. Fill me up."

He clung to that slippery line of control, and as her legs wrapped around him, slid slowly, very slowly into her. Slid deep when she rose to meet him. Held there with his breath caught in his throat and everything he was lost in her.

Sighs now, and a quick, rushing gasp. They kept their eyes on each other and moved, an almost lazy pace that spread pleasure like a warm pool. Their lips met, and he

felt hers curve against his before he lifted his head to see her smile.

Flesh glided over flesh, silky friction. Music, the tragic sob of it from her living room, a sudden celebratory burst of it from the street below, merged together in his head with her quickening breaths.

She tensed beneath him, her head going back to bare the line of her throat for his lips. She tightened around him, shuddered, shuddered. Once again he buried his face in her hair, and this time, let himself fly with her.

Later, he lay watching the light play on the ceiling, stroking his hand along her back. Drenched in her. "Are you going to let me stay?" he asked. "Or do I catch a cab?"

She stared into the shadows. "Stay."

9

He woke just after daybreak. She'd curved into him in sleep, but he saw that she had her arm between them and a fist curled over her heart. As if she were guarding it, he thought. The little silver key lay against the side of her hand.

He wanted to lift that hand, gently uncurl the fingers. Bare her heart to him, he realized. He'd already lost his to her. Had lost it, he decided, the moment he'd seen her.

It was a jolt, and a shock for a man who'd come to believe he simply wasn't capable of love. Unless it was family or friendship. His personal crisis over Jessica, who everyone—including Jessica—had claimed was perfect for him, had convinced him he'd blown his one chance at a lasting, content relationship with a woman.

It had been tough to swallow for a man who, at the core, believed strongly in family, in home, in marriage. And swallowing it, he realized, had been largely responsible for the restless unhappiness that had trailed after him like a faithful dog for months.

Now he was looking at the woman who was the answer. And he didn't think she was going to be willing to listen to the question.

So, he'd have to persuade her. One way or the other, and sooner or later. Because he'd meant what he'd said the night before. They were going to belong to each other.

He considered waking her up and reminding her how good they were together in bed. He couldn't think of a better way to start the day, especially since she was warm and soft and draped around him.

But it didn't seem quite fair to wake her when they'd barely slept. Her workday started a great deal later than his.

He slid away from her, with no little regret, and eased out of bed. She stirred, sighing in sleep, and rolled into the warmth he'd left behind.

He grabbed his trousers and headed into the shower.

In his opinion, you could tell a lot about a person by their bathroom. Hers was both rigorously clean and indulgent. Thick towels of forest green offset the white fixtures and picked up the small diamond chip pattern scattered through the floor tile.

Lush green plants lined the windowsill, and a trio of daffodils speared out of a slim bottle of pale green.

There were other bottles, jewel colors, and covered boxes that held fragrant oils and lotions, bath salts. She liked fancy soaps, he noted, and kept them in a pretty bowl.

He also discovered her hot water lasted longer than his. He smiled through the bliss of a fifteen-minute shower that steamed up the room like a Turkish bath.

She was still sleeping when he stepped out. Sprawled now over the sheets with the morning sun slanted over the lean length of her naked back. He turned his mind firmly from sliding back into bed with her and focused it on finding coffee.

Her living area had lofty ceilings and dark wood floors. She'd sponged the walls with a bluish paint that made them look like faded denim. Against one stood a fireplace framed in that same dark wood with a sunburst mantelpiece he immediately coveted. Its woodwork was distressed, its cream-colored paint peeling.

He understood why she'd left it that way. Its history and character came through.

To complement the faded walls, she'd hung colorful framed posters. Advertising posters, he noted. Elegant women selling champagne, sleek-looking men toting cigars.

A high-backed sofa in royal blue sat in the center of the room covered, as women mysteriously cover sofas and beds, with pillows.

He admired the style she'd formed here. Old, subtly battered tables and slashing colors. And he liked seeing his tulips on her coffee table.

He wandered through to the kitchen and found himself grinning. It wasn't often you found black-and-white photos of nudes—male and female—on kitchen walls.

But he was happier yet to find coffee.

He closed the pocket door so the sound of grinding beans wouldn't carry to the bedroom. And while the coffee brewed, he stood at her kitchen window, looking out at her section of New Orleans.

He heard the slide of the kitchen door.

She wore a short red robe, and her eyes were heavy with sleep, her smile lazy with it.

"Sorry, I thought I'd muffled the coffee grinder."

"I didn't hear it." She drew a deep breath. "But I smelled the results. You making breakfast, *cher*?"

"Want toast? It's my best thing."

"Oh, I think I had a taste of your best thing last night." Still smiling, she sauntered toward him, slid her hands

around his neck. "Gimme another," she said and lifted her mouth to his.

She'd woken lonely, sure he'd gone. She never let men stay the night in her bed. It was too easy for them to slip out the door. Better to send them along, to sleep alone, than to wake lonely.

Then she'd seen his shirt, his jacket, his shoes, and had been delighted. Too delighted. When a man had that much power, it was time to take some back. The surefire way was to cloud his mind with sex.

"Why didn't you just roll over and wake me up, sugar?"

"Thought about it." Was still thinking about it. "I figured since you're working tonight, you need more than ten minutes' sleep. But since you're awake . . ."

She laughed and slipped away. "Since I'm awake I want coffee." She opened a cupboard door, sent him that knowing glance over her shoulder. "Maybe if you ask nice, I'll fix you some breakfast."

"Do you want me to beg standing up, on my knees or completely supine?"

"You tickle me, Declan. I'll make you some toast. *Le pain perdu*," she added when his face fell. "French toast. I got me most of a nice baguette." She handed him a thick white mug filled with black coffee.

"Thanks. Since you're good in the kitchen, we won't have to hire a cook when we get married and raise our six kids."

"Six?"

"I feel obligated to uphold the Sullivan-Fitzgerald tradition. I really like your kitchen art. Not the usual spot for nudes."

"Why?" She got out a black iron skillet. "Cooking's an art, and it's sexy if you do it right."

She got out a blue bowl. He watched her crack an egg

on its side, slide white and yolk in, one-handed.

“I see what you mean. Do it again.”

She chuckled and cracked a second egg. “Why don’t you go on out and put some music on? This won’t take long.”

They ate at a little gateleg table she had tucked under one of the living room windows.

“Where’d you learn to cook?” he asked her.

“My grandmama. She tried to teach me to sew, too, but that didn’t stick so well.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t open a restaurant instead of a bar.”

“I like to cook when I like to cook. Do it for a living, do it all the time.”

“There’s that. How did you end up running a bar?”

“I wanted my own business. You work for somebody else, they say do this, don’t do that, come here, go there. That doesn’t set with me. So I went to business school, and I think, what business do I want to have? I don’t want to sell souvenirs, don’t want a gift shop, don’t want to sell dresses. I think, all those things sell in New Orleans, but what sells even more? Pleasure sells. A little harmless sin and a good time, that’s what people come to the Big Easy for. So . . . Et Trois.”

“How long have you had it?”

“Let’s see now.” She’d already eaten her toast, so speared a slice from the four she’d piled on his plate. “Going on six years now.”

“You opened a bar when you were twenty-three?”

“Hey, how do you know how old I am?”

“Remy.”

She looked up at the ceiling. “*Et là!* Gonna have to take a strip off his ass for that. Man oughta know better than flapping about a woman’s age. What else he flap about?”

Declan gave his breakfast his undivided attention.

“This is really great. What do you put in this stuff?”

She said nothing for a full ten seconds. “I see. Men just can’t stop themselves from crowing about their sexual exploits.”

Uneasy, for himself and his friend, Declan replied, “It wasn’t like that. It was nostalgic. And it was sweet. You meant something to him. You still do.”

“It’s a good thing for him I know that. And that I feel the same. Do you remember the first girl you got into the backseat, Declan? Do you remember her fondly?”

“Sherry Bingham. A pretty little blond. I loved her desperately through most of my junior year in high school.”

She liked him for coming out with a name, instantly. Even if he’d made it up. “What happened?”

“She dumped me for a football player. Left tackle. Jesus, a football player with no neck and the IQ of a pencil. I’m still pissed off at her. But to get back to you—and by the way, you’re really good at deflecting personal questions, but I was a lawyer. Anyway, how did you manage to pull it off? Twenty-three’s pretty young to establish a business, one that’s proven itself out when most go under within three years.”

She leaned back. “What difference does it make? Counselor.”

“Okay.” He shrugged and kept eating. “I’ll just assume you robbed a bank, paid off the mob, seduced then murdered the previous owner—after he left you the building in his will. And continue to run illegal gambling and prostitutes out of the back room.”

“Why I’ve been so busy. But I like your version better. Mine’s very dull in comparison. I worked after school and summers, saved my pennies. I’m very good at saving pennies if I need to. Then I worked, tending bar, serving drinks, and went to business school part-time. Just before I turned twenty-two, my grandpapa died. Fell off a ladder, broke his damn fool neck.”

Her eyes filled as she said it. "Guess I'm still pissed off at him."

"I'm sorry." He covered her hand with his. "You were close."

"I loved him more than any man in the world. Pete Simone, with his big laugh and his big hands. He played the fiddle and always carried a red bandanna. Always. Well . . ." She blinked away the tears. "He had an insurance policy, bigger than it ought to have been considering. Half for me, half for Grandmama. In the end she made me take all of it. Nothing you can do to change her mind when she digs her heels in. So I invested the money, and a year later I opened my place."

"There's nothing dull about that. You run a good bar, Lena."

"Yes, I do." She rose, picked up the plates. "You'd best get yourself dressed, *cher*, if you want a ride home."

He couldn't talk her into coming inside. He had to settle for a mind-numbing kiss before she pushed him out of her car and drove away.

Arriving home at nine in the morning in a wrinkled suit gained him a grin and a wink from Big Frank as the man carted dead tree limbs to a burn pile.

"You fell into some luck last night, Mister Dec."

Into something, Declan thought and, rubbing his heart, went into the house to get to work.

She wouldn't see him that night, or the next. He had to content himself with phone calls that made him feel like a teenager as he wandered the house with his portable phone and rattled his brains for any conversational ploy that would keep her on the line.

Mardi Gras celebrations, and business, were under way, she told him. While they were, she didn't have time to come out and play.

He knew when he was being tested and stalled and tangled. And decided he'd let her string out his line. Until he reeled her in.

Remy dropped by one afternoon wearing Hugo Boss and gold beads. He took the beads off, tossed them over Declan's head. "When you coming into town?"

"I thought I might join the insanity over the weekend."

"*Cher*, it's Mardi Gras. Every night's the weekend."

"Not out here. Come take a look." He led the way into the parlor, where Tibald was high on a ladder patiently detailing the ceiling plasterwork.

"Hey, Tibald." Remy hooked his thumbs into his pockets and craned his neck back. "That's some job."

"It surely is. How's Effie doing these days?"

"Driving me to drink with wedding plans. Picked out the cake yesterday, and you'd think it was a matter of life and death whether it has yellow rosebuds or full-blown roses around the edges."

"Best thing a man can do in these situations is nod at whatever she likes best, and just show up on the day."

"You might've said something of that nature before I told her I liked the big, fat roses when it turned out she had her mind set on the buds." He pulled a small bottle of Tylenol out of his pocket. "You got something I can down this with, Dec? That woman's given me the mother of all headaches."

Declan picked up a half-empty bottle of water. "Did you come out here to hide?"

"Till she cools off." Gulping down the pills and water, Remy wandered over the drop cloth. "You do these walls in here, Dec, or you hire them out?"

"I did them." Pleased, Declan ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the Paris green walls. "Spent the last three days on this room." And nights, he thought. "I think this color will make the room seem cooler than a patterned paper, and I like the way it looks with the trim."

“You’re a regular Bob Vila and Martha Stewart combined. What do you tackle next?”

“The library. Still some details to deal with in here, and the kitchen, but the library’s on the slate for next week. After that, I’m hoping to move outside for a while. Give me a couple of those aspirin.”

“Sure.” Remy handed over the pills and the water. “You got work problems or female problems?”

“A little of both. Come out on the back gallery, take a look at what the Franks have done with the rear gardens.”

“Heard you escorted our Lena around in a big, white limo a few nights ago,” Remy said as they walked toward the back of the house. “Classy stuff.”

“I’m a classy guy.” He handed the water back to Remy and opened the French doors of the dining room.

“You got romancing her in mind, that’s a good start.”

“I’ve got more than that in mind,” Declan said as Remy tipped back the bottle. “I’m going to marry her.”

Water spewed out as Remy choked.

“Pretty good spit take,” Declan commented. “Keep the bottle.”

“Jesus, Dec. Jesus Christ, you and Lena are getting married?”

“I’d like to have the wedding here, in the fall. September maybe.” He scanned his gallery, his gardens. He wondered what kind of bird it was that was currently singing its lungs out. “The place won’t be finished, but that’d be part of the charm. Of course, if it takes me longer to pin her down, we could do it next spring.”

“That’s some fast work.”

“Not really. It’s just a matter of keeping at it.” He smiled now as he studied Remy’s baffled face. “Oh, you don’t mean the house. Lena. I haven’t asked her yet. She’d just say no. Look out there, bulbs coming up. Daffodils, tulips, calla lilies, the Franks tell me. Buried under

all those weeds and vines, maybe blooming under it for years. That's something."

"Dec, I think you need something stronger than Tylenol."

"I'm not crazy. I'm in love with her. I'm starting to think I was in love with her before I even met her. That's why there was never anyone else who really mattered. Not like this. Because she was here, and I just hadn't found her yet."

"Maybe I need something stronger."

"Bourbon's in the kitchen. Ice is in the cooler. New fridge is due to come in tomorrow."

"I'm fixing us both a drink."

"Make mine short and weak," Dec told him absently. "I've got work to do yet today."

Remy brought back two glasses and took a long sip of his as he studied Declan's face. "Declan, I love you like a brother."

"I know you do."

"So, I'm going to talk to you like I would a brother—if I had one instead of being plagued with sisters."

"You think I've lost my mind."

"No. In some situations, hell, in most situations, a man thinks with his dick. By the time that thought process works all the way to his head, he usually sees that situation more clearly."

"I appreciate you explaining that to me, Dad."

Remy only shook his head and paced up and down the gallery. "Lena's a very sexy woman."

"No argument there."

"She just sort of exudes those pheromones or whatever the hell they are the way other women do the perfume they splash on to get a man stirred up. She stirs you up just by breathing."

"You're trying to tell me I'm infatuated, or in the heavy wave of first lust."

“Exactly.” Remy laid a supportive hand on Declan’s shoulder. “Not a man alive would blame you for it. Add to that, son, you’ve had a rough few months on the relationship train, and knowing the way you cart guilt around like it was your personal treasure chest, I don’t imagine you’ve been clearing your pipes regular since you broke it off with Jennifer.”

“Jessica, you asshole.” Amused, touched, Declan leaned back on the baluster. “It’s not infatuation. I thought it was, with a good dose of that lust tossed in. But that’s not it. It’s not a matter of clogged pipes, and I’m not thinking with my dick. It’s my heart.”

“Oh, brother.” Remy took another good gulp of whiskey. “Dec, you haven’t been down here a full month yet.”

“People are always saying something like that, as if time is a factor.” And because the critical part of his brain had said the same thing, he was irritated to hear the sentiment from his closest friend. “What, is there a law somewhere that states you can’t fall in love until a reasonable, rational period of time has passed during which the parties will socialize, communicate and, if possible, engage in sexual intercourse in order to assure compatibility? If there is, and it worked, explain the divorce rate.”

“A couple of lawyers stand here debating the subject, we’ll be here till next Tuesday.”

“Then let me say this. I’ve never felt like this before, never in my life. I didn’t think I could. I figured something inside me just didn’t work the way it was supposed to.”

“Well, for Christ’s sake, Dec.”

“I couldn’t love Jessica.” The guilt slid back into his voice. “I just couldn’t, and I tried to. I damn near settled for affection, respect and mutual backgrounds because I thought it was all I’d get, or be able to give. But it’s not. I’ve never felt like this, Remy,” he said again. “And I like it.”

“If you want Lena, then I want her for you. The thing is, Dec, no matter how you feel, it doesn’t guarantee she’s going to feel the same.”

“Maybe she’ll break my heart, but feeling too much is a hell of a lot better than feeling nothing.” He’d been telling himself that, repeatedly, since he’d realized he was in love with her. “One way or the other, I’ve got to try.”

He swirled the whiskey he’d yet to drink. “She doesn’t know what to make of me,” Declan murmured. “It’s going to be fun letting her find out.”

*T*hat night, he heard weeping. A man’s raw and broken sobs. Declan tossed in sleep, weighed down with the grief, unable to stop it, unable to give or seek comfort.

Even when silence came, the sorrow stayed.

10

Bayou Rouse
March 1900

He didn't know why he came here, to stare at the water while thick green shadows spread around him, as night gathered to eat away at the day.

But he came, time and again, to wander through the marsh as if he would somehow come upon her, strolling along the curve of the river where the swamp flowers blossomed.

She would smile at him, hold out her hand.

And everything would be right again.

Nothing would ever be right again.

He was afraid he was going mad, that grief was darkening his mind as night darkened the day. How else could he explain how he could hear her whispering to him in the night? What could he do but shut off the sound of her, the pain of her?

He watched a blue heron rise from the reeds like a ghost, beautiful, pure, perfect, to skim over the tea-

colored water and glide into the trees. Away from him. Always away from him.

She was gone. His Abby had winged away from him, like the ghost bird. Everyone said it. His family, his friends. He'd heard the servants whispering about it. How Abigail Rouse had run off with some no-account and left her husband and bastard baby daughter behind.

Though he continued to look in New Orleans, in Baton Rouge, in Lafayette, though he continued to haunt the bayou like a ghost himself, in the loneliest hours of the night, he believed it.

She'd left him and the child.

Now he was leaving, in all but body. He walked through each day like a man in a trance. And God help him, he could not be a father to the child, that image of Abigail he secretly, shamefully doubted carried his blood. Just looking at her brought him unspeakable sorrow.

He no longer went up to the nursery. He hated himself for it, but even the act of climbing the stairs to the third floor was like drowning in a sea of despair.

They said the child wasn't his.

No. In the dimming light of dusk, with the night coming alive around him, Lucian covered his face with his hands. No, he could not, would not believe that of her. They had made the child together, in love, in trust, in desire.

If even that was a lie . . .

He lowered his hands, stepped toward the water. It would be warm, as her smile had been warm. Soft, as her skin had been soft. Even now the color was deepening and was almost the color of her eyes.

"Lucian!"

He froze, on the slippery edge.

Abby. She was rushing toward him, pushing through

the fronds of a willow, with her hair spilling over her shoulders in midnight curls. His heart, deadened with grief, woke in one wild leap.

Then the last shimmer of sunlight fell over her face, and he died again.

Claudine gripped his hands. Fear made her fingers cold. She'd seen what had been in his eyes, and it had been his death.

"She would never want this. She would never want you to damn your soul by taking your life."

"She left me."

"No. No, that isn't true. They lie to you. They lie, Lucian. She loved you. She loved you and Marie Rose above all things."

"Then where is she?" The rage that lived under the numbness of his grief leaped out. He gripped Claudine's arms, hauled her to her toes. Part of him, some dark, secret part, wanted to pound his fists into her face. Erase it for its connection to Abigail, and his own drowning despair. "Where is she?"

"Dead!" She shouted it, and her voice rang in the warm, sticky air. "They killed her. Death is the only way she would leave you and Rosie."

He shoved her aside, staggered away to lean against the trunk of a live oak. "That's just another madness."

"I tell you I know it. I *feel* it. I've had dreams."

"So did I." Tears stung his eyes, turned the light watery. "So did I have dreams."

"Lucian, you must listen. I was there that night. She came to the nursery to tend the baby. I've known Abby since we were babies ourselves. There was nothing in her but love for you and Marie Rose. I should never have left the Hall that night." Claudine crossed her hands over her breast, as if to hold together the two halves of her broken heart. "The rest of my life I'll beg her forgiveness for not being there."

“She took clothes, jewelry. My mother is right.” He firmed his lips on what he believed was an act of strength, but was only his weakened faith. “I have to accept.”

“Your mama hated Abby. She kicked me out the next day. She’s afraid to keep me in the house, afraid I might find out—”

He whirled around, his face so contorted with fury, Claudine stepped away. “You want me to believe my mother somehow killed my wife, then disguised the crime, the sin, the horror, by making it appear Abby ran away?”

“I don’t know what happened. But I know Abby didn’t leave. Mama Rouse, she went to Evangeline.”

Lucian waved a hand, turned away again. “Voodoo nonsense.”

“Evangeline’s got power. She said there was blood, and pain, and fear. And a dark, dark sin. Death, she said, and a watery grave. She said you got two halves, and one is black as a cave in hell.”

“I killed her then? I came home in the night and murdered my wife?”

“Two halves, Lucian, that shared one womb. Look to your brother.”

The chill stabbed through him, bringing a raw sickness to the belly, a vile roaring in his head. “I won’t listen to any more of this. Go home, Claudine. Keep away from the Hall.”

He dug into his pocket, took out the watch pin, pressed it into Claudine’s hand. “Take this, keep it for the child.” He could no longer call her by name. “She should have something that was her mother’s.”

He stared down, grieving, at the symbol in her hand. Time had stopped for Abigail.

“You kill her again by not believing in her.”

“Stay away from me.” He staggered away, toward Manet Hall, toward his chosen hell. “Stay away.”

“You know!” Claudine shouted after him. “You know she was true.”

Clutching the watch to her breast, Claudine vowed to pass it, and the truth, along to Abigail’s daughter.

Janet Hall

February 2002

From his gallery, Declan watched the day come to life. Dawn was a rosy blush on the eastern sky, with hints of mauve, like sleepy bruises, just beneath. The air was warming. He could feel the rise of it almost every day. It wasn’t yet March, but winter was bowing out.

The gardens that a month before had been a sorrowful wreck showed hints of their former grandeur. Strangling vines, invasive weeds, deadwood and broken bricks had been hauled away, revealing foot by foot the wandering paths, the shrubs, even the bulbs and plants that had been too stubborn to die away.

An old iron arbor was wild with what the Franks told him was wisteria, and there was an island of massive azaleas that showed the beginning of hopeful buds.

He had magnolia, crape myrtle, camellia, jasmine. He’d written down everything he could remember the Franks reeled off in their lazy voices. When he’d described the vine he imagined on the corner columns, they’d told him what he wanted was morning glory.

He liked the sound of it. Mornings here were full of glory.

He thought his body was adjusting to the five or six hours of disturbed sleep a night he was able to snatch. Or maybe it was just nervous energy that was fueling him.

Something was pushing him, driving him step by step

through the transformation of the house that was his. Yet somehow, not only his.

If it was Abigail hovering, she was a damn fickle female. There were times he felt utterly comfortable, totally at peace. And others when cold fear prickled the back of his neck. Times when he felt in his gut he was being watched.

Stalked.

Well, that was a woman for you, he thought as he sipped his morning coffee. All smiles one minute, and slaps the next.

Even as he thought it, he saw Lena and the big black dog step out of the trees.

He didn't think twice, but set his coffee aside and started for the gallery steps.

She'd seen him long before he'd seen her. From the shelter of the trees and morning mists, she'd stood, idly rubbing Rufus's head, and had studied the house. Studied him.

What was it about the place and the man that pulled at her so? she wondered. There were any number of great old houses here, along the River Road, on toward Baton Rouge.

God knew there were any number of good-looking men, if a woman was in the market for one.

But it was this house that had always snagged her interest and imagination. Now it seemed it was this man, jogging down the thick stone stairs in a ratty shirt, rattier jeans, his face rough with the night's beard, who had managed to do the same.

She didn't like to want. It got in the way of things. And when that want involved a man, well, it was just bound to mess up your life.

She'd built her life brick by goddamn brick. And she liked it, just as it was. A man, no matter how amiable he

was, would, at best, alter the design. At worst, he'd send those bricks tumbling down to ruin.

She'd kept away from him since the night she'd taken him into her bed. Just to prove she could.

But she had a smile ready for him now, a slow, cat-at-the-mouse-hole smile, and stood her ground as the dog raced over, tearing through the ground fog, to meet him.

Rufus leaped, slopped his tongue over Declan's face, then collapsed, belly up, for a rub.

It was, Lena knew, Rufus's way of showing unconditional love.

Charms dogs, too, she thought as Declan crouched down to rub and wrestle. The man had entirely too much appeal for anybody's good. Especially hers.

"Rufus!" she called out, bringing the dog to his feet in a flurry of muscle and limbs that nearly put Declan on his ass. And laughing, she tossed the ball she carried high in the air, nipped it handily on its fall. Rufus charged her, a blur of black fur and enthusiasm. She hurled the ball over the pond. Rufus sailed up, over the water, and nabbed the ball with his teeth seconds before his massive splash.

"The Bo Sox could use you two." As the dog paddled his way to shore, Declan strode up, cupped his hands under Lena's elbows, and lifted her off her feet. He had an instant to see her blink in surprise before he covered her mouth with his, and took her under.

She gripped his shirt, not for balance, though her feet were dangling several inches off the ground. But because he was under it, all that muscle and heat and man.

She heard the dog bark, three deep throaty rumbles, then the water he shook off himself drenched her. She wouldn't have been surprised if it had steamed off her skin.

"Morning," Declan said and dropped her back on her feet. "Where y'at?"

"Woo." She had to give him credit for both greetings,

and pushed a hand through her hair. "Where y'at?" she responded, then reached up and rubbed a hand over his rough cheek. "Need a shave, *cher*."

"If I'd known you'd come walking my way this morning, I'd have taken care of that."

"I wasn't walking your way." She picked up the ball Rufus had dropped at her feet and sent it, and the dog, flying again. "Just playing with my grandmama's dog."

"Is she all right? You said you stayed over with her when she wasn't feeling well."

"She gets the blues sometimes, is all." And damn it, *damn* it, his instant and genuine concern touched her. "Missing her Pete. She was seventeen when they got married, and fifty-eight when he died. More'n forty years is a long time to mesh lives."

"Would she like it if I went by later?"

"She likes your company." Because Rufus was thumping his tail impatiently, she winged the ball again.

"You said she has a sister. Any other family?"

"Two sisters, a brother, all still living."

"Children?"

Her face shut down. "I'm all she's got there. You been into town for any of the partying?"

Off limits, he decided. He let it go, for the moment. "Not yet. I figured I'd go in tonight. Are you working?"

"Nothing but work till Ash Wednesday. People do like to drink before Lent comes."

"Late hours for you. You look a little tired."

"I don't much care for being up this early, but Grandmama, she's an early bird. She's up, everybody's up." She lifted her arms high, stretched. "You're an early bird yourself, aren't you, *cher*?"

"These days. Why don't you come back to the house with me, have some coffee, see what I've been doing with my time since I haven't been able to spend any with you."

"I've been busy."

"So you said."

Her brows knit, forming a long, shallow line of annoyance between them. "I say what I mean."

"I didn't say different. But I'm making you edgy. I don't mind that, Lena." He reached out to tug on her hair, amused and delighted to see temper darken her face. "But I would mind if you think I'd settle for one night with you."

"I sleep with you if I want, when I want."

"And I'd mind," he continued mildly, though the hand that gripped her arm before she could spin away was very firm. "I'd mind a great deal if you think all I want is to get you in the sheets."

"Men don't touch me unless I tell them they can touch me." She shoved at his hand.

"You've never dealt with me before, have you?" There was steel in his fingers, in his tone. "Just simmer down. Picking a fight isn't going to shake me loose, either. You wanted to keep your distance this week, okay. I'm a patient man, Lena, but I'm not a doormat. Don't think you're going to walk over me on your way out the door."

Anger, she realized, wasn't the way to handle him. She had no doubt she could scrape away at that control and stir him up into a good shouting match of a fight. It would be interesting, even entertaining. But she had a fifty-fifty chance of losing it.

She didn't care for the odds.

Instead, she stroked a hand over his cheek. "Aw now, *cher*." Her voice was liquid silk. "What you getting so het up about? You got me irritable, that's all. I'm not at my best so early in the day, and here you being all tough and surly. I don't mean to hurt your feelings."

She rose on her toes and kissed his cheek.

"What *do* you mean to do, Angelina?"

There was something about the way he used her whole name that put her back up. A kind of warning. “Now, Declan honey, I like you. I truly do. And the other night, why, you just about swept me off my feet. We had ourselves a real good time, too, didn’t we? But you don’t want to be making more out of it than it was.”

“What was it?”

She lifted her shoulders. “A very satisfying interlude, for both of us. Why don’t we leave it at that and be friends again?”

“We could. Or, we could try it this way.”

He yanked her to him, dragged her up to her toes. And plundered her mouth. No patience this time, no reason, no dreamy mating of lips. It was a branding, and they both knew it.

Rufus gave a warning growl as she struggled. Even when the growl turned to a snarl, Declan ignored it. He fisted a hand in her hair, pulled her head back, and took them both deeper. Temper, hurt and hunger all stormed inside him and flavored the kiss.

She couldn’t resist it. Not when the punch of emotions slammed into her system, liberating needs she’d hoped to lock down. On a muffled oath, she wrapped her arms around his neck and met the ferocity of the kiss.

With a whine, Rufus settled down to chew at the ball.

“We’re not done with each other.” Declan ran proprietary hands down her arms.

“Maybe not.”

“I’ll come in tonight, take you home after you close. Wednesday, after things quiet down, I’d like you to come out here. We’ll have dinner.”

She managed to smile. “You cooking?”

He grinned, touched his lips to her brow. “I’ll surprise you.”

“You usually do,” she retorted when he walked away.



She was irritated with herself. Not just for losing a battle, but for cowardice. It was cowardice that had pushed her to start the fight in the first place.

She trudged through the marsh while Rufus raced into the trees, through the thick green undergrowth in hopes of scaring up a rabbit or a squirrel.

She stopped at the curve of what had been known as far back as memory stretched as Bayou Rouse. This mysterious place with its slow-moving, shadowy water, its cypress bones and thick scents, was as much her world as the crooked streets and lively pace of the Quarter.

She'd run in this world as a child, learned the difference between a wren and a sparrow, how to avoid a copperhead nest by its cucumber whiff, how to drop a line and pull up a catfish for supper.

It was the home of her blood, as the Quarter had become the home of her ambition. She didn't come back to it only when her grandmother was feeling blue, but when she herself was.

She caught a glimpse of the knobby snout of an alligator sliding by. It was, she thought, what was under the surface that could take you down, one quick, ugly snap, if you weren't alert and didn't keep your wits about you.

There was a great deal under the surface of Declan Fitzgerald. She'd have preferred if he'd been some spoiled, rich trust-fund baby out on a lark. She could've enjoyed him, and dismissed him when they were both bored.

It was a great deal more difficult to dismiss what you respected. She admired his strength, his purpose, his humor. As a friend, he would give her a great deal of pleasure.

As a lover, he worried the hell out of her.

He wanted too much. She could already feel him suck-

ing her in. And it scared her, scared her that she didn't seem able to stop the process.

Toying with the key around her neck, she started back toward the bayou house. It would run its course, she told herself. Things always did.

She pasted on a smile as she neared the house and saw her grandmother, shaded by an old straw hat, fussing in her kitchen garden.

"I smell bread baking," Lena called out.

"Brown bread. Got a loaf in there you can take home with you."

Odette straightened, pressed a hand lightly to the small of her back. "Got an extra you could take on by the Hall for that boy. He doesn't eat right."

"He's healthy enough."

"Healthy enough to want a bite outta you." She bent back to her work, her sturdy work boots planted firm. "He try to take one this morning? You've got that look about you."

Lena walked over, dropped down on the step beside the garden patch. "What look is that?"

"The look a woman gets when a man's had his hands on her and didn't finish the job."

"I know how to finish the job myself, if that's the only problem."

With a snorting laugh, Odette broke off a sprig of rosemary. She pinched at its needle leaves, waved it under her nose for the simple pleasure of its scent. "Why scratch an itch if someone'll scratch it for you? I may be close to looking seventy in the eye, but I know when I see a man who's willing and able."

"Sex doesn't run my life, Grandmama."

"No, but it sure would make it more enjoyable." She straightened again. "You're not Lilibeth, 't poulette."

The use of the childhood endearment—little chicken—made Lena smile. "I know it."

“Not being her doesn’t mean you have to be alone if you find somebody who lights the right spark in you.”

She took the rosemary Odette offered, brushed it against her cheek. “I don’t think he’s looking for a spark. I think he’s looking for a whole damn bonfire.” She leaned back on her elbows, shook back her hair. “I’ve lived this long without getting burned, and I’m going to keep right on.”

“It always was right or left for you. Couldn’t drive you to middle ground with a whip. You’re my baby, even if you are a grown woman, so I’ll say this: Nothing wrong with a woman walking alone, as long as it’s for the right reasons. Being afraid she might trip, that’s a wrong one.”

“What happens if I let myself fall for him?” Lena demanded. “Then he has enough of swamp water and trots on back to Boston? Or he just has his fill of dancing with me and finds himself another partner?”

Odette pushed her hat back on the crown of her head, and her face was alive with exasperation. “What happens if it rains a flood and washes us into the Mississippi? Pity sakes, Lena, you can’t think that way. It’ll dry you up.”

“I was doing fine before he came along, and I’ll do fine after he goes.” Feeling sulky, she reached down to pet Rufus when he butted his head against her knee. “That house over there, Grandmama, that house he’s so set on bringing back, it’s a symbol of what happens when two people don’t belong in the same place. I’m her blood, and I know.”

“You don’t know.” Odette tipped back Lena’s chin. “If they hadn’t loved, if Abby Rouse and Lucian Manet hadn’t loved and made a child together, you and I wouldn’t be here.”

“If they’d been meant, she wouldn’t have died the way she did. She wouldn’t be a ghost in that house.”

“Oh *chère*.” Both the exasperation and all the affection

colored Odette's voice. "It isn't Abby Rouse who haunts that place."

"Who, then?"

"I expect that's what that boy's there to find out. Might be you're here to help him."

She gave a sniff of the air. "Bread's done," she said an instant before the oven buzzer sounded. "You want to take a loaf over to the Hall?"

Lena set her jaw. "No."

"All right, then." Odette walked up the steps, opened the back door. "Maybe I'll take him one myself." Her eyes were dancing when she glanced over her shoulder. "And could be I'll steal him right out from under your nose."

*D*eclan had every door and window on the first level open. Ry Cooder blasted out of his stereo with his lunging rhythm and blues. Working to the beat, Declan spread the first thin coat of varnish on the newly sanded floor of the parlor.

Everything ached. Every muscle and bone in his body sang with the same ferocity as Ry Cooder. He'd thought the sheer physical strain of the sanding would have worked off his temper. Now he was hoping the necessary focus and strain of the varnishing would do the job.

The rosy dawn hadn't lived up to its promise.

The woman pushed his buttons, he thought. And she knew it. One night she'd wrapped herself all over him in bed, and the next she won't give him more than some conversation on the phone.

Snaps out in temper one minute, melts down to sexy teasing the next. Trying to turn the night they'd spent together into the classic one-night stand.

Fuck that.

“Aw, *cher*, what you wanna get all het up about?” he muttered. “You haven’t seen het up, baby. But you’re going to before this is done.”

“You look to be in the middle of a mad.”

He spun around, slopping varnish. Then nearly went down to his knees when he saw Odette smiling at him from the doorway.

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Not surprising.” With the privilege of age, she leaned down and turned down the volume on his portable stereo as Cooder switched pace, lamenting falling teardrops. “Like Cooder myself, but not that loud. Brought you by a loaf of the brown bread I baked this morning. You go on and finish what you’re doing. I’ll put it back in the kitchen for you.”

“Just give me a minute.”

“You don’t have to stop on my account, *cher*.”

“No. Please. Five minutes. There’s . . . something, I forget what, to drink in the fridge. Why don’t you go on back, help yourself?”

“I believe I will. It’s a bit close out already, and not even March. You take your time.”

When he’d finished up enough to join her, Odette was standing in front of his kitchen display cabinet, studying the contents.

“My mama had an old waffle iron just like this. And I still got a cherry seeder like the one you got in here. What do they call these dishes here? I can’t remember.”

“Fiestaware.”

“That’s it. Always sounds like a party. You pay money for these old Mason jars, *cher*?”

“I’m afraid so.”

She clucked her tongue at the wonder of it. “There’s no accounting for things. Damn if they don’t look pretty, though. You come look through my shed sometime, see if

there's anything in there you want." She turned now, nodded at the room. "This is fine, Declan. You did fine."

"It'll come together when the counters are in and I finish the panels for the appliances."

"It's fine," she said again. "And the parlor where you're working, it's as lovely as it can be."

"I've already bought some of the furniture for it. A little ahead of myself. Would you like to sit down, Miss Odette?"

"For a minute or two. I've got something from the house you might like to have, maybe put on the mantel in the parlor or one of the other rooms."

She took a seat at the table he'd moved in, and pulled an old brown leather frame from a bag. "It's a photograph, a portrait, of Abigail Rouse."

Declan took it and gazed down on the woman who haunted his dreams. It might have been Lena, he thought, but there was too much softness, too much yet unformed in this face. Her cheeks were rounder, her long-lidded eyes too gullible, and far too shy.

So young, he mused. And innocent despite the grown-up walking dress with its high, fur-trimmed collar, despite the jaunty angle of the velvet toque with its saucy feathers.

This was a girl, he reflected, where Lena was a woman.

"She was lovely," Declan said. "Lovely and young. It breaks your heart."

"My grandmama thought she was 'round about eighteen when this was taken. Couldn't've been more, as she never saw her nineteenth birthday."

As she spoke, a door slammed upstairs, as if in temper. Odette merely glanced toward the ceiling. "Sounds like your ghost's got mad on, too."

"That just started happening today. Plumber's kid shot out of here like a bullet a couple hours ago."

“You don’t look like you’re going anywhere.”

“No.” He sat across from her as another door slammed, and looked back down at Abigail Rouse Manet’s shy, hopeful smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

There was a madness about Mardi Gras. The music, the masks, the mayhem all crashing together into a desperate sort of celebration managed to create a tone that was both gleefully innocent and rawly sexual. He doubted the majority of the tourists who flocked here for the event understood or cared about the purpose of it. That rush to gorge on pleasures before the forty days of fasting.

Wanting a taste of it himself, Declan opted to wander through the crowds, even snagged some beads when they were tossed in a glitter of cheap gold from one of the galleries. His ears rang with the blare of brass, the wild laughter.

He decided the sight of naked breasts, which a couple of coeds flashed as they followed tradition and jerked up their shirts, would be less alarming after a couple of drinks.

As would being grabbed by a total stranger and being treated to a tonsil-diving kiss. The tongue currently in-

vading his mouth transferred the silly sweetness of many hurricanes and happily drunken lust onto his.

“Thanks,” he managed when he freed himself.

“Come on back here,” the masked female shouted. “*Laizzate les bon temps rouler!*”

He didn’t want to let the good times roll when it involved strange tongues plunged into his mouth, and escaped into the teeming crowds.

Maybe he was getting old, he thought—or maybe it was just the Boston bedrock—but he wanted to get someplace where he could sit back and observe the party rather than being mobbed by it.

The doors to Et Trois were flung open, so the noise from within poured out and tangled with the noise of the streets. He had to weave his way through the revelers on the sidewalk, those packed inside, and squeeze his way to a standing spot at the bar.

The place was full of smoke, music and the slap of feet on wood as dancers shoehorned together on the dance floor. Onstage, a fiddler streamed out such hot licks, Declan wouldn’t have been surprised to see the bow burst into flame.

Lena was pulling a draft with one hand, pouring a shot of bourbon with the other. The two other bartenders were equally busy, and from what he could see, she had four waitresses working the tables.

He spotted his crawfish grinning from their spot on the shelf behind the bar and was ridiculously pleased.

“Beer and a bump,” she said and slid the glasses into waiting hands. When she spotted Declan, she held up a finger, then served three more customers as she worked her way down to him.

“What’s your pleasure, handsome?”

“You are. You’re packed,” he added. “In here and out on the sidewalk.”

“Banquette,” she corrected. “We call them banquettes

'round here." She'd pulled her hair back, wound purple and gold beads through it. The little silver key dangled against skin dewed with perspiration. "I can give you a drink, *cher*, but I don't have time to talk right now."

"Can I give you a hand?"

She pushed at her hair. "With what?"

"Whatever."

Someone elbowed in, shouted out a request for a tequila sunrise and a Dixie draft.

Lena reached back for the bottle, shifted to pull the draft. "You know how to bus tables, college boy?"

"I can figure it out."

"Redheaded waitress? She's Marcella." She nodded in the general direction of mayhem. "Tell her you're hired. She'll show you what to do."

By midnight, he figured he'd carted about a half a ton of empties into the kitchen, and dumped the equivalent of Mount Rainier in cigarette butts.

He'd had his ass pinched, rubbed, ogled. What *was* it with women and the male behind? Someone ought to do a study on it.

He'd lost track of the propositions, and didn't care to think about the enormous woman who'd hauled him into her lap.

It had been like being smothered by a three-hundred-pound pillow soaked in whiskey.

By two, he was beyond amazement at the human body's capacity for vice, and had revised any previous perception of the skill and endurance required in food-service occupations.

He made sixty-three dollars and eighty-five cents in tips, and vowed to burn his clothes at the first opportunity.

The place was still rolling at three, and he decided Lena hadn't been avoiding him. Or if she had, she'd had a reasonable excuse for it.

“What time do you close?” he asked when he carted another load toward the kitchen.

“When people go away.” She poured bottled beer into the plastic to-go cups, handed them off.

“Do they ever?”

She smiled, but it was quick and distracted as she scanned the crowd. “Not so much during Mardi Gras. Why don’t you go on home, *cher*? We’re going to be another hour or more in here.”

“I stick.”

He carried the empties into the kitchen and came back in time to see a trio of very drunk men—boys really, he noted—hitting on Lena and hitting hard.

She was handling them, but they weren’t taking the hint.

“If y’all want to last till Fat Tuesday, you gotta pace yourself a bit.” She set to-go cups under the taps. “Y’all aren’t driving now, are you?”

“Hell no.” One, wearing a University of Michigan T-shirt under an avalanche of beads, leaned in. Way in. “We’ve got a place right over on Royal. Why don’t you come back there with me, baby? Get naked, take a spin in the Jacuzzi.”

“Now, that’s real tempting, *cher*, but I’ve got my hands full.”

“I’ll give you a handful,” he said and, grabbing his own crotch, had his two companions howling and hooting.

Declan stepped forward, ran a proprietary hand over Lena’s shoulder. “You’re hitting on my woman.” He felt her stiffen under his hand, saw the surly challenge in the Michigan boy’s eyes.

Under other circumstances, Declan thought as he sized the kid up—six-one, a toned one-ninety—he might be the type to make his bed every morning, he might visit old ladies in nursing homes. He might rescue small puppies. But right now, the boy was drunk, horny and stupid.

To prove it, Michigan bared his teeth. “Why don’t you just fuck off? Or maybe you want to take it outside, where I can kick your ass.”

Declan’s voice dripped with bonhomie. “Now, why would I want to go outside and fight about it, when all you’re doing here is admiring my taste? Spectacular, isn’t she? You didn’t try to hit on her, I’d have to figure you’re too drunk to see.”

“I see just fine, fuckface.”

“Exactly. Why don’t I buy you and your pals a drink? Honey, put those drafts on my tab.”

Declan leaned conversationally on the bar, nodded toward the T-shirt. “Spring break? What’s your major?”

Baffled and boozy, Michigan blinked at him. “Whatzit to ya?”

“Just curious.” Declan slid a bowl of pretzels closer, took one. “I’ve got a cousin teaching there, English department. Eileen Brennan. Maybe you know her.”

“Professor Brennan’s your cousin?” The surly tone had turned to surprised fellowship. “She damn near flunked me last semester.”

“She’s tough, always scares the hell out of me. If you run into her, tell her Dec said hi. Here’s your beer.”

It was past four when Lena let them into her apartment over the bar. “Pretty smooth with those college jerks, *cher*. Smooth enough I won’t give you grief for the ‘my woman’ comment.”

“You are my woman, you just haven’t figured it out yet. Besides, they were easy. My cousin Eileen has a rep at the U of M. Odds were pretty good he’d heard of her.”

“Some men would’ve flexed their muscles.” She set her keys aside. “Gone on outside and rolled around in the street to prove who had the biggest dick.” Weary, she reached up to tug the beads loose as she studied him. “I

guess it's the lawyer in you, so you just talk yourself out of a confrontation."

"Kid was maybe twenty-two."

"Twenty-one last January. I carded them."

"I don't fight with kids. Plus, I really hate having bare knuckles rammed into my face. It seriously hurts." He tipped her chin up. She looked exhausted. "Had a long one, didn't you?"

"Going to be a long time till Wednesday. I appreciate the help, sugar. You pulled your weight."

More than, she thought. The man had slid right into the rhythm of her place and *worked*. Charmed her customers, tolerated the grab-hands, and avoided a potentially ugly situation by using his wit instead of his ego.

The longer she knew him, she reflected, the more there was to know.

She tugged an envelope out of her back pocket.

"What's this?"

"Your pay."

"Jesus, Lena, I don't want your money."

"You work, I pay. I don't take free rides." She pushed the envelope into his hands. "Off the books, though. I don't want to do the paperwork."

"Okay, fine." He stuffed it into his own pocket. He'd just buy her something with it.

"Now, I guess I'd better give you a really good tip." She wound her arms around his neck, slithered her body up his. Eyes open, she nibbled on his lip, inching her way into a kiss.

His hands ran down her sides, hooked under her hips, then hitched them up until her legs wrapped around his waist. "You need to get off your feet."

"Mmm. God, yes."

He nuzzled her neck, her ear, worked his way back to her mouth as he carried her into the bedroom. "Know what I'm going to do?"

Lust was a low simmer under the bright glory of being off her aching feet. "I think I have a pretty good notion."

He laid her on the bed, could almost feel her sigh of relief at being horizontal. He pried off one of her shoes. "I'm going to give you something women long for." He tossed the shoe aside, then climbing onto the bed, removed the other.

Weary or not, her face went wicked. "A sale at Saks?"

"Better." He skimmed a finger over her arch. "A foot rub."

"A what?"

Smiling, he flexed her foot, rubbed her toes, and saw her eyes go blurrier yet with pleasure.

"Mmmm. Declan, you do have a good pair of hands."

"Relax and enjoy. The Fitzgerald Reflexology Treatment is world famous. We also offer the full-body massage."

"I bet you do."

The worst of the aches began to evaporate. When he worked his way up to her calves, overworked muscles quivered with the combination of pain and pleasure.

"Do you take any time off after Mardi Gras?"

She'd been drifting, and struggled to focus at the sound of his voice. "I take Ash Wednesday off."

"Boy, what a slacker." He tapped a careless kiss to her knee. "Here, let's get your clothes off."

He unbuttoned her jeans. She lifted her hips, gave a lazy stretch. He doubted she realized her voice was husky, her words slurring. "What else you got in mind to rub, *cher*?"

He indulged himself by cupping her breasts, enjoyed her easy response, the way she combed her fingers through his hair, met his lips. He tugged her shirt up and away, snapped open the front catch of her bra. Kissed his way down to her breasts while she arched back to offer.

Then he flipped her onto her stomach. She jerked,

groaned, then all but melted when he kneaded her neck. “Just as I thought,” he announced. “Carry most of your tension here. Me, too.”

“Oh. God.” If she’d had a single wish at that moment, it would’ve been that he keep doing what he was doing for a full week. “You could make a good living out of this.”

“It’s always been my fall-back career. You’ve got yourself some serious knots here. Doctor Dec’s going to fix you up.”

“I just love playing doctor.”

She waited for him to change the tone, for his hands to become demanding. He was a sweetheart, she thought sleepily. But he was a man.

She’d just take herself a little catnap, and let him wake her up.

The next thing she knew, the sun was beating through her windows. A groggy glance at her bedside clock showed her it was twenty after ten. Morning? she thought blearily. How did it get to be morning?

And she was tucked into bed as tidily as if her grandmother had done the job. Tucked in alone.

She rolled over on her back, stretched, yawned. And realized with a kind of mild shock that nothing ached. Not her neck, not her feet, not her back.

Doctor Dec, she mused, had done a very thorough job. And was probably at home sulking because she hadn’t paid his fee. Hard to blame him, when he’d been such a sweetie pie, and she’d done nothing but lie there like a corpse.

Have to make it up to him, she told herself, and crawled out of bed to put coffee on before she hit the shower.

She walked into the kitchen, stared at the full coffeepot

on her counter, and the note propped in front of it. Frowning, she picked up the note, switched the pot back to warm as she read.

*Had to go. Counter guys coming this morning.
Didn't know when you'd surface, so I was afraid
to leave the pot on. But it's fresh as of seven-ten
A.M., that is, if you end up sleeping 'round the
clock. By the way, you look pretty when you sleep.
I'll give you a call later.*

Declan

“Aren’t you the strangest thing,” she muttered as she tapped the note against her palm. “Aren’t you just a puzzlement.”

*S*he needed to stop into the bar to check on her lunch shift, to check on supplies. Then, needing her curiosity satisfied, she drove out to Manet Hall.

The door was open. She imagined he was one of the few who’d lived here who would leave that impressive front door open to whoever might wander in. Country living or no, someone should put a bug in his ear about a security system.

She could hear the racket of workmen from the back of the house, but took her time getting there.

The parlor grabbed her attention. She crouched down, touched her fingers to the glossy floors, and found them hard and dry, and, stepping in, just looked.

He took care, was all she could think. He took care of what was his. Paid attention to details and made them matter. Color, and wood, the elegant fireplace, the gleam of the windows, which she imagined he’d washed personally.

Just as she imagined he would furnish this room personally—and with care and attention to detail.

She'd never known a man to take so much . . . bother, she supposed, with anything. Or anyone. And maybe, she was forced to admit, she'd spent too much time with the wrong kind of man.

“What do you think?”

She turned and, framed by the windows, by the light, looked at him as he stood in the doorway. “I think this house is lucky to have you. I think you see it as it should be, and you'll work to make it come to life again.”

“That's nice.” He crossed to her. “That's very nice. You look rested.”

“A man's not supposed to tell a woman she looks rested. He's supposed to tell her she looks gorgeous.”

“I've never seen you look otherwise. Today you look rested on top of it.”

“You are the smoothie.” She wandered away, toward the fireplace. She trailed a palm over the mantel, stopped when she came to the brown leather frame holding the photograph of a young woman. “Abigail,” she whispered, and the ache went into her. Went deep.

“Miss Odette gave it to me. You look like her, a little.”

“No, I never looked as innocent as this.” Compelled, Lena traced a fingertip over the young, hopeful face.

She'd seen the photograph before, had even studied it, point by point, during a period in her life when she'd found the story, the mystery of it, romantic. During a period when she herself had been young enough to see romance in tragedy.

“It's odd,” Lena said, “seeing her here. Seeing part of me here.”

“She belongs here. So do you.”

She shook that off, and the sorrow those dark, clear eyes coated over her heart. Turning, she gave Declan a

long, considering look. Work clothes, she thought, tool belt, a night's stubble. It was getting harder and harder to picture him wearing a pin-striped suit and carrying a fancy leather briefcase.

It was getting harder and harder to picture her life without him in it.

"Why did you leave my place this morning?"

"Didn't you see the note? Counter guys." He jerked a thumb back toward the kitchen. "I had to beg and pay extra to get them to schedule me for a Saturday morning. I had to be here."

"That's not what I meant. You didn't come into the city, work—what was it, about six hours busing tables?—and give me a foot rub because you didn't have anything better to do on a Friday night. You came in for sex, *cher*, and you left without it. Why is that?"

He could feel his temper prick holes in his easy mood. "You're a piece of work, Lena. You've got a real talent for turning something simple into the complicated."

"That's because things are rarely as simple as they look."

"Okay, let's clear it up. I came into the city because I wanted to see you. I bused tables because I wanted to help you. I rubbed your feet because I figured you'd been on them about twelve hours straight. Then I let you sleep because you needed to sleep. Hasn't anyone ever done you a favor?"

"Men don't, as a rule, unless they're looking for one in return. What're you looking for, Declan?"

He gave himself a moment, waiting for the first lash of anger to pass. "You know, that's insulting. If you're worried about your pay-for-work ethic, I can spare about twenty minutes now. We can go up, have sex, even the score. Otherwise, I've got a lot to do."

"I didn't mean to insult you." But she saw, quite

clearly, she had. "I just don't understand you. The men I've known, on an intimate level, would have been irritated by what didn't happen between us this morning. I expected you to be, and I wouldn't have blamed you. I would've understood that."

"It's harder for you to understand that I could care about you enough to put sex on the back burner so you could get a few hours' sleep?"

"Yes."

"Maybe that's not insulting. Maybe that's just sad." He saw the color deepen in her cheeks as the words hit her. Embarrassed color, he realized. "Everything doesn't boil down to sex for me. It helps things percolate, but it's not all that's in the pot."

"I like knowing where I stand. If you don't know where you stand, you can't decide if that's where you want to be, or which direction you'd like to go from there."

"And I'm fucking up your compass."

"You could say that."

"Good. I'm a pretty agreeable guy, Lena, but I'm not going to be lumped in with others you've dealt with. In fact, you won't deal with me at all. We'll deal with each other."

"Because that's the way you want it."

"Because that's the way it is." His tone was flat, final. "Nothing between us is like, or going to be like, anything either of us has had before. You may need some time to get used to that."

"Is this how you get your way?" she demanded. "By listing off the rules in that annoyingly reasonable tone?"

"Facts, not rules," he corrected in what he imagined she would consider that annoyingly reasonable tone. "And it's only annoying because you'd be more confident having a fight. We've already eaten into the twenty minutes we could've earmarked for sex. Good sex, or a good

fight, take time. I'm going to have to take a rain check on both."

She stared at him, tried to formulate any number of withering remarks. Then just gave up and laughed. "Well, when you cash in your rain checks, let's do the fight first. Then we can have make-up sex. That's like a bonus."

"Works for me. Do you have to get right back, or have you got a few minutes? I could use a hand hauling in and unrolling the rug I've got for in here. I was going to snag one of the counter guys, but with what I'm paying them, I'd as soon they stick with the counters."

"Pinching pennies now? And you with all those big tubs of money."

"You don't keep big tubs of money if you let yourself get hosed. Besides, this way I'd get to keep you here and look at you a little while longer."

"That's clever." And the fact was, she wanted to stay, wanted to be with him. "All right, I'll help you with your rug before I go. Where is it?"

"Next parlor." He gestured to the connecting doors. "I've got most of what I've bought so far stuffed in here. I'm working in the library next, so I can clean out what goes in the front parlor and in there before I start on this one."

Lena moved to the pocket doors he opened, then just goggled. Aladdin's cave, she thought, outfitted by a very rich madman with very eclectic taste. Tables, sofas, carpets, lamps, and what her grandmother would call doodads were spread everywhere.

"God Almighty, Declan, when did you get all this?"

"A little here, a little there. I tell myself no, but I don't listen. Anyway"—he began to pick his way through the narrow aisles his purchases formed—"it's a big house. It needs lots of . . . stuff. I thought about sticking with the era when the house was originally built. Then I decided I'd get bored. I like to mix things up."

She spotted a brass hippo on what she tagged as a Hep-plewhite side table. "Mission accomplished."

"Look at this lamp." He ran his fingers over the shade of a Tiffany that exploded with gem colors. "I've got a weakness for lamps."

"*Cher*, looking 'round here, I'd say you've got a weakness for every damn thing."

"I sure have one for you. Here's the rug." He patted the long, rolled carpet leaning against the wall. "I think we can drag it, snake it through. I should've put it closer to the door, but I wasn't sure where I was going to use it when I bought it. Now I am."

Between them, they managed to slide it to the floor, then with Declan walking bent over and backward, they wove it around the islands of furniture. He had to stop once to move a sofa, again to shove a table aside.

"You know," Lena said as they both went down on their knees, panting a little, in the parlor, "in a couple months you're going to be rolling this up again. Nobody leaves rugs down through the summer around here. Too damn hot."

"I'll worry about that in June."

She sat back on her heels, patted his cheek. "*Cher*, you're going to start thinking summer before April's over. Okay." She pushed up her sleeves, put her palms on the roll. "Ready?"

On their hands and knees, they bumped along, pushing the carpet, revealing the pattern. She could catch only glimpses of the colors and texture, but it was enough to see why he wanted it here.

The greens of leaves were soft, like the walls, and blended with faded pink cabbage roses against a deeper green background. Once it was unrolled, she got to her feet to study the effect while he fussed with squaring it up.

“You bought yourself a rose garden, Declan. I can almost smell them.”

“Great, huh? Really works in here. I’m going to use the two American Empire sofas, and I think the Biedermeier table. Start with those, then see.” He looked up at the ceiling medallion. “I saw this great chandelier—blown glass, very Dale Chihuly. I should’ve bought it.”

“Why don’t we see how your sofas do first?”

“Hmm? Oh, they’re heavy, I’ll get Remy to give me a hand with them later. He’s supposed to come by.”

“I’m here now.”

“I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

She merely shot him a look and started back into his makeshift storeroom.

They’d just set the second one in place, she’d only stepped back to ponder the arrangement, when she heard the baby crying.

She glanced over at Declan, but he seemed lost in thought.

“Did one of your counter men bring a baby with him?” she asked, and Declan closed his eyes, sank down on the sofa.

“You hear it? Nobody else hears it. The doors slamming, yeah. And water running when there’s nobody in the room to turn on the taps. But nobody hears the baby.”

A chill whipped up her back, had her glancing uneasily toward the hallway. “Where is it?”

“The nursery, mostly. Sometimes in the bedroom on the second floor. Abigail’s room. But usually the nursery. It stops when I get to the door. Remy’s been here twice when it started. He didn’t hear it. But you do.”

“I have to see. I can’t stand hearing a baby crying that way.” She walked into the foyer, started up the stairs. And it stopped.

For an instant, it seemed the whole house hushed.

Then she heard the clamor from the kitchen, the stream of music from a radio, the hum of men's voices as they worked.

"That's so strange." She stood on the staircase, one hand on the banister. And her heart thumping. "I was thinking, I wanted to pick up the baby. People say you need to let babies cry, but I don't know why they should. I was thinking that, and she stopped crying."

"It's weird, isn't it, that you were thinking about picking up your great-great-grandmother? It's Marie Rose," he said when Lena turned on the stairs to look down at him. "I'm sure of it. Maybe you can hear her because you're blood. I guess I can because I own the house. I have a call in to the previous owners. I wanted to ask them, but they haven't gotten back to me."

"They may not tell you."

"Well, they can't tell me if I don't ask. Does it scare you?"

She looked up the stairs again and asked herself the same question. "I guess it should, but no, it doesn't. It's fascinating. I think—" She broke off as a door slammed upstairs. "Well, no baby did that." So saying, she ran upstairs.

"Lena." But she was already rounding the curve to the landing and gave him no choice but to bolt after her.

Marching down the hall, she flung doors open. As she reached Abigail's room, the cold swept in. The shock of it had her breath huffing out. Mesmerized by the vapor it caused, she wrapped her arms tightly over her chest.

"This isn't like the baby," she whispered.

"No. It's angry." When he laid his hands on her shoulders to warm her, to draw her away, the door slammed in their faces.

She jumped—she couldn't help it. And heard the nerves in her own strangled laugh. "Not very hospitable, this ghost of yours."

“That’s the first time I’ve seen it.” There was a hard lump at the base of his throat. His heart, Declan thought as he took two steadying breaths. “Whoever it is—was—is seriously pissed off.”

“It’s Abigail’s room. We Cajuns can have fierce tempers if we’re riled.”

“It just doesn’t feel like a girl’s anger. Not that pretty young thing in the photograph downstairs.”

“A lot you know about girls then, *cher*.”

“Excuse me, I have a sister, and she can be mean as a scalded cat. I meant it feels more . . . full-blown. More vicious.”

“Somebody killed me and buried my body in some unmarked grave, I’d be feeling pretty vicious.” Lena made herself reach out, grip the icy knob. “It won’t turn.”

Declan laid his hand over hers. The cold swept out again; the knob turned easily. And when they opened the door, there was only an empty room, full of sunlight and shadows.

“It’s a little scary, isn’t it?” But she stepped over the threshold.

“Yeah, a little bit.”

“You know what I think, *cher*?”

“What?”

“I think that anybody who stays in the house alone, night after night, who goes out and buys rugs and tables and lamps for it . . .” She turned around and slid her arms around his waist. “I think a man who does that has big steel balls.”

“Yeah?” Reading invitation, he lowered his head and kissed her. “I could probably carve out another twenty minutes for that sex now.”

She laughed and gave him a hard hug. “Sorry, sugar. I’ve got to get on back. Saturday night’s coming on. But if you happened to be in the neighborhood, say, at three, four in the morning, I think I could stay awake long

enough to . . .” She cupped her hand between his legs and stroked over denim. “Stay awake long enough to give those big, steel balls a workout.”

He managed not to whimper, but it was a close call. “Wednesday,” he told her. “When you’re clear.”

She still had her hand between his legs, could feel the hard line of him. “Wednesday?”

“When you’re clear.” But he did crush his mouth to hers to give her some taste of what he was feeling. “Come out here. We’ll have dinner. And stay.” He backed her against the wall. Used his teeth on her. “Stay the night. I want you in my bed. Wednesday. Tell me you’ll come out and be with me.”

“All right.” She wiggled free. Another few minutes of that, she thought, they wouldn’t wait till Wednesday and she’d have him right here on the floor. “I have to get back. I shouldn’t have stayed so long.”

She looked up and down the hall as she stepped out of the room. “I don’t believe I’ve ever spent the night in a haunted house. What time should I come by?”

“Early.”

“I might do that, too. You don’t need to see me to the door, *cher*.” She sent him a wicked grin. “Walking’s got to be a little bit of a problem for you, shape you’re in just now. You come on into the bar if you change your mind.”

She laid a fingertip on her lips, kissed it, then pointed it at him like a gun before she walked away.

It was an apt gesture, Declan thought. There were times a look from her was as lethal as a bullet.

All he had to do was hold out until Wednesday, then he could get shot again.

Rain moved in Saturday night and camped out like a squatter through the rest of the weekend. It kept Declan inside, and kept him alone. With Blind Lemon Jackson playing on his stereo, he started preliminary work on the library.

He built a fire as much for cheer as warmth, then found himself sitting on the hearth, running a finger over the chipped tile. Maybe he'd leave it as it was. Not everything should be perfect. Accidents should be accepted, and the character of them absorbed.

He wanted to bring the house to life again, but did he want to put it back exactly the way it had been? He'd already changed things, and the changes made it his.

If he had the tile replaced, was he honoring the history of the Hall, or re-creating it?

It hadn't been a happy home.

The thought ran through him like a chill, though his back was to the snapping fire.

A cold, cold house, full of secrets and anger and envy.

Death.

She wanted a book. Reading was a delight to her—a slow and brilliant delight. The sight of the library, with row after row after row of books, made her think of the room as reverently as she did church.

Now, with Lucian closeted with his father in the study going over the business of land and crops, and the rain drumming against the windows, she could indulge herself in a quiet afternoon of reading.

She wasn't quite accustomed to the time to do as she pleased and so slipped into the room as if it were a guilty pleasure. She no longer had linens to fold, tables to dust, dishes to carry.

She was no longer a servant in this place, but a wife.

Wife. She hugged the word to her. It was still so new, so shiny. As the life growing inside her was new. So new, she had yet to tell Lucian.

Her curse was late, and it was never late. She'd awakened ill three days running. But she would wait, another week. To speak of it too soon might make it untrue.

And oh, she wanted a child. How she wanted to give Lucian a child. She laid a hand on her belly as she wandered along the shelves and imagined the beautiful son or daughter she would bring into the world.

And perhaps, just perhaps, a child would soften Lucian's mother. Perhaps a child would bring joy into the house as the hope for one brought joy to her heart.

*She selected Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The title, she thought, spoke to her. Manet Hall had so much of both. She bit her lip as she flipped through the pages. She was a slow, painstaking reader, but Lucian said that only meant she savored the words.*

Stumbled over them, she thought, but she was getting better. Pleased with herself, she turned and saw Julian slouched in one of the wine-colored chairs, a snifter in his hand, a bottle by his elbow.

Watching her.

He frightened her. Repulsed her. But she reminded herself she was no longer a servant. She was his brother's wife, and should try to be friends.

"Hello, Julian. I didn't see you."

He lifted the bottle, poured more brandy into his glass. "That book," he said, then drank deep, "has words of more than one syllable."

"I can read." Her spine went arrow-straight. "I like to read."

"What else do you like, chère?"

Her fingers tightened on the book when he rose, then relaxed again when he strolled to the fireplace, rested a boot on the hearth, an elbow on the mantel.

"I'm learning to ride. Lucian's teaching me. I'm not very good yet, but I like it." Oh, she wanted to be friends with him. The house deserved warmth and laughter, and love.

He laughed, and she heard the brandy in it. "I bet you ride. I bet you ride a man into a sweat. You may work those innocent eyes on my brother—he's always been a fool. But I know what you are, and what you're after."

"I'm your brother's wife." There had to be a way to take the first step beyond this hate. For Lucian, for the child growing inside her, she took it, and walked toward Julian. "I only want him to be happy. I make him happy. You're his blood, Julian. His twin. It isn't right that we should be at odds this way. I want to try to be your sister. Your friend."

He knocked back the rest of the brandy. "Want to be my friend, do you?"

"Yes, for Lucian's sake, we should—"

"How friendly are you?" He lunged toward her, grabbed her breasts painfully.

The shock of it froze her. The insult flashed through the shock with a burning heat. Her hand cracked across his

cheek with enough force to send him staggering back.

“Bastard! Animal! Put your hands on me again, I’ll kill you. I’m Lucian’s. I’m your brother’s wife.”

“My brother’s whore!” he shouted as she ran for the door. “Cajun slut, I’ll see you dead before you take what’s mine by rights.”

Raging, he shoved away from the mantel. The heavy silver candlestick tumbled off, smashed against the edge of the tile, snapped off the corner.

Declan hadn’t moved. When he came back to himself he was still sitting on the hearth, his back to the snapping fire. The rain was still beating on the ground, streaming down the windows.

As it had been, he thought, during the . . . vision? Fugue? Hallucination?

He pressed the heel of his hand between his eyes, where the headache speared like a spike into his skull.

Maybe he didn’t have ghosts, he thought. Maybe he had a goddamn fucking brain tumor. It would make more sense. Anything would make more sense.

Slamming doors, cold spots, even sleepwalking were by-products of the house he could live with. But he’d *seen* those people, inside his head. Heard them there—the words, the tone. More, much more disturbing, he’d felt them.

His legs were weak, nearly gave way under him as he got to his feet. He had to grip the mantel, his fingers vising on so that he wondered the marble didn’t snap.

If something was wrong with him, physically, mentally, he had to deal with it. Fitzgeralds didn’t bury their heads in the sand when things got tough.

Figuring he was as steady as he was going to get, he went into the kitchen to hunt up aspirin. Which, he decided as he shook out four, was going to be like trying to piss out a forest fire. But he gulped them down, then ran the cold glass over his forehead.

He'd fly up to Boston and see his uncle. His mother's baby brother was a cardiologist, but he'd know the right neurosurgeon. A couple of days, some tests, and he'd know if he was crazy, haunted or dying.

He started to reach for his phone, then stopped and shook his head. Crazy, he thought, just got one more point. If he went to Uncle Mick, word of his potential medical problems would run through the family like an airborne virus.

Besides, what was he running back to Boston for? New Orleans had doctors. He'd get the name of Remy's. He could tell his friend he just wanted to get a doctor, a dentist and so on in the area. That was logical.

He'd get himself a physical, then ask the doctor to recommend a specialist. Simple, straightforward and efficient.

If ghosts couldn't drive him out of Manet Hall, damn if a brain tumor would.

As he set the glass down, a door slammed on the second floor. He simply glanced up at the ceiling and smiled grimly.

"Yeah, well, I'm in a pretty crappy mood myself."

By Wednesday, he had a handle on things again. Maybe it was the anticipation of seeing Lena that lifted his spirits—in combination with the work he'd managed to get done on those last days before Lent. He had an appointment with Remy's doctor the following week and, having taken that step, was able to put most of the concern about the state of his brain aside.

There had been no more fugues. At least, he thought, none he was aware of.

The rain had finally moved on to plague Florida, and had left him with the first tender trumpets of daffodils scattered along one of his garden paths.

The morning weather report had detailed a ten-inch snowfall in Boston.

He immediately called his mother to rub it in.

Sunshine and the tease of spring had him switching gears earlier than he'd intended. He postponed work on the library and set up outdoors to reinforce the second-floor gallery, to replace damaged boards.

He listened to Ray Charles, and felt healthy as a horse. He was going to have the Franks do most of the early planting, he decided. He just didn't have time. But next year, he'd do his own. Or as much as he could manage.

Next spring, he'd sit out here on the gallery on Sunday mornings, eating beignets, drinking café au lait—with Lena. Long, lazy Sundays, looking out over the lawns, the gardens. And a few years down the road, looking out at the kids in the yards, in the gardens.

He wanted a family of his own, and it was good to know it. He'd never had that need inside him before, the need to hold onto the now and look to tomorrow at the same time.

So he knew it was right, what he felt for her. What he planned for them. He'd help her in the bar if she needed it, but he'd have his own work.

He turned his hands over, studied the palms, the calluses he'd built. The little nicks and scars he looked on as personal medals of valor.

He'd use them, his back and his imagination, to transform other houses. People in the parish would think of Declan Fitzgerald when they needed a contractor.

You should've seen that old house before he got ahold of it, they'd say. You need the job done, you just call Dec. He'll fix you up.

The idea made him grin as he ripped out the next rotten board.

By four, he'd finished the long front sweep of the gallery floor and stretched out on it, belly down, to take a

break. He fell asleep with B. B. King pleading with Lucille.

And was sleeping still when he rose and walked down the shaky, sagging curve of stairs to the front lawn.

The grass was thick under his feet, and the heat of the sun poured over his face, beat down on his head despite the hat he wore as protection.

The others were inside, but he'd wanted to look at the pond, at the lilies. He'd wanted to sit in the shade of the willow that danced over the water, and read.

He liked the music of the birds, and didn't mind the heat so much. The heat was honest. The air inside the Hall was cold and false.

It was heartbreaking to watch the house he loved rotting away from bitterness.

He stopped at the edge of the pond, looking down at the green plates of the pads, the creamy white lilies that graced them. He watched a dragonfly whiz by, the sun glinting off the wings so it was an iridescent blur. He heard the plop of a frog and the call of a cardinal.

When he heard his name, he turned. And smiled as his beloved crossed the velvet lawn toward him. As long as they were together, he thought, as long as they loved, the Hall would stand.

"Declan. Declan."

Alarmed, Lena gripped his arms and shook. She'd seen him coming down those treacherous stairs as she'd driven down his lane, and how he'd walked toward the pond in an awkward, hesitant gait so unlike his usual easy stride.

His eyes were open but glazed in a way that made her think he was looking through her and seeing something—someone—else.

"Declan." She kept her voice firm, and her hands, as she took his face in them. "Look at me now. Hear me? It's Lena."

"Let's sit under the willow where no one can see us."

There was no willow, only the rotted stump of one. Fear tickled the back of her throat, but she swallowed it. Going with instinct, she rose up on her toes and laid her lips warmly on his.

His response was slow, dreamy, a kind of sliding to her. Against her. Into her. So she knew the instant he snapped back by the way his body stiffened. He started to sway, but she held on.

“Steady now, *cher*. You just hang onto me till you get your legs under you.”

“Sorry. Need to sit.” He dropped straight down on the grass, laid his brow on his knees. “Whoa.”

“You’re okay now. You’re fine now.” She knelt beside him, brushing at his hair and murmuring in Cajun—her language of comfort. “Just get your breath back.”

“What the hell’s wrong with me? I was on the gallery. I was working on the gallery.”

“Is that the last thing you remember?”

He looked up now, over the pond. “I don’t know how I got out here.”

“You walked down the stairs, the ones on the right of the house. I thought you were going to go straight through them.” Her heart still hitched when she thought of how unsteady they were. “They don’t look safe, Declan. You ought to block them off.”

“Yeah.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “Lock myself in a padded room while I’m at it.”

“You’re not crazy.”

“I’m sleepwalking—in the daylight now. I’m hallucinating. I’m hearing voices. That doesn’t sound sane to me.”

“That’s just the Yankee talking. Down here that doesn’t even come up to eccentric. Why, my great-aunt Sissy has whole conversations with her husband, Joe, and he’s been dead for twelve years come September. Nobody thinks she’s crazy.”

“What do they talk about?”

“Oh, family business, current events, the weather. Politics. Great-Uncle Joe dearly loved complaining about the government. Feeling better now, *cher*?”

“I don’t know. What did I do? What did you see me do?”

“You just came down the stairs and walked across the grass toward the pond. You weren’t walking like you, so I knew something was wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a smooth, lanky kind of gait, and you weren’t moving like that. Then you stopped at the pond.”

She didn’t tell him she’d had one shocked moment when she’d been sure he meant to walk straight into the water.

“I kept calling you. And finally you turned around and smiled at me.” Her stomach muscles tightened as she remembered. “But not *at* me. I don’t think you were seeing me. And you said you wanted to sit under the willow, where no one could see us.”

“There’s no willow here.”

“Well.” She pointed toward the stump. “There was, once. Seems like you’re having dreams where maybe you can see things that happened before. That’s a kind of gift, Declan.”

“Where do I return it?” He shook his head. “I don’t know, because I can’t remember once I wake up. But I’m starting to think I should tie myself to the bedpost at night.”

“I can take care of that for you tonight.”

“You trying to cheer me up with bondage fantasies?”

“How’d I do?”

“Pretty good.” He let out a breath, then frowned at the smudge on her forehead. “You’ve got some soot or something,” he began, and she tipped her head back before he could rub at it.

“Those are my holy ashes.”

“Oh, right.” His brain had definitely gone on holiday. “Ash Wednesday. I not only don’t know where I am, but when I am.”

She couldn’t bear to watch him sink into the dark again, and kept her voice brisk, just a little lofty. “I take it you didn’t get to church today, on this holy day of obligation.”

He winced. “You sound like my mother. I forgot. Sort of.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Seems to me you could use all the blessings you can get.” So saying, she rubbed her thumb on the print of ash on her forehead, then rubbed it on his. It made him smile.

“That’s probably sacrilegious, but thanks. What time is it?” He looked at his watch and swore. “I have to get this sucker into the shop. It keeps stopping on me. I know it’s past noon, and it sure isn’t midnight.”

“It’s about five. You did say to come early.”

“Yeah, I did. Why don’t we go sit out back and have some wine?”

She watched him closely for the first few minutes, but he appeared to be steady again as he selected a wine. Got some lovely old stemware out of his new cupboards.

He’d frightened her, Lena could admit, and badly. She’d been certain he’d intended to walk into the water, to drown himself among the lily pads just as Lucian Manet had done.

And with the realization, a whole new realm of possibilities opened in her mind. “Declan . . .”

“I got steaks and I got a grill,” he said as he poured the wine. He needed to focus on ordinary things—to steep himself in the here and now. “All real men can grill steaks. If you tell me you don’t eat red meat, we’re going to have to go for the frozen pizza.”

“If I eat meat, why should I care what color it is? Let’s go out and sit. I’ve got an idea I want to run by you.”

They walked to the two wooden crates he was using for chairs and sat.

“What if it’s not ghosts? Or not only ghosts?” she asked him.

“Oh, that’s a cheering thought. What else have I got? Vampires? Werewolves? Maybe some flesh-eating zombies. I’m going to sleep much better now, thanks.”

“What do you think about reincarnation?”

“Past lives? Recycling souls?” He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“It always seemed efficient to me—and fair, too. Everybody deserves more than one chance, don’t you think? Maybe you’re remembering things that happened here because you lived here before. Maybe you’re Lucian, come back after all these years for his Abigail.”

“That’s a romantic notion. I’ll be Lucian if you’ll be Abby.”

“You don’t get to choose. And if you’re going to make fun of the idea, I won’t say another word about it.”

“Okay, don’t get testy.” He sipped his wine, brooded into space. “So your theory is I’m here, and these things are happening because I lived a past life, as Lucian Manet.”

“It’s no more farfetched than the place being haunted, which you swallowed easy enough. It would explain why you bought this place, needed it. Why you’re working so hard to restore its beauty. How you saw the furniture in his bedroom upstairs.”

“Reincarnation,” he repeated. “Sounds better than a brain tumor.”

“What?”

He shook his head, drank again. “Nothing.”

“You’re thinking you got a tumor in your brain? That’s

nonsense, Declan.” Her voice was sharper than she’d intended, so she continued more gently. “That’s just nonsense, *cher*. There’s not a thing wrong with your head or any other part of you.”

“Of course not. I was just thinking out loud.”

But she saw it on his face and, rising, slid onto his lap, straddling him. “You’re really worried you’ve got something inside your head making you see things, do things?”

“I’m not worried. I’m just . . . Look, I’m going to have some tests, eliminate the possibility.”

“You’re not sick, *cher*.” She touched her lips to his cheek, then the other. There’d never been another man who’d so consistently, so effortlessly, nudged out her tender side. “I guarantee it. But if having some fancy doctor tell you the same thing settles your mind, that’s fine.”

“Don’t mention this to Remy.” He took her hand until she eased back to meet his eyes. “He’s got the wedding coming up. That’s enough for him to think about right now.”

“So, you’re planning on going to have brain tests all by yourself? That’s not the way we do things around here, *cher*. You don’t want Remy to know, all right. But you tell me when this is set up for, and I’ll go with you.”

“Lena, I’m a big boy.”

“You’re not going by yourself. So I go with you, or I tell Remy and we gang up on you.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know when it’s scheduled and you can hold my hand. In the meantime, I’m going to put my money on your reincarnation theory. It’s weird, but it’s a lot less messy than brain surgery.”

“They say Lucian Manet was a handsome man, like a young golden god.” She trailed her fingers through Declan’s disordered hair. It was a dark blond, she mused, thick, lush, and she bet it would streak up sexily with the

summer sun. “I think you’ve improved on him this time around.”

“Oh yeah?” He hooked his arms around her waist. “Tell me more.”

“I never much cared for the golden-god type. Usually too pretty for my taste.” She cocked her head, eased forward to kiss him. “You suit my taste, *cher*.”

He brought her closer and, sitting on the wooden crate, rested his chin on her shoulder as he looked out over the gallery railings. “I love you, Lena.”

“If you’re trying to sweet-talk me into bed before you feed me—”

He drew her back, and the grin faded from her face as she saw his. “I love you,” he repeated. “I never understood what that meant before, and I didn’t think I could.”

He held her in place when she tried to scramble up and away. “You need to settle down now,” she told him.

“Yeah, I do—but I don’t think you mean it the same way. I need to settle down, right here, with you. I don’t care if it’s the first time or the fiftieth time we’ve gone around. You’re what I’ve been waiting for.”

“Declan, you’re making more out of this than you should.” Her voice wanted to shake. God knew, her stomach already was. “We went out to dinner. We went to bed. We’ve seen each other a handful of times.”

“It only took one look at you.”

His eyes were so deep, she thought, so clear. Like the surface of a lake at twilight. “You don’t even know me.”

He pulled her back a second time, reminding her that there was steel in him, and an edge to it. “You’re wrong. I know you’re smart, and you’re strong. Enough to carve out your own place from almost nothing. I know you pay your debts. I know you’re loyal and you’re loving. I know somebody hurt you, and it wouldn’t take much to knock the scab off. And I know I’m scaring you right now be-

cause you don't think you're ready to hear what I'm saying to you."

The beat of her heart was painful, like the strike of a fist on a raw wound. "I'm not looking for love, Declan. I'm sorry."

"Neither was I, but there you go. We don't have to rush it. I wasn't going to say anything to you yet but . . . I needed to."

"*Cher*, people, they fall in and out of love all the time. It's just a dazzle of chemicals."

"He really hurt you."

Frustrated, she pushed away, and this time he let her go. "You're wrong. There's no man, no ghost of some lover who broke my heart. I look like a cliché to you?"

"You look like everything to me."

"*Mon Dieu*." The man made her throat fill up, then snap shut. Deliberately she fought back the sensation and spoke clearly. "I like you, Declan, and I enjoy your company. I want you in bed. If that's not enough for you, I walk now and save us both a lot of trouble and disappointment."

"Do you always get so pissed off when somebody tells you he loves you?"

No one ever had, she nearly said. No one ever had who meant it. "I don't like being pushed, and when I am, I make a point of not going in that direction."

"I have to admire that." His grin was easy as he got to his feet. "I like you, too, Lena. And I enjoy your company, want you in bed. That's enough for now. Are you hungry? I think I'll heat up the grill."

If it was a trick, Lena thought, or some sort of strategy to keep her off balance, it was well done.

She just couldn't quite puzzle the man out, and his

seamless shift of moods was a surefire way to push her to keep trying.

He cooked like a man who didn't trust himself in an actual kitchen. Jacketed potatoes on the grill, the steaks. And he sweet-talked her into making the salad.

He didn't say another word about love.

He asked her about work, how her business had done during the two days of rain. He put on music, kept it low, and talked through the kitchen door as the grill smoked and she chopped vegetables.

They might have been casual friends, or the most comfortable of lovers.

They ate in his pretty kitchen, by candlelight. Even the house behaved. Despite it—or perhaps because of it—she stayed on edge throughout the meal.

He took a bakery cake out of the fridge. Lena took one look, sighed. “I can't.”

“We can save it for later.”

“I can't for forty days. I gave up chocolate for Lent. I've got a powerful taste for chocolate.”

“Oh.” He stuck it back in. “I've probably got something else.”

“What'd you give up?”

“Wearing women's underwear. It's tough, but I think I can hold out till Easter.”

“You talk like that, I'm going to take my ashes back.” He was making her itchy, she thought. The best way to solve that was to make him itch more. She stepped behind him as he searched his refrigerator, then wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her body to his. “You need to give something up, *cher*, something you've got a powerful taste for.”

“It sure as hell isn't going to be you.”

He let her spin him around, shove him back against the refrigerator.

Oh, he knew her, he thought as she used her lips to set off explosions in his bloodstream. He knew she was using sex to keep one step ahead of him. One step back from him.

If she didn't realize he could love her as much as he wanted her, it was up to him to show her.

"In your bed, you said." Her mouth was reckless, restless as it raced over his face. "In your bed."

She pulled him toward the doorway. He nearly pulled her back, toward the kitchen stairs, but decided it might be interesting to take the long way around.

He pushed her against the wall in the hallway, assaulted her throat with his teeth. "We'll get there."

He reached down, yanked her shirt up, over her head, threw it aside. Wrapped together, they did a quick vertical roll along the wall, and finally stopped with their positions reversed. With impatient hands she pulled his shirt open so that buttons danced along the floor.

They fought with clothes on their way to the steps. Shoes landed with thumps. Her bra fluttered over the banister, his jeans plopped on the third step.

They were breathless before they reached the landing.

His hands were rough, a workingman's hands now that thrilled as they streaked over her. Her skin came alive.

"Hurry." She sank her teeth into his shoulder as need raged through her, a firestorm of violent heat that burned away all caution. "God, hurry."

He nearly took her where they stood, but he wanted her under him. Bucking, arching.

With his mouth savaging hers, he wrapped his arms around her waist, lifted her two inches off the floor. Something raw and primitive stabbed through him at the knowledge that there was no choice now. No choice for either of them but to mate.

Shadows cloaked them as they moved toward the bedroom.

Cold from doorways seeped out, made her shiver.

“Declan.”

“This is us. This is ours.” As he spoke, his voice a snarl, as he held her, his grip like iron, the cold curled back.

They fell on his bed, a tangle of limbs and urgency. When he plunged into her, her nails dug into his back. Pleasure, dark and desperate, drenched her, the feral glory of it drove her up so that she twined herself around him and matched the furious pace.

No control, nor the desire for it. Only the wild thirst to take and take and take. And with it, the gnawing hunger to give.

She clung to him, riding through the storm of sensation, sprinting up and up toward that jagged brink again.

Dimly, she heard a clock begin to strike in deep, heavy bongs. On the twelfth, she shattered with him.

*W*hen he started to shift away, she tightened her grip. “Mmm. Don’t move yet.”

“I’m too heavy for you.” He rubbed his lips at the curve of her throat.

“I like it. I like this.” Lazily, she angled her head so he could work his way up to her jaw. Her body felt used and bruised and wonderfully loose. “Even better than chocolate cake.”

He laughed and rolled over, taking her with him so she sprawled over his chest. “There, now I don’t have to worry about crushing you.”

“A gentleman to the last.” Content, she settled in. “I’ve always liked a clock that chimes the hours,” she said. “But you need to set it. It’s not midnight yet.”

“I know.”

“Sounded like a big, old grandfather clock. Where’d you put it? In the parlor?”

“No.” He stroked a hand over her hair, down her back. “I don’t have a clock that chimes.”

“*Cher*, you absolutely ring my bells, but I heard a clock chime twelve.”

“Yeah, so did I. But I don’t have a clock.”

She lifted her head, let out a slow breath. “Oh. Well then. Does it scare you?”

“No.”

“Then it doesn’t scare me, either,” she said, and laid her head back over his heart.

The best way, in Declan's opinion, to break through the obstacles and opposition to any goal, was not to ram headfirst against them and risk a skull fracture, but to chip away at them. Gradually, reasonably. Relentlessly. Whether it was a lawsuit, a sporting event or a love affair, it was imperative to keep the end in sight in order to select the correct means.

He found out which Mass Lena and her grandmother attended, and at which church. Research was essential in any strategy.

When he slipped into the pew beside them on Sunday morning, he got a long speculative look from Lena, and a conspirator's wink from Odette.

He figured God would understand and appreciate the ploy, and not hold it against him for using Sunday Mass as a means to his end.

But he wouldn't mention the brainstorm to his mother. She was, in Declan's experience, a lot less flexible than the Almighty.

Aiming the leading edge of his charm toward Odette, he talked them into brunch afterward, and got another cool stare from Lena when he gave his name to the hostess. He'd already made reservations for three.

"Sure of yourself, aren't you, *cher*?"

His eyes were the innocent gray of a former altar boy. "Just prepared."

"You ain't no Boy Scout, sugar," she told him.

"Your granddaughter's very cynical," Declan responded as he offered his arm to Odette.

"What she is, is smart." Odette patted a hand on his and had her bracelets jangling. "A woman's got to be about smooth-talking, handsome men. Man who comes into church so he can spend a Sunday morning with a woman, he's pretty smart, too."

"I thought I'd come in and pray for a while."

"What'd you pray for?"

"That you'd run away with me to Borneo."

With a laugh, Odette slipped into the chair Declan held out for her. "Aren't you the one?"

"Yeah." He looked directly at Lena. "I'm going to be the one."

They settled in with mimosas and the first round from the expansive buffet. While a jazz quartet played Dixieland, Declan told them about the progress on the house.

"I'm going to stick with the outside work as long as the weather holds. Tibald's still dealing with the plastering, and I'm trying to line up a painter for the exterior. I don't want to do that myself. The guy I had paint the parlor came in to take a look at the library, but he left sort of abruptly."

Declan's expression was rueful as he sipped his mimosa. "I don't think he's coming back. Tile man, either. He got one bath half done when he packed it in."

"I can do some asking around for you," Odette offered.

"I'd appreciate it. But I think I'm going to have to start

looking outside the parish or try my hand at some of this stuff myself. Things are getting a little lively at the Hall.”

“Grown men running off because a couple of doors slam.” Lena curled her lips into a sneer. “Ought to have more spine.”

“It’s a little more than that now. Clocks bonging where there aren’t any clocks to bong, music playing in empty rooms. When the painter was there, the pocket doors in the library kept opening and closing. Then there was the screaming.”

“What screaming?”

“Tile guy.” Declan smiled wanly. “Said he heard somebody come in the bedroom door, thought it was me. He’s talking away, setting the tiles, listening to what he assumed was me moving around in there. Since I wasn’t answering whatever questions he had, he got up, walked in. Nobody there. From what I could get out of him when he was semi-coherent, the bathroom door slammed behind him, the logs caught fire in the fireplace. Then he claims he felt somebody put a hand on his shoulder. I had to peel him off the ceiling when I got up there.”

“What do you think about it?” Odette asked.

“A couple of things. Seems to me the more the work progresses on the house, the more overt and volatile the . . . paranormal activity, we’ll call it. Especially, well, when I veer off from the original scheme.”

Lena scooped up a forkful of grits—a particular southern culinary custom Declan had yet to get his tastebuds around. “What do you mean?”

“For example, the plasterwork. The areas where that is going on, things are pretty settled. I’m restoring them, replicating. But in places where I’ve made changes—bathroom setup, tiles—things get really interesting. It’s like whatever’s in the house gets royally ticked that we’re not sticking with the original plan.”

“Something to think about,” Odette commented.

“I have been. I figure Josephine Manet.” Even here, with Dixieland bright in the air and champagne fizzing, the name coated his belly with dread. “Mistress of the Hall. You only have to look at her photographs to see that was a woman who didn’t like to be crossed. Now, I come along and put my fingerprints all over what’s hers.”

“You resolved to living with her?” Odette asked, and watched his jaw firm.

“I’m resolved to living in the Hall, and doing it my way. She wants to kick up a fuss about it, that’s her problem.”

Lena sat back. “What do you figure, Grandmama? Brave or stubborn?”

“Oh, he’s some of both. It’s a good mix.”

“Thanks, but I don’t know how brave it is. It’s my house now, and that’s that. Still, I think you can’t blame a man who doesn’t have any more than his time and labor invested for taking a hike. Anyway, Miss Odette, what do you think? Am I tangling with Josephine?”

“I think you’ve got two opposing forces in that house. The one that brought you there, the one that wants you to go away. It’s going to come down to who’s strongest.”

She opened her Sunday purse, took out a small muslin bag. “I made this up for you.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, a little kitchen magic. You just keep that in your pocket. May not help, but it can’t hurt.” She picked up her glass again, smiled at it. “Imagine, drinking champagne for breakfast.”

“Come with me to Borneo, you can bathe in it.”

“*Cher*, I drink enough of this, I may take you up on it.”

“I’ll get us another round.”

She was so sweet with her, Lena thought. Flirting with her grandmother until there was a flush of pleasure on

Odette's cheeks throughout the long, lazy meal. He troubled himself for people, she mused. Took the time, made the effort to find out what they might enjoy, then saw to it.

He was attentive, clever, sexy, rich, tough-minded and kind.

And he said he was in love with her.

She believed she understood him well enough to be sure he wouldn't have said it unless he meant it. That's what unnerved her.

For added to those other qualities was a wide streak of honesty. And sheer stubborn grit.

He could make her fall in love with him. She was already halfway there and sliding fast. Every time she tried to dig her heels in, she lost her balance again. The tumble was as worrisome as it was thrilling.

But what would happen when she hit? Once she dropped all the way, there'd be no climbing back out. That was something she understood about herself. Relationships were easy when they didn't matter, or mattered only for the moment.

When they mattered forever, they changed everything.

Things had changed already, she admitted. It had started with that yearning for him inside her. And now with the comfort and challenge she felt when she was with him. With being able to imagine feeling it day after day, year after year.

He'd want promises she was afraid to give.

Not afraid, she corrected, irritated with herself. Reluctant to give. Unwilling to give.

Then she watched him lean over and kiss her grandmother's cheek and was afraid—there was no point in pretending otherwise—that she'd end up giving him anything he asked for.

He courted her. It seemed a particularly appealing southern word to Declan, bringing images of moonlight and porch swings, tart lemonade and country dances.

Throughout March, two things occupied his mind, his time and his plans. Lena and the house.

He celebrated the clear results of his neurological tests by taking the day off to antique. Spring had jump-started the flowers and had pedestrians strolling in shirtsleeves. The carriage horses the tourists loved prancing with bright clip-clops of hooves on pavement.

Summer would drop her heavy hand soon enough, and turn the air to molasses. The thought of it reminded him he had to have the air-conditioning upgraded, and maybe reconsider installing paddle fans in some of the rooms.

He bought with his usual surrender to impulse, brightening the day of several shopkeepers before he stopped in a place called, simply, Yesterday.

It was a hodgepodge of statuary, lamps, vintage accessories and jewelry, with three curtained booths on the side where patrons could buy a tarot card reading.

It was the ring that caught his eye first. The blood-red ruby and ice-white diamond formed two halves of an interlocking heart on a platinum band.

The minute he held it in his hand, he knew he wanted it for Lena. Maybe it was foolish to buy an engagement ring at this point in their relationship. And it was reckless to snatch at something before he'd looked at other options.

But this was the one he wanted to put on her finger. And he decided if a man could buy a house on a whim, he could sure as hell buy a ring.

"I'll take it."

"It's beautiful," said the shopkeeper. "She's a lucky woman."

"I'm working on convincing her of that."

"I have some lovely earrings that would complement

this. Is ruby her birthstone?" the clerk asked as she showed him a pair of earrings with a dangle of ruby hearts and diamonds.

"I don't know." But he'd gotten her birthday from Odette to make sure he didn't miss it. "July?"

"Then it is. Lucky guess."

"No kidding." It gave him a little tingle as he looked back at the ring. Some things were meant, he told himself. He lifted one of the earrings. He could already see them on her—just as he imagined the clerk could see *Impulse Buyer* stamped on his forehead.

He leaned on the counter and began to pit Yankee bargaining skills against southern horse-trading.

He figured they'd come to fair terms when her smile was still in place but much less brilliant.

"Will that be all for you today?"

"Yeah, I've got to get going. I'm already—" He broke off when he glanced at his watch and saw it had stopped at twelve again. "You know, I could use a watch—a pocket watch. Mine's been acting up, and I'm doing a lot of carpentry right now. Probably smashed this one a few times on the job."

"I've got some wonderful old pocket watches and chains. They're so much more imaginative than the new ones."

She led him over to another display cabinet, pulled out a drawer and set it on the counter.

"Watches like this tell more than time," she began. "They tell a story. This one—"

"No." The edges of his vision dimmed like smoke. The chatter of voices from other customers faded into a hum. Part of him remained aware enough to know he was sliding away from himself. Even as he tried to stop it, to pull back, he watched his own hand reach out, pick up a gold watch and its loop of chain.

The voice of the shopkeeper hovered around the rim of

his consciousness. It was another voice that stabbed through, clear as a bell. Female, young, excited.

For my husband, for his birthday. He broke his. I want to give him something special. This one is so handsome. Can you engrave it?

And he already knew what he would find, exactly what he would find, before he turned the watch over to read the back.

*To Lucian from his Abby.
To mark our time together.
April 4, 1899*

“Mr. Fitzgerald? Mr. Fitzgerald, are you all right? Would you like some water? You’re awfully pale.”

“What?”

“Can I get you some water? Would you like to sit down?”

“No.” He closed his hand tightly over the watch, but the sensation was already fading. “No, thanks. I’m okay. I’ll take this, too.”

More than a little shaken, he headed to Remy’s office. He thought some time in the sensible business district, in the rational atmosphere of law, might help settle him down.

More, he wanted a few minutes with a friend who might think he was crazy, but would love him anyway.

“If you’d told me you were coming by,” Remy began as he closed his office door, “I’d’ve scooted some stuff around so we could maybe have lunch.”

“I didn’t expect to head over this way today.”

“Been shopping again.” Remy nodded at the bag Declan carried. “Boy, aren’t you having anything sent down from Boston?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve got some stuff coming down next week. Books mostly,” Declan said as he wandered the office. His gaze skimmed over the law books, the fat files, the memos. All of it, the debris of the lawyer, seemed very distant to him now.

“A few pieces I had in my study up there that should work in the library.”

He picked up a brass paperweight, set it down. Slipped a hand into his pocket, jiggled change.

“You going to tell me what’s on your mind, or just pace until you dig a trench in my carpet?” With his suit jacket draped over the back of his chair, his tie loosened, his sleeves rolled up, Remy kicked back in his chair and began to swish a bright green Slinky from palm to palm. “You’re wearing me out.”

“I’ve told you some of the things that’ve been happening.”

“Got a firsthand account of them myself when I dropped in on Saturday. I’d still feel better if you told me that piano music we heard was from some radio you forgot to turn off.”

“I guess I’ll have to get a piano for the ladies’ parlor, since that seems to be the spot. I like to play anyway, when I remember to sit down at one.”

Remy shifted the Slinky to vertical, let the colorful spiral drip into itself. “So, you came by to tell me you’re in the market for a piano?”

“I bought a watch today.”

“And you want to show it off? Want me to call in my assistant, some of the law clerks?”

“It was Lucian Manet’s watch.”

“No shit?” The Slinky, sloshed into a whole, was tossed aside. “How do you know? Where’d you get ahold of it?”

“Little shop in the Quarter.” He drew out the box, set it on Remy’s desk. “Take a look at it.”

Obliging, Remy took off the lid. “Elegant, if you want something you’re going to have to dig out whenever you want to know what time it is. Heavy,” he added when he picked it up.

“You don’t . . . feel anything from it?”

“Feel anything?”

“Look on the back, Remy.”

“Names and dates are right,” Remy concluded. “Hell of a stroke of luck, you stumbling on this.”

“Luck? I don’t think so. I go into a shop, buy Lena a ring, then—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, just back up there a minute. A ring?”

“I told you I was going to marry her.” Declan shrugged. “I found the ring. It doesn’t hurt to have it ahead of schedule. But that’s not the point.”

“Pretty damn big point, if you ask me. She know you’re up to this?”

“I told her how I felt, what I wanted. I’m letting her stew on it awhile. Can we get back to the watch?”

“*Et là!* You always were mule-headed. Go ahead.”

“I walk into that shop, decide I need a watch because mine’s acting up. I decide I need a pocket watch even though I’ve never used one, never thought about using one. Then, I see that one, and I know. I know it was his, I know she bought it for him for his birthday. I know what it says on the back before I read it. Exactly what it says. Because I heard it in my head.”

“I don’t know what to think about that.” Remy raked his fingers through his hair. “Isn’t there something about how some people touch an object and get images from it? Its history or whatever?”

“It’s called psychometry. I’ve been doing a lot of reading up on paranormal science in my spare time,” Declan explained when Remy frowned at him. “But I’ve never

had anything like that happen before. Lena's got a theory. That this is a reincarnation deal."

Remy pursed his lips, set the watch back in its box. "I guess I'd be more inclined to put some stock in that rather than the psycho whatever."

"If it is, then the house, now this watch, are triggering past-life memories. Pretty weird."

"The whole thing's been weird since the get-go, *cher*."

"Here's the kicker. If I accept that I was Lucian, then I know Lena was Abigail. What I don't know is if I'm supposed to bring her into the house, to make things right from before. Or if I'm supposed to keep her away from it, and resolve the cycle that way."

In the Vieux Carre, where Lena prepared to leave her apartment for the bar and the afternoon shift, she opened the door and stepped into another cycle. An old one.

"Baby!" Lilibeth Simone threw open her arms.

Sluggish with shock, Lena was unable to move back before they wrapped around her like chains. Trapped, she was assaulted with impressions. Too much perfume that didn't quite cover the smell of stale smoke, the bony form honed down by years of hard living. Sticky layers of hair-spray over curls dyed black as pitch.

And through it all seeped her own dark dread.

"I went downstairs first, and that handsome young man behind the bar said you were still up here. Why, I'm so glad to catch you!" The voice was a bright bubble that bounced and jerked in the air. "Let me just *look* at you! I swear, I *swear* you just get prettier every time I see you. Sweetie pie, I just have to sit down a minute and catch my breath. I'm just so excited to see you, I can hardly *stand* it."

She talked too fast, Lena noted, walked too fast on the

spiked backless heels she'd paired with hot-pink and skin-tight capris. Those were warnings that she'd taken a hit of her current drug of choice very recently.

"Look what you've done with this place!" Lilibeth dropped into a chair and dumped a floral suitcase beside her. She clapped her hands like a child so the plastic bracelets on her bony wrists banged together. "Why, I just love it. Suits you, baby. It sure does suit you."

She'd been pretty once, Lena thought as she studied her mother. She'd seen pictures. But all that prettiness had been carved down, diamond-hard, to canny.

At forty-four, Lilibeth's face showed all the wear from too much liquor, too many pills and far too many men.

Deliberately, Lena left the door open and remained standing just inside it. The sound of traffic, the scent of the bakery across the street, kept her grounded. "What do you want?"

"Why, to see you, of course." Lilibeth let out a trill of laughter that scraped over Lena's brain like nails on a blackboard. "What a thing to ask. I got such a yen to see you, baby. I said to myself, My Lena's busy, but we've just got to have a little time together. So I got myself on a bus, and here I am. You just have to sit on down here, honey, and tell me everything you've been up to."

Disgust rolled through her, and Lena clung to it. Better disgust than the despair that crept along just under it. "I have work."

"Oh now, you can take a little while for your own mama. After all, you own the place. I'm just so proud of my baby, all grown up and running your own business.

"Doing so well for yourself, too," she continued as she looked around the room.

Lena caught the look, and the cunning in it. It tightened her chest, and stiffened her spine. "I told you the last time it was the last time. You won't get any money from me again."

“Why do you want to hurt my feelings like that?” Lilibeth widened her eyes as they filled with tears. “I just want to spend a few days with my little girl.”

“I’m not a little girl,” Lena said dully. “Yours in particular.”

“Don’t be mean, honey, after I’ve come all this way just to see you again. I know I haven’t been a good mama to you, darling, but I’m going to make it up.”

She jumped up, pressing a hand to her heart. The nail on the pinkie of her right hand was very long, slightly curved.

Coke nail, Lena realized without shock or regret. Now she knew Lilibeth’s current drug of choice.

“I made some mistakes, I know I did, honey.” Lilibeth’s voice rang with apology, with regret. “You gotta understand, I was just so young when you came along.”

“You’ve used that one up.”

Lilibeth dug into her shiny red purse, pulled out a tattered tissue. “Why you wanna be so hard on your mama, baby girl? Why you wanna hurt my heart?”

“You don’t have a heart. And you’re not my mama.”

“Carried you inside me for nine months, didn’t I?” Sorrow became temper as if a switch had been flicked. Lilibeth’s voice rose, shrilled. “Nine months of being sick and fat and stuck back that damn bayou. Lay there in pain for hours giving birth to you.”

“And left me within a week. An alley cat spends more time with its litter than you did with me.”

“I was sixteen.”

It was that, the sad fact of it, that had caused Lena to make room, time and time again, in her heart. Until her heart had simply calcified from the blows. “You haven’t been sixteen in quite a while. Neither have I. I’m not going to waste time arguing about it. I have to work, and you have to go.”

“But, baby.” Panicked, Lilibeth shifted, back to the

teary, choked voice. "You've got to give me a chance to make things right. I'm going to get me a job. I can work for you awhile, won't that be fun? I'll just stay here with you for a couple weeks till I find a place of my own. We'll have such a fine time. Just like girlfriends."

"No, you won't work for me, and no, you can't stay here. I made that mistake four years ago, and when I caught you turning tricks up here, you stole from me and took off again. I don't repeat myself."

"I was sick back then. I'm clean now, honey, I swear I am. You can't just turn me out." She held out her hands, palms up, in a gesture of pleading. "I'm flat broke. Billy, he took almost everything I had and ran off."

Lena could only assume Billy was the latest in the string of users, losers and abusers Lilibeth gravitated to. "You're high right now. Do you think I'm blind or just stupid?"

"I'm not! I just took a little something because I was so nervous about seeing you. I knew you'd be mad at me." Tears spilled out, tracking bits of mascara down her cheeks. "You just have to give me a chance to make it up to you, Lena honey. I've changed."

"You've used that one up, too." Resigned, Lena walked to her purse, counted out fifty dollars. "Here." She stuffed it into Lilibeth's hand. "Take this, get on a bus and ride it as far away as this takes you. Don't come back here again. There's no place for you here."

"You can't be so mean to me, baby. You can't be so cold."

"Yes, I can." She picked up the suitcase, carried it over to the door and set it outside. "It's in the blood. Take the fifty. It's all you're going to get. And get out, or I swear to God, I'll throw you out."

Lilibeth marched to the door. The money had already disappeared into her purse. She stopped, gave Lena one last glittering look. "I never wanted you."

“Then we’re even. I never wanted you, either.” She shut the door in her mother’s face. Then flipped the locks, sat down on the floor. And cried in absolute silence.

She was certain she’d smoothed away the edges by the time she drove out to Manet Hall that evening. She’d nearly canceled the dinner plans she had with Declan, but that would have given her mother too much importance.

That would have acknowledged the grief that had slashed its way into her heart despite the locks.

She needed to put her mind to other things, and would never manage it if she stayed at home, brooding. She’d get through the night, hour by hour, and in the morning Lilibeth would be gone. From her life, and from her mind.

The house looked different, she thought. Little changes that somehow made it seem more real. It was good to look at it, to focus on it, and to contemplate that some things could change for the better. With the right vision.

Over the years, she’d come to think of Manet Hall as a kind of dream place, burrowed in the past. More than that, she decided. *Of* the past.

Now, with new unpainted boards checkerboarded with the old, peeling white, with some windows gleaming and others coated with dust, it was a work in progress.

Declan was bringing it back to life.

Though the front gardens were a bit straggled, a bit lost, there were flowers blooming. And he’d plopped a huge clay pot full of begonias on the gallery.

He’d have planted them himself, she thought as she walked toward the door. He was a man who liked his hands in things. Especially when he considered them his.

She wondered if he thought of her as one of his works in progress. Probably. She couldn’t quite decide if the idea amused or irritated her.

She strolled in. She figured that when two people had slept with each other a time or two, formalities were superfluous.

She smelled the lilies first, the good, strong scent bringing the garden indoors. He'd bought a lovely old table, a couple of straight-back chairs and, she saw with a grin, an enormous ceramic cow for the foyer.

Some would call it foolish, others charming, she supposed, but no one would call the entrance to the old hall sterile any longer.

"Declan?" She wandered in and out of the parlor, noting the few new additions. She circled into the library and found herself crossing to the mantel and the heavy candlesticks standing on it.

Why did her fingers tremble? she wondered as she reached out to touch. Why did those old tarnished candlesticks look so strangely familiar?

There was nothing special about them, really. Expensive perhaps, but too ornate for her taste. And yet . . . her fingers brushed down each of them, lightly. And yet they looked right here, so right she could imagine the slim white tapers they were waiting to hold once more; she could smell the melting wax.

Shivering, she stepped back and walked out of the room.

She kept calling his name as she started up the stairs. When she reached the first landing, the hidden door in the wall opened. She and Declan choked back simultaneous screams.

With a gasping laugh, she clutched at her heart and stared at him. He had cobwebs in his hair, dirt smeared on his cheek and hands. The flashlight he carried bobbed.

"Lord, *cher*, next time just shoot me and get it over with."

"Same goes." He blew out a breath, dragged at his hair

and the cobwebs lacing it. "You scared five years off me."

"Well, I called out a couple times, then decided I'd just hunt you up." She peered over his shoulder. "What've you got here, secret passages?"

"No, servants' access. There are doors on every level, so I thought I'd take a look. It's kind of cool, but a real mess." He looked down at his filthy hands. "Why don't you go fix yourself a drink or something? I'll clean up."

"I might be persuaded to fix us both a drink. What're you in the mood for?"

"Could use a beer." But he was studying her face now that he'd recovered from the jolt. "What's wrong, Lena?"

"Nothing, other than you frightening the wits out of me."

"You're upset. I can see it."

She tried a suggestive smile. "Maybe I'm sulking 'cause you don't bother to kiss me hello."

"Maybe you don't trust me enough yet, and figure all I'm looking for with you is a good time." He used one knuckle to lift her chin, stared into her eyes until hers began to sting. "You're wrong. I love you." He waited a beat, then nodded when she didn't respond. "I'll be down in a minute."

She started down the steps, then stopped, speaking without looking back. "Declan, I don't think you're looking for a good time, but I don't know as I have what it is you are looking for."

"Angelina. You're what I've looked for all my life."

He didn't press. If she needed to pretend she wasn't upset and skittish, he'd give her room. They took a walk through the rear gardens as dusk crept in.

"This place. All these years, people come, people go. Mostly they go. And here you are, doing more in a few

months than anyone's done since before I can remember."

She turned to study the house. Oh, it still needed work. Wood and paint. New shutters here and there. But it no longer seemed . . . dead, she realized. It hadn't just been abandoned, it had been dead until he'd come.

"You're bringing it back to life. It's more than the money and the work."

"Could you live here?"

Her eyes, startled, even panicked, whipped back to his. But his gaze stayed calm and level. "I have my own place."

"That's not what I asked. I asked if you could. If you could be comfortable here, or if the idea of sharing the place with . . . ghosts or memories, whatever you'd call it, would bother you."

"If it bothered me I wouldn't have come over tonight so you could feed me. Which reminds me, what are you feeding me, *cher*?"

"I'm going to try my hand at grilling tuna." He pulled his pocket watch out. "In a bit," he said after checking the time.

She was mesmerized by the watch in his hand. Her stomach jittered as it had done when she'd seen the candlesticks. "Where did you get that?"

"I found it at a shop today." Alerted by her tone, fascinated by it, he held the watch out. "Look familiar?"

"You just don't see many men using that type of watch anymore."

"I knew it was mine as soon as I saw it. I think you bought it for me," he said, and her head jerked up. "A long time ago." He turned the watch over so she could read the inscription on the back.

"Lucian's." Because her instinct was to curl her fingers into her palms, she made herself reach out and touch the engraving. "Very strange. Strange indeed, Declan. You think I was Abigail?"

“Yeah, I do.”

She shook her head. “Don’t you think that’s a little too neat and tidy—and self-serving?”

“Murder, despair, suicide, a century of wandering souls?” He shrugged and slipped the watch back in his pocket. “Not very tidy, if you ask me. But I think, Lena, that maybe love is patient enough to wait until its time comes around again.”

“God, you are so . . . appealing. And it’s irritating that I have to be the sensible one around here. I like being with you, Declan.”

She toyed with the key on her neck chain as she spoke. A habit, he thought, she was probably unaware of.

“I like your company, I like your looks. And I like making love with you. That’s all I have right now.”

He took her into his arms. “I’ll take it.”

Lena rolled over, slid along one pillow to the other. She heard singing—a deep, male voice in a dreamy refrain. And sighing, she ran her hand over the sheets.

He wasn't beside her in bed, but his warmth was.

Opening her eyes, she blinked against the misty sunlight. She hadn't meant to stay the night. But with Declan, her intentions often twisted around to meet his wishes. More, somehow his wishes circled until they ended up being hers as well.

Clever man, she mused, yawning as she burrowed into the pillow. He rarely seemed to push, never appeared to be unreasonable. And always got his way.

Damned if she didn't admire him for it.

Even now, though she'd have preferred waking in her own bed, she was glad she'd stayed. Her mood had been heavy, and a bit prickly, when she'd arrived. Seeing her mother usually had that effect on her. For a few hours, she'd forgotten about it, and had just enjoyed being with him.

That was enough—and would have to be enough for both of them for as long as it lasted. Seeing Lilibeth was a stark reminder of the promises Lena had made to herself.

To succeed, on her own terms. To live, precisely how she chose to live. And never, never to place her hopes, her needs, her wants in the hands of another.

Declan would move along sooner or later. Everyone did. But she cared more this time, and would make a genuine effort to be and to remain friends.

So, she'd would be very, very careful not to fall in love with him. Very careful not to hurt him while he believed he loved her.

Her brow creased. She *did* hear singing. In the shower, she realized, Declan's voice over the drum of water.

“Long years have passed, child—I’ve never wed, true to my lost love, though she is dead.”

An odd tune for a man to belt out in the shower, she thought, and found herself singing the refrain with him in her mind. *After the ball is over, after the break of morn.*

Puzzled—where had those lyrics come from?—she rose and went to the bathroom door. She knew the tune, but more, she knew the words. The sad story of lack of faith, of death, melded to the romantic melody.

And her heart was pounding. She felt the pulse of it jump in her throat.

Dancing in the moonlight with the house a white beacon against the night. A girl in faded muslin, and the young man in elegant black tie. The smell of lilacs. Heavy and sweet.

The air's thick with flowers. So thick it's hard to breathe. So thick it makes you dizzy as you spin around and around through the garden, along the bricks with the music playing.

Dizzy, dizzy from the dance. Dizzy, dizzy from the fall into love.

She swayed, reaching out to brace a hand against the door. But it opened, and steam poured out as she fell forward.

“Whoa!” Declan caught her, scooped her off her feet. Still wet from the shower, his hair dripping onto her face, he carried her back to bed.

“I’m okay. I just . . . lost my balance.”

“Baby, you’re white as a sheet.” He brushed her hair back, rubbed her chilled hand between both of his. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Torn between confusion and embarrassment, she nudged him back to sit up. “I got up too fast, is all. Then I lost my balance when I reached for the door and you opened it. I’m fine, *cher*. *Ça va*. It’s just a little early for me to be up and around.”

“I’ll get you some water.”

“Sweetheart, don’t fuss. Simones aren’t swooning sorts.” She ran a finger over his chin. It was all fading away now, the song, the scent of lilacs, the giddy sense of reeling. “Though that handsome face of yours does take my breath away. You leave any hot water for me?”

“Probably not.” He eased down to sit beside her. “I’ve got to replace that water heater. If you give it a half hour, it should come through for another shower.”

“Mmm. Now what could I do with a half hour?” Laughing, she pulled him into bed.

Now that, Lena decided, was a much better way to start the day. She lingered over her first cup of coffee at the little table Declan had set up on the gallery outside his bedroom. As his breakfast pickings were slim at best, she’d settled on a bowl of Frosted Flakes and had watched him load his down with sugar.

“*Cher*, why don’t you just have yourself a big old candy bar for breakfast?”

“Don’t have one.”

He grinned over at her, and damn it, he *did* take her breath away.

“You’ve got yourself a nice spot here,” she told him. “Good morning-contemplation sort of spot.”

“It’ll be better when I get some of the boards replaced and it’s painted. Needs more stuff, too.” He glanced around. “Pots, you know, flowers and things. A glider or a swing.”

She spooned up some cereal. “You’re just a homebody, aren’t you, *cher*?”

“Looks like.” And it delighted him. “Who’d’ve thought?”

“And what does the homebody have planned for today?”

“I want to finish the first section of the exterior stairs. If the weather holds through the weekend, I’ll have a good start on the front of the house. I’ve got guys coming in to start on the other bathrooms. Got some more shopping to do. Want to come with me?”

“I’ve never seen a man so crazy to shop.” It was tempting to give in to the charming image of hunting with him for treasures. And to have some part in selecting pieces for the house.

And wouldn’t that go toward forging another link in making them a couple instead of two people just enjoying the moment?

So she shook her head and denied herself the pleasure. “Unless this shopping involves looking at shoes or earrings, you’re on your own, sugar.”

“I could probably fit that in, between hunting up drawer pulls and hardware. In fact . . . hang on a minute.”

He rose and went inside while Lena stretched back and, cupping her mug in both hands, looked out over the gardens to the pond.

She’d distracted him, she thought. Or at least he was

pretending to be distracted from what had happened that morning. She'd damn near fainted, and that would've been a first.

Something in the house, she mused, was affecting her, just as it did Declan. One side pulling her in, another pushing her out, but she was determined to stand firm.

Was it possible he was right after all? Could it be so perfectly neat? He had been Lucian in a past life, and she his doomed Abigail?

Had they danced in the moonlight to that old, sad song?

If it were true, what did it mean to them now, in this life?

Her face was clear of worry when he stepped out again. And put a small box on the table beside her bowl.

"*Cher*, you keep picking up presents like this, what're you going to do when my birthday rolls around?"

"I'll think of something."

"Well, I don't think you're going to top my salt and pepper shakers, but . . ." She opened the box, expecting to see some cute and foolish pin or silly earrings. Then just stared down at the pair of ruby and diamond hearts.

"They caught my eye."

"You—you can't give me something like this." For the first time since he'd known her, she stuttered. "You can't just—just give me earrings like these. These are real stones. Do you think I'm too stupid to recognize real diamonds?"

"No." Interesting, he thought, that she'd jump from fluster into temper at the gift of diamonds. "I thought they'd look good on you."

"I don't care how rich you are." She snapped the lid back down on the sparkle of blood and ice. "I don't care how much money you've got stuffed away in your portfolios and your bank accounts. I don't want you buying me expensive jewelry. If I want diamonds and rubies, then

alors, I'll buy them for myself. I'm not sleeping with you for baubles and profit."

"Well, these were a big hit." He tipped back in his chair to meet her furious eyes, as she'd leaped to her feet as she'd shouted at him. "So, they'd be okay with you if they were glass? Let me get the ground rules clear. If I see something I'd like to get for you, it has to be, what, under a hundred? One-fifty? Give me a ballpark."

"I don't need you to buy me things."

"Lena, if you needed me to buy you things, I'd buy you groceries, for Christ's sake. These were pretty, they made me think of you. And look at this." He picked up the box, ran his free hand around it. "No strings attached."

"Something costs as much as a decent secondhand car's got strings, *cher*."

"Wrong. Money's relative. I have a lot of it, so deal. You don't want them, fine." He shrugged, picked up his coffee. "I'll give them to someone else."

Her eyes went to slits. "Oh, will you?"

"They appear to upset your moral balance, but there's no point in them going to waste."

"You're trying to make me sound like an idiot."

"No, you're acting like an idiot. I'm just playing my part in your little drama. I'd like you to have them, but not if you're going to think they're payment for services rendered. That's just as insulting to me as it is to you, Lena," he said when her mouth dropped open. "Your telling me you don't want payment for sex is telling me I'm willing to buy it from you. They're just goddamn rocks."

"They're beautiful rocks." Damn, damn, damn! Why did the man constantly throw her off balance?

And wasn't it just like him, just exactly like him, to sit there, calmly watching her flash and burn?

She took a deep, steadying breath while he looked at her with both patience and amusement. "I was rude, and I

overreacted. I'm not used to men handing me diamonds and rubies over bowls of cereal."

"Okay. Want me to wait and give them to you over a nice steak dinner?"

She gave a weak laugh, dragged her hair back. "You're entirely too good for me."

"What the hell does that mean?" he demanded.

But she shook her head, then picked up the box. She studied the earrings against their bed of velvet for a long moment before taking them out, putting them on.

"How do they look?"

"Perfect."

She leaned down, kissed him. "Thank you. They just scared me a little, but I'm getting over it pretty quick now."

"Good."

"I'm going to have to wear my hair back with them. Show them off. Damn it," she said as she ran for the door. "I have to see." She stopped at the mirror, held her hair back with one hand. "Oh God! They're fabulous. I've never had anything so lovely in my life. You're a sweet man, Declan. A hardheaded, crazy, sweet man."

"When you marry me," he said from the doorway, "I'll give you diamonds for breakfast once a week."

"Stop that."

"Okay, but keep it in mind."

"I've got to get on. I want to stop by and see my grand-mama before I head back."

"Give me a ride over? I've got something for her."

Her eyes, when they tracked to his in the glass, were indulgent and just a little frustrated. "You bought her another present."

"Don't start on me," he warned, and stepped back out to gather up the bowls.

"Why do you have to buy things all the time, *cher*?"

She knew him now, and the little ripple movement of

his shoulders told her he was annoyed and uncomfortable. So she softened the question by giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I've got money," he said. "And I like stuff. You trade money for stuff, which is more fun and interesting than having a bunch of green paper in your wallet."

"I don't know. Me, I like that green paper just fine. But . . ." She fingered the diamonds at her ears. "I could grow mighty fond of these pretty rocks. Go on, get whatever you've gone and bought for Grandmama. Bound to brighten her day, whatever it is, 'cause it's from you."

"You think?"

"She's sweet on you."

"I like that." He turned, wrapped his arms around Lena's waist. "How about you? You sweet on me?"

A long line of warmth flowed down her spine, nearly made her sigh. "You make it hard not to be."

"Good." He touched his lips to hers, then eased away. "I like that even better."

He carried a little gift bag out to her car. It struck her as odd and charming that he would think of things like that. Not just a present, a token he could so easily afford, but the presentation of it. Pretty bags or bows, ribbons or wrappings most men—or men she'd known—would never bother with.

Any woman she knew would call Declan Fitzgerald one hell of a catch. And he wanted her.

"I'm going to ask you a question," she began as she started the car.

"True or false? Multiple choice?"

"I guess it's more the essay type."

He settled back, stretched out his legs as best he could as she started down the drive. He'd always aced his tests. "Shoot."

“How come with all those fine ladies up in Boston, and all the good-looking women here ’round New Orleans, you zeroed in on me?”

“Not one of them ever made my heart stop, or sprint like a racehorse at the starting gun. But you do. Not one of them ever made me see myself ten years, twenty years down the road, reaching out to take her hand. But you do, Lena. And what I want most in the world is to hold onto you.”

She didn’t look at him, didn’t dare, as everything inside her seemed to fill up so she knew one glance at his face would have it all spilling out. Warm and sweet and conquered.

“That’s a good answer,” she managed.

“It’s a true one.” He took one of her tensed hands off the wheel, kissed it. “God’s truth.”

“I think it is. I don’t know what to do about it, Declan. You’re the first man who’s ever made me worry about what to do. I’ve got powerful feelings for you. I’d rather I didn’t.”

“Here’s what I think. We should elope to Vegas, then you won’t have anything to worry about.”

“Oh, I’m sure the Boston Fitzgeralds would just be thrilled hearing you’ve eloped to Vegas with a Cajun bar owner from the bayou. That’d set them up right and tight.”

“It’d give them something to talk about for the next decade or two. My mother would like you,” he said, almost to himself. “And she’s no easy mark. She’d like that you’re your own woman and don’t take any crap off anyone. Run your own business, look after your grandmother. She’d respect that, and she’d like that. Then she’d love you because I do. My father would take one look at you and be your slave.”

She laughed at that and it loosened some of the tightness in her chest. “Are all the Fitzgerald men so easy?”

“We’re not easy. We just have exceptional taste.”

She pulled up in front of Odette’s house, and finally turned to look at him. “Any of them coming down for Remy and Effie’s wedding?”

“My parents are.”

“We’ll see what we see, won’t we?”

She hopped out, headed to the door ahead of him. “Grandmama!” She bumped the door open and strolled in. “I brought you a handsome gentleman caller.”

Odette came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a red checked cloth. The smells of fresh coffee and baking followed her. She was, as always, decked out in layers of jewelry and sturdy boots. But there was a strain around her eyes and mouth even Declan spotted instantly.

“A gentleman caller’s always welcome. *Bébé*,” she replied and kissed Lena’s cheek.

“What’s wrong?”

“Baked me some brown bread this morning,” Odette said, evading Lena’s question. “Y’all come back to the kitchen.” She wrapped an arm around Lena’s waist to nudge her along. “What you got in the pretty bag, *cher*?”

“Just a little something I thought you’d like.” In the kitchen, Declan set it on the table. “Smells fabulous in here. Maybe I ought to learn how to bake bread.”

Odette smiled as he’d hoped she would, but the tension in the air didn’t lessen. “Could be I’ll teach you a thing or two. Kneading dough’s good therapy. Takes your mind off your troubles, gives you thinking time.”

She took the small wrapped box out of the gift bag, turned it in her hand, then tugged the ribbon free. “Lena, you don’t nail this boy down, I may just snatch him for myself.” When she opened the box, her face softened.

The trinket box fit into the palm of her hand. It was heart-shaped and hand-painted with a couple in old-fashioned formal dress sitting on a garden bench. When she lifted the lid, it played a tune.

"I've been hearing that song in my head for weeks," Declan told her. "So when I saw this, I figured I'd better buy it."

"'After the Ball,'" Odette told him. "It's an old waltz. Sad and sweet." She looked up at him. "Maybe you got a nice widowed uncle you could send my way."

"Well, there's Uncle Dennis, but he's homely as a billy goat."

"He's got half your heart, I'll take him."

"Isn't this a pretty picture?"

At the voice, Lena went stiff as if someone had pressed a gun to her head and cocked the hammer. Declan saw the look pass between her and her grandmother. Apologetic on Odette's part, shocked on Lena's.

Then they turned.

Lilibeth slumped against the doorjamb. She wore a short red robe, loosely belted. Her hair was a tumble around her shoulders, and her face already made up for the day with her eyes darkly lined, her lips slick and red as her robe.

"And who might this be?" She lifted one hand, languidly pushed back her hair as she sent Declan a slow, feline smile.

"What's she doing here?" Lena demanded. "What the hell is she doing in this house?"

"It's my house as much as yours," Lilibeth shot back. "Some of us have more respect for blood kin than others."

"I told you to get on a bus and go."

"I don't take orders from my own daughter." Lilibeth pushed off the jamb, sauntered to the stove. "This here coffee fresh, Mama?"

"How could you?" Lena demanded of Odette. "How could you take her in again?"

"Lena." All Odette could do was take her hand. "She's my child."

"I'm your child." The bitter fury poured out and left its horrid taste on her tongue. "You're just going to let her come back, stay until she's sucked you dry again, until she and whatever junkie she hooks up with this time steal you blind? It's cocaine now. Can't you see it on her? And that doesn't come free."

"I told you I'm clean." Lilibeth slapped a mug on the counter.

"You're a liar. You've always been a liar."

Lilibeth surged forward. Even as Lena threw out her chin to take the blow, Declan stepped between them. "Think again." He said it quietly, but the heat in his voice pumped into the kitchen.

"You lay a hand on her, Lilibeth, one hand on her, and I'll put you out." Odette stepped to the stove, poured the coffee herself with hands not quite steady. "I mean that."

"She's got no call to speak to me that way." Lilibeth let her lips quiver. "And in front of a stranger."

"Declan Fitzgerald. I'm a friend of Lena's, and Miss Odette's. I'll get that coffee, Miss Odette. You sit down now."

"This is family business, Declan." Lena kept her furious eyes on her mother's face. She would think of the embarrassment later. Right now it was only a dull pinch through the cushion of anger. "You should go."

"In a minute." He poured coffee, brought a cup to Odette. Crouched so their faces were level. "I'm Irish," he told her. "Both sides. Nobody puts on a family fight like the Irish. You only have to call me if you need me."

He squeezed her hand, then straightened. "Same goes," he said to Lena.

"I'm not staying. I'll drive you back." She had to breathe deeply, to brace for the pain her own words would cause. "Grandmama, I love you with all my heart. But as long as she's in the house, I won't be. I'm sorry this hurts you, but I can't do this again. Let me know

when she's gone. And you." She turned to Lilibeth. "You hurt her again, you take one dollar from her or bring any of the scum you like to run with in this house, I'll hunt you down. I swear to God I will, wherever you go. And I'll take it out of your skin this time."

"Lena, baby!" Lilibeth rushed down the narrow hall as Lena strode to the door. "I've changed, honey. I want to make it all up to you. Give me a chance to—"

Outside, Lena whirled. "You've had your last chance with me. Don't you come near me. Don't you come near my place. You're dead to me, you hear?"

She slammed the car door, ground the engine to life, then sped off, spewing up a thin cloud of smoke that obscured her mother and the house where she'd grown up.

"Well, that was fun, wasn't it?" Lena punched the gas. "I bet your family would just love a load of Lilibeth Simone. Whore, junkie, thief and liar."

"You can't blame your grandmother for this, Lena."

"I don't blame her. I don't." The tears were rushing up from her throat. She felt the burn. "But I won't be a part of it. I won't." She slammed the brakes in front of the Hall. "I need to go now." But she lowered her brow to the wheel. "Go on, get out. *Va t'en.*"

"No. I'm not going away." Others had, he realized now. And that's where the hurt came from. "Do you want to talk about this out here, or inside?"

"I'm not going to talk about it anywhere."

"Yes, you are. Pick your spot."

"I told you all you need to know. My mother's a whore and a junkie. If she can't earn enough to feed her various habits on her back, she steals. She'd as soon lie as look at you."

"She doesn't live around here."

"I don't know where she lives. No place for long. She came to my place yesterday. Stoned, and full of lies and

her usual talk about new starts and being friends. Thought I'd let her move in with me again. Never again," she said and leaned her head back on the car seat. "I gave her fifty dollars for bus fare. Should've known better. Likely it's already gone up her nose."

"Let's take a walk."

"This isn't something you walk off or kiss better, Declan. I need to get back."

"You're not driving into town when you're still churned up. Let's walk."

To ensure she didn't just drive away when he got out, he took the keys out of the ignition, pocketed them. Then he climbed out, walked around the car. Opening her door, he held out a hand.

She couldn't drum up the energy to argue. But instead of taking his hand, she slid out of the car and dipped hers in her pockets.

They'd walk, she figured. They'd talk. And then, it would be over.

She imagined he thought his gardens—that new blossoming, the tender fragrances—would soothe her. He would want to comfort. He was built that way. More, he'd want to know so he could find solutions.

When it came to Lilibeth, there were no solutions.

"Family can suck, can't it?"

Her gaze whipped to his—dark and fierce, and sheened with damp. "She's *not* my family."

"I get that. But it's a family situation. We're always having situations in my family. Probably because there are so many of us."

"Not having enough canapés at a cocktail party, or having two aunts show up in the same fancy dress isn't a situation."

He debated whether to let the insult pass. She was, after all, raw and prickly. But he couldn't quite swallow it.

“You figure having money negates personal problems? Takes the sting out of hurts, buries tragedies? That’s pretty shallow, Lena.”

“I’m a shallow gal. Comes through the blood.”

“That’s bullshit, but you’re entitled to feel sorry for yourself after almost taking a slap in the face. Money didn’t make my cousin Angie feel much better when her husband got her and his mistress pregnant the same month. It didn’t help my aunt when her daughter died in a car wreck on her eighteenth birthday. Life can fuck you over, whatever your income bracket.”

She stopped, ordered herself to calm down. “I apologize. She tends to put me in a mood that’s not fit for company.”

“I’m not company.” Before she could evade, he cupped her face in his hands. “I love you.”

“Stop it, Declan.”

“I can’t.”

“I’m no good for you. No good for anybody, and I don’t want to be.”

“That’s the key, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

He reached down, lifted the key she wore around her neck. “It wasn’t a man, but a woman who broke your heart. Now you want to lock it up, close it off so you won’t accept love when it’s offered. Won’t let yourself give it back. Safer that way. If you don’t love, it doesn’t matter if someone walks away. That makes you a coward.”

“So what if it does?” She shoved his hand aside. “It’s my life. I live it the way I want, and I get along fine. You’re a romantic, *cher*. Under all that Yankee sense, that expensive education, you’re a dreamer. I don’t put stock in dreams. What is, that’s what counts. One of these days you’re going to wake up and find yourself in this big, old house in the middle of nowhere, wondering what the hell you were thinking. And you’ll hightail it back to Boston,

go back to lawyering, marry some classy woman named Alexandra, and have a couple pretty children.”

“You forgot the pair of golden retrievers,” he said mildly.

“Oh.” She threw up her hands. “*Merde!*”

“Couldn’t agree more. First, the only woman I know named Alexandra has teeth like a horse. She sort of scares me. Second, and more important, what I’m going to do, Angelina, is live out my life in this big, old house, with you. I’m going to raise a family with you, right here. Golden retrievers are optional.”

“You saying it, over and over, isn’t going to make it so.”

Now he grinned, white and wide. “Bet?”

There was something about him when he was like this, she realized. Something potent and just a little frightening when he wore that sheen of affability over a core of concrete stubbornness.

“I’m going to work. You just stay away from me for a while, you hear? I’m too irritated to deal with you.”

He let her walk away. It was enough, for now, that her anger with him had dried up those tears that had glimmered in her eyes.

15

New Orleans

1900

Julian was drunk, as he preferred to be. He had a half-naked whore in his lap, and her heavy breast cupped in his hand. The old black man played a jumpy tune on the piano, and the sound mixed nicely in his head with wild female laughter.

Cigar smoke stung the air, giving him a low-level urge for tobacco. But he couldn't quite drum up the gumption for a cigar, or to haul the whore upstairs.

The fact that he was broke—again—didn't worry him overmuch. He patronized this brothel habitually, and always, eventually, scraped together the funds to pay his bill. His credit was good here, for the moment.

He'd selected the prostitute because she was blond and lush of build, vacant of brain. He could tell himself that later, when he rode her, he wouldn't see Abigail's face staring back up at him.

Not this time.

He took another swig of bourbon, then pinched the

blond's nipple. She squealed and slapped playfully at his hand. He was grinning when Lucian walked in.

"My sainted brother." Though his words slurred, they were bitter on his tongue. Julian gulped more whiskey as he watched Lucian shake his head at a redhead who sidled up to him.

He looked, Julian thought, pale and gold and perfect through the hazy smoke, against the garish colors, through the raucous noise.

And he wondered if Cain had looked at Abel and felt the same violent disgust as he himself felt now.

He waited, jiggling the blond on his knee, squeezing her breast as Lucian scanned the parlor. When their eyes met—identical eyes—there was a clash. Julian would have sworn he heard it in his head. The sound two swords make when struck in battle.

"What's this?" he said as Lucian approached. "Finally lowering yourself to the rest of us humans? My brother needs a drink, a drink and a woman for *mon frère!*" he called out. "Though I doubt he knows what to do with either."

"You embarrass yourself and your family, Julian. I'm sent to bring you home."

"I'm not embarrassed to pay for a whore." Julian set down his glass and ran his hand up the blond's thigh. "Now if I married one, it would be a different matter. But you beat me to that, brother, as you have so many other things."

Lucian's face whitened. "You will not speak of her in this place."

"My brother married a slut from the swamps," he said conversationally, jerking the blond back when she tried to crawl off his lap. He could feel her heart pounding, pounding under his hand now as the heat between him and Lucian stirred fear.

And her fear excited him as none of the promises she'd whispered in his ear had done.

"Lucian, pride of the Manets, brought his tramp into our home, and now he pines and weeps because she left him for another, and saddled him with her bastard whelp."

He had to believe it. Over the winter he'd drowned in an ocean of bourbon the look of her staring eyes, the sound of her body sliding wetly into the bayou.

He *had* to believe it, or go mad.

"*Allez*," Lucian ordered the blond. "Go."

"I like her where she is." Julian clamped his hands on her arms as she struggled.

Neither of them noticed as the room fell silent, as the notes of the piano died away and the laughter trailed off. Lucian reached down, dragged the blond off Julian's lap. She bolted away like a rabbit even as Lucian yanked Julian from the chair.

"Gentlemen." The madam of the house swept forward. Behind her was an enormous man in spotless evening dress. "We want no trouble here, Monsieur Julian." Her voice cooed, her hand glided intimately over his cheek. And her eyes were frigid. "Go with your brother now, *mon cher ami*. This isn't the place for family squabbles."

"Of course. My apologies." He took her hand, kissed it. Then turned and leaped on Lucian.

The table and lamp they fell on shattered. While people rushed away and women screamed, they rolled, jabbing with fists, snapping like dogs as the violence of a lifetime sprang out of both of them.

The bouncer waded in, dragged Julian up by the scruff. He quick-marched him to the door, heaved him through. Lucian had barely gained his hands and knees when he was lifted.

Curses and screams followed him out the door. And

anger was smothered by mortification. Lucian shook his head clear, gained his feet.

He looked down at his brother, that reflection of self, and felt a different kind of shame. "Have we come to this?" he said wearily. "Brawling in brothels, sprawling in gutters. I want peace between us, Julian. God knows I have peace nowhere else."

He held out a hand, an offering, to help Julian to his feet.

But Julian's shame had a different color. And it was black.

He wouldn't remember drawing the knife out of his boot. Liquor and temper and guilt blinded him. Nor would he remember surging to his feet, striking out.

He felt the blade slice through his brother's flesh with a kind of wild glee. And his lips were peeled back, his eyes mad as he scented first blood.

They struggled, Lucian through the pain and shock, Julian through the black haze, with the hilt of the knife slippery in their hands.

And the bright, bright horror paralyzed him as Julian's eyes widened when the killing point turned on him, into him.

"*Mère de Dieu*," Julian murmured, and stared down at the blood on his breast. "You've killed me."

Manet Hall

2002

The heat had pumped in from the south. It seemed to Declan that even the air sweat. Mornings and evenings, when it was bearable, he worked outside. Afternoons, he sought the cooler regions of the house.

It wasn't as efficient, dragging his tools in and out, but he was making progress. That was the name of the game.

He didn't call Lena—he figured she needed to simmer and settle. But he thought of her, constantly.

He thought of her as he nailed boards, when he studied paint samples, when he installed paddle fans.

And he thought of her when he woke, in the middle of the night, to find himself curled on the grass by the edge of the pond, Lucian's watch clutched in his fist and his face damp with tears.

He tried to put the sleepwalking out of his mind in the daylight. But he couldn't put her out.

One more day, he ordered himself as he wiped sweat off his face. Then he was going into town, banging on her door. If he had to push her into a corner to force her to talk to him, that's what he'd do.

Remy's wedding was coming up fast. Which meant, not only was he going to watch his best friend get married, but . . . his parents were coming to town.

He was ridiculously grateful they'd declined his offer for them to stay with him. Everyone would be a hell of a lot happier with them tucked into a nice hotel suite.

Regardless, he was determined to finish the galleries, and one of the spare bedrooms. In that way, the house would look impressive when they came down the drive, and he could prove he'd *had* the room he'd offered them.

His mother would look to be sure. That was a given.

He backed down the ladder, grabbed the cooler, and gulped cold water. Then poured the rest over his head. Refreshed, he walked across the lawn, then turned back to look.

Dripping, already starting to steam, he felt the smile spread across his face.

"Not bad," he said aloud. "Not half bad for a Yankee amateur."

He'd finished the dual staircases. The sweep of them

curved up opposite sides of the second-floor gallery. The elegance of them negated all the nicks, cuts, scrapes, and the hours of labor.

They would be, he realized, his pride and joy.

Now all he needed was to bribe the painters to work in this heat wave. Or pray for a break in the weather.

Either way, he wasn't going to wait until he'd finished the rear of the house. He wanted the front painted, wanted to stand as he was standing now, and see it gleam in bridal white.

To please himself, he strode back, walked slowly up the right-hand stairs, crossed the gallery, and walked slowly down the left. It gave him such a kick he did it again.

Then he dug through his toolbox for his cell phone and called Lena.

He had to share his excitement with her. What did it matter if he was a day ahead of schedule?

The phone was ringing in her apartment when he glanced over and saw Lilibeth crossing his lawn. He pressed **END**, got to his feet and put the phone back in his toolbox.

"I swear, this heat's just wilting."

She beamed at him, fluttering her lashes as she waved a hand in front of her face. He noted the bracelets she wore were Odette's.

"And it's barely noon. Look at you," she said in a slow purr.

She sauntered straight to him, trailed a fingertip down his bare chest. "You're all wet."

"Impromptu shower." Instinctively, he took a step back so her finger no longer touched his skin. "What can I do for you, Miss Simone?"

"You can start by calling me Lilibeth. After all, you're a good friend of my mama's—and my little girl's, aren't you?"

She wandered away a bit, let her eyes widen as she scanned the house. "I just can't hardly believe what you've done with this big, old place. You must be awfully clever, Declan." She said flirtatiously, "I can call you Declan, can't I?"

"Sure. You don't have to be so clever," he said. "You just have to have plenty of time."

And money, she thought. Plenty of money. "Oh now, don't you be modest. It's just a miracle what you're doing here. I hope it wouldn't be putting you out too much to show me some of the inside. And I surely could use something cold. Just walking over here from home's left me parched."

He didn't want her in his house. More than distaste, there was a kind of primitive dread. But whatever else she was, she was Lena's mother, and his own had drummed manners into his bones.

"Of course. I've got some tea."

"Can't think of anything that would be more welcome."

She followed him to the door, was pleased when he opened it for her and stepped back for her to enter ahead of him. She let her body brush his, just the faintest suggestion, then walked into the foyer and let out a gasp.

She didn't have to feign the shock, or her wonder as she gazed around the grand entrance. She'd been inside before. Remy and Declan weren't the first to get liquored up and break into Manet Hall.

She'd never liked it much. The place had given her the creeps with its shadows and dust, its cobwebs and faded glamour.

But now it was full of light and polish. Glossy floors, glossy walls. She didn't think much of the old furniture, not for looks anyway. But she had no doubt the price tags had been heavy.

Old money bought or kept old things. It was a concept

that baffled her when there was so much new and glittery in the world.

“My lord, sugar, this is a showplace. Just a showplace,” she repeated and wandered into the parlor.

She might’ve preferred the city, where the action was, but she could see that a woman could live like a queen in such a place. And bring the action in, at her whim.

“Goodness, did I say you were clever? Why, you’re just a genius. Everything’s so beautiful and fresh.” She turned back to him. “You must be awful proud.”

“It’s coming along. Kitchen’s back this way. We can get you that cold drink.”

“That would be lovely, but don’t you hurry me along now.” She slid a proprietary hand onto his arm, clung there as she walked down the hall. “I’m just fascinated by what you’ve done with this place. Mama said you’d only started on it a few months ago.”

“You can get a lot done if you stick to the plan.”

And since he seemed to be stuck with her, for the time being, he banked down on the desire to get her out again. Instead, as she turned into the library, made purring noises, he took the opportunity to study her.

He couldn’t see Lena in her. There were, he supposed, some physical similarities. But where Lena had that compact, bombshell body, Lilibeth’s had been whittled down with time and abuse to nearly gaunt.

Showing it off in tiny red shorts and a tight tank top only made her appear cheap and pathetic—a worn-out Kewpie doll painted up for one last night at the carnival. He felt a stir of sympathy for a woman who sought approval and attention by trying to showcase a sexuality she’d already lost.

She’d used a heavy hand with makeup, and the heat hadn’t been kind. Her face seemed sallow and false under all the borrowed color. Her hair had frizzed, and graying roots were streaking through it.

By the time he got her into the kitchen, he found her too pitiful to resent.

“Have a seat,” he told her. “I’ll get you that drink.”

And she mistook the kindness in his voice for attraction.

“A kitchen like this . . .” She slid into a chair. It was cool here, and she tipped back her head to let the air reach her throat—and to watch him. “Don’t you go and tell me you cook, too. Why, if that’s so, sugar, I’m just going to have to cut Lena out and marry you my own self.”

“Sorry.” The mention of Lena tightened him up again. But his back was to her, and she didn’t see his face. “I don’t cook.”

“Well, a girl can make allowances.” She lapped her tongue over her lips. He had a good, strong build to go along with those deep pockets. And she was starting to itch for a man.

“You wouldn’t have anything a little stronger than that tea, would you, honey?”

“Would you rather a beer?”

She’d rather a good glass of whiskey, but she nodded. “That’d be just fine. You gonna join me?”

“I’ll stick with tea. I’ve got work to do yet today.”

“Too hot to work.” She stretched back, looking at him under her lashes. “Days like this, you just wanna soak in a cool tub, then lie on down in a dim room with a fan blowing over your skin.”

She accepted the glass of beer he’d poured her, and sipped. “What do you do to beat the heat, honey?”

“Pour cold water over my head. How’s Miss Odette?”

Lilibeth’s lips pursed. “Oh, she’s fine. House is hot as hell in the morning with her baking. Gotta save her penies. I’ve been helping out, best I can, but things are tight. Declan . . .”

She ran her finger down the condensation on the glass, drank some more. “I wanted to apologize for that scene

over at the house the other day. Lena and I, well, we just rub each other wrong half the time. I guess I can't deny I didn't do right by her when she was a little thing. But I'm trying to make it up to her."

She widened her eyes until they stung and watered cooperatively. "I've changed. I've come to a point in my life when I realize what's important. And that's family. You know what I mean. You've got family."

"Yes, I've got family."

"And now you're down here, you must miss them, and they miss you. Whatever troubles you might have between you, you'd put them aside and support each other. No matter what, ain't that right?"

"Yes."

She dabbed delicately at her tears. "I need Lena to see that's all I want. She doesn't trust me yet, and I can't blame her. I was hoping maybe you could help convince her to give me a chance."

She slid her hand across the table, skimmed it over the back of his. "I'd sure appreciate it if you did. I feel so alone. Woman in my situation, she needs a friend. A strong man in her corner. If I knew I had you on my side, it would help so much."

"If there have to be sides, I'm on Lena's. Either way, I can't step between family—and if I was stupid enough to try it, she wouldn't listen to me anyway."

"Maybe the two of you aren't as close as I assumed."

"It's always risky to make assumptions," he returned equably.

She took another swallow of beer. "You're sleeping with her, aren't you?"

"I'm not going to discuss that with you."

"Why not?" Lilibeth ran the chilly glass between her breasts, then, laughing, rose. "You shy, honey? Don't you be shy with Lilibeth. We could be friends, you and me." She skirted the table, leaned in behind him. "Very good

friends,” she added as her arms twined down and her teeth nipped at his ear.

“Miss Simone, you’re putting me in the awkward position of asking you to get your hands off me.”

“You *are* shy.” With a chuckle that blew warm breath and beer over his cheek, she trailed her hands down toward his lap.

He clamped a hand over her wrists, jerked them up again. “You’re embarrassing yourself.” He twisted so he could lever out of the chair and onto his feet to face her. “That’s your business. But you’re using me to take a shot at Lena, and that’s mine.”

Angry color spotted her cheeks. “Maybe you think you’re too good for me.”

“There’s no maybe about it. Get out and we’ll forget this happened.”

She wanted to scream at him, to strike out. But she still had her wits about her. She hadn’t had enough beer to dull them, and the hit of coke she’d had before walking over had been miserly. Playing it out, she sank into a chair, dropped her head on her folded arms and sobbed.

“I don’t know what to do. I’m just so alone. I’m just so scared. I need help. I thought—I thought if I let you have me, you’d help me. I just don’t know what to *do!*”

She lifted her head, and the two tears she’d managed to squeeze out tracked through her makeup. “I’m in such awful trouble.”

He went to the sink, ran the water cold, then got a glass. “What kind of trouble?”

“I owe some money. That’s why I left Houston, and I’m afraid they’ll find me. Hurt me. Maybe Lena, too. I don’t want them to hurt my baby.”

He set the water in front of her. “How much money?”

He saw it, the quick glint of satisfaction in her eyes before she lowered them. “Five thousand dollars. It wasn’t my fault. Really, it wasn’t my fault. I trusted the wrong

people. A man," she said wearily. "And he ran off with the money and left me owing. If I don't find a way to pay it back, they're going to track me down and do something to me. Something to Mama and Lena."

He sat back down, looked at her intently. "You're a liar. You want to try to soak me for a quick five K so you can score some drugs and get out of town. You figure me for an easy mark, but you figure wrong. If it wasn't for Lena, I'd give you a couple hundred to send you along. But you see, Lilibeth, there is Lena. She wouldn't like it."

She hurled the water in his face. He barely blinked. "Fuck you."

"I thought we already established that wasn't an option."

"Think you're so smart, don't you? So important because you come from money." She pushed to her feet. "Big, fancy, highfalutin family. I found out all about you, Declan Fitzgerald. Let me ask you just what that big, fancy, highfalutin family's going to think when they hear you're heating the sheets with a Cajun swamp whore?"

The phrase had something clutching in his gut, in the back of his throat, in his head. Her face changed in front of his eyes, became fuller, older. Colder.

Josephine.

"Get out." He wasn't sure, not entirely, if he spoke to the flesh-and-blood woman or to the ghost. His hands shook as he gripped the edge of the table.

"All those fine doctors and lawyers and Indian chiefs up there in Boston, how are they gonna like the idea of their golden boy hooking up with some bastard child from the bayou? No money, no pedigree. Runs a second-rate bar and has a grandmama who sews for other people to earn extra pennies. Gonna cut you right out of the will, sugar. Leave you high and dry with this big white elephant of a house on your hands. Especially when I tell them you slept with her mama, too."

His legs were weak as water, but he stood on them. "Get out of my house before I hurt you."

"Your type doesn't lay hands on a woman. Don't think I don't know the difference." Riding on coke and confidence, she tossed back her hair. "You wanna keep plugging your wick into my girl, and you wanna keep your family out of it, you'll write me a check, *cher*. You'll write it quick, fast and in a hurry. And we're going to make it ten thousand now, because you hurt my feelings."

"Your feelings aren't worth a buck and a half to me, Lilibeth."

"They will be, after I have a little chat with your mama."

"My mother will chew you up and spit you out." He walked to the counter, yanked open a drawer and took out a pad. Scrawled a number on it. "Here, that's her number. Call her. You can use my phone, as long as I can listen in. It'll be a real pleasure to hear her slice you to bloodless pieces."

"I need money!"

"You won't get it here." Out of patience, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to the door. "I can make a lot more trouble for you than you can for me. Believe it," he said, and shut the door in her face.

He had to sit down until he had his legs under him again. He felt ill, physically ill. Something had happened when she'd raged at him over Lena. The face that had become her face was one he'd seen in his dreams.

The face belonged to the house, or to the part of it that slammed doors, that wished him away.

That wished him harm.

No doubt now, he told himself, that Lena's mother now wished him harm as well.

He rose, went to the phone. One positive result of the ugly incident was it had made him appreciate his own mother.

He dialed, and felt cleaner at the familiar sound of her voice.

“Hi, Ma.”

“Declan? What are you doing calling in the middle of the day? What’s wrong? You had an accident.”

“No, I—”

“All those horrible tools. You’ve cut off a hand.”

“I still have two, and all other assigned parts. I just called to tell you I love you.”

There was a long, pregnant pause. “You’ve just learned you have a terminal disease and have six months to live.”

Now he laughed. “Got me. I’m a dead man and want to make contact with my family so I get a really cool wake.”

“Do you want Uncle Jimmy to sing ‘Danny Boy’?”

“I really don’t. I’d as soon rest in peace.”

“So noted. What is it, really, Declan?”

“I want to tell you about the woman I’m in love with and want to marry.”

This pause was even longer. “Is this a joke?”

“No. Got a couple minutes?”

“I think I can rearrange my schedule for this.”

“Okay.” He walked over, picked up his iced tea. The ice had melted, but he glugged it down anyway. “Her name’s Angelina Simone, and she’s beautiful, fascinating, frustrating, hardheaded and perfect. She’s just perfect, Ma.”

“When do I meet her?”

“Remy’s wedding. There’s this one minor glitch—other than the one where she isn’t ready to say yes.”

“I’m sure you can overcome that minor detail. What’s the glitch?”

He sat down again and told her about Lilibeth.

By the time he got off the phone, he felt lighter. Going with impulse, he went upstairs to clean up and change. He was going to confront Lena a bit ahead of schedule.

Declan detoured by Remy's office on the way to Et Trois. The wedding was approaching quickly, and his duties as best man included coordinating the bachelor party. Though he figured the big picture was clear enough—enough booze to float a battleship, and a strip club—there were some finer details to work out.

When reception buzzed through to Remy's office, he heard his friend's almost frantic "Send him right in."

The minute he opened the office door, he saw why.

Effie, tears streaking down her cheeks, sat in one of the visitor chairs with Remy crouched at her feet. Though Remy kept mopping at the tears, kept trying to comfort, he shot Declan a look of sheer male panic.

In a testament to friendship, Declan resisted the urge to back out and run. Instead he closed the door, crossed over and rubbed Effie's shoulder.

"Sweetheart, I told you I'd tell him you were dumping him for me."

Effie merely looked up, then covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

“Okay, bad joke.” Declan scrubbed now-sweaty palms over his jeans. “What’s wrong?”

“Problem with the wedding venue,” Remy began, and Effie let out a wail.

“There *is* no wedding venue.” She snatched Remy’s handkerchief, buried her face in it. “They had . . . they had a kitchen fire, and the fire department came, and they . . . they . . . Oh what’re we going to do!”

“Smoke and water damage,” Remy explained to Declan. “Over and above the fire damage. They’re not going to be able to put it back together in time.”

“It’s my fault.”

Mirroring Remy, Declan crouched. “Okay, honey, why’d you start the fire?”

It made her laugh—for a split second. “I wanted to use that old plantation house. It’s romantic and so lovely. Remy said it’ll all be easier booking a hotel ballroom, but no, I just had to have my way. And now look. We’ve got less than three weeks, and we’re . . . We’re just sunk, that’s all.”

“No, we’re not, honey. We’ll find another place. *Pleure pas, chère.*” Remy kissed the tip of her nose. “Worse comes to worst, we’ll have the wedding, then we’ll have our party later. We’ll have us a real *fais do-do*, after the honeymoon.”

“Where are we going to get married? City Hall?”

“I don’t care where we get married.” Now he kissed her fingers. “Long as we do.”

She sniffled, sighed, leaned into him. “I’m sorry. I’m being silly and selfish. You’re right. It doesn’t matter where or how.”

“Sure it does.” Declan’s statement had them both staring at him, Effie with tears still swirling, Remy with baf-

fled frustration. "You can't let a little fire screw up your plans. Use my place."

"What do you mean, your place?" Remy demanded.

"The Hall. Sure as hell big enough. Ballroom needs some work, but there's time. I have to strong-arm some painters, but I finished the entrance this morning. Gardens are in really good shape, kitchen's done, parlors, library. Lots of rough spots yet, but people won't care about that. They'll get the house, the grounds, the ghosts. They'll talk about it for years."

"Do you mean it?" Effie snagged Declan's hands before Remy could speak.

"Sure I do. We can pull it off."

"Dec," Remy began, but Effie rolled right over him.

"Oh God. Oh, I *love* you." She threw her arms around Declan's neck. "You're the most wonderful man in the world. An angel," she said and kissed him. "A saint."

"Do you mind?" Declan said to Remy. "We'd like to be alone."

Laughing, Effie spun to her feet. "Oh, I shouldn't let you do this. You'll have all those strangers roaming around your house, trooping all over your lawn. But I'm going to let you because I'm desperate, and it's so perfect. I swear, I swear you won't have to do any of the work. I'll take care of everything. I'm going to owe you till my dying day."

"Giving me your firstborn son will be payment enough."

Remy sat on the edge of the desk and shook his head. "I say I'll marry you anywhere, anytime, all he does is give you a broken-down house and he's the one gets kissed."

"I already got you." But she turned, wrapped her arms around Remy and, with a sigh, rested her head on his shoulder. "I want it to be beautiful, Remy. I want it to be special. It means a lot to me."

"I know it does. So it means a lot to me, too. We'll have us some party, won't we?"

"We will." She gave him one last squeeze, then whirled away. The sad, sobbing woman was replaced by a dervish. "Can I go out now?" she asked Declan. "I need to get my mother and my sister, and we'll go out right now and start figuring it all out."

"Go ahead."

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you." Then the other. "Thank you." Then his mouth with a long, drawn-out smack. "Remy, you come on out soon as you can. Oh, Dec?" She was pulling out her cell phone as she headed for the door. "My bride colors are rose and blue. You don't mind if we have the house painted those colors, do you?"

His mouth dropped open as she shut the door behind her. "She was kidding, right?"

"Probably." Knowing his girl, and the pack she ran with, Remy blew out a breath. "*Cher*, you don't know what you just got yourself into. You made my girl happy, and I'm grateful, but I gotta tell you, you're in for a couple weeks of pure insanity."

"I couldn't stand seeing her crying like that. Besides, it makes sense." Rose and blue, he thought. How much trouble could they get into with nice, harmless colors like rose and blue? "Anyway," he added, rubbing a hand over his sinking heart, "I've been through wedding plans before."

"You haven't met her mother before."

Declan shifted his feet. "Is she scary?"

"Pretty scary."

"Hold me."

Good deeds put him in a good mood. When he walked into Et Trois, he was ready for a cold one, a self-congratulatory pat on the back. And Lena.

She was behind the bar, pulling a draft and chatting up one of her regulars. He watched her gaze wash over, then land on him. Stay on him as he walked up, flipped up the pass-through.

She had time to slide the foaming mug across the bar to waiting hands, start to turn before he lifted her off her feet and planted his lips on hers.

The scattering of applause and hoots had him grinning as he held her an inch off the floor. "Missed you."

She rubbed her tingling lips together. "Your aim seemed good to me." She patted his cheek, gave him that quick, wicked gleam. "Now down, boy. I'm working here."

"You're going to need someone to cover for you."

"I'm busy, *cher*. Go on and sit down, I'll get you a beer."

He just hitched her up, giving her legs a little swing so he could get his arm under them. He elbowed the door to the bar kitchen. "Lena needs you to cover for her," he called back, then nodded toward the pass-through. "Mind?" he asked the man sipping the draft.

"Sure thing."

"Declan." She didn't struggle, bad for the image. "I'm running a business here."

"And you do a damn good job of it. Thanks," he added when the man flipped up the pass-through. "It ought to run fine without you for a half hour." He nodded as his new friend hustled over and opened the door for him.

He carried her outside. They got a few glances as he walked down the sidewalk and turned into her courtyard.

"I don't like being pushed around, *cher*."

"I'm not pushing you, I'm carrying you. Where's your spare key?" he asked as he climbed the stairs. When she said nothing, he shrugged. "Fine. We're going to get arrested for doing what I plan on doing out here on your gallery, but I'm game."

“Under the pot, second from the left.”

“Good.”

To her shock, he shifted her, slinging her over his shoulder as he crouched down to retrieve the key. She continually underestimated his strength and, she admitted, her reaction to it.

“You’ve dropped a couple of pounds,” he commented and unlocked her door. “Good.”

“I beg your pardon?” she said in her best frigid, southern-belle tone.

“I figure it’s because you’ve been pining for me.”

“You’re going to want to get a grip, *cher*.”

“Got one,” he said and reached up to squeeze her butt as he kicked the door closed.

“I can’t tell you how flattered I am that you’d take time out of your busy day to come into town for a quickie, but I—”

“Excellent idea. It wasn’t my first order of business, but why wait?” He hitched her more securely on his shoulder and headed for the bedroom.

“Declan, you’re starting to seriously irritate me now. You’d better just put me down and—”

She lost the rest—and the air in her lungs—when he flipped her onto the bed. He could see her eyes glittering dangerously behind her hair before she shoved it out of her face. And that, he thought, was perfect. He was in the mood for the fast and the physical, the sweaty and the sexy.

“What the *hell’s* gotten into you? You come marching into my place like you own it, cart me off like I’m spoils of war. If you think I’m here to scratch your itch whenever it suits you, you’re about to find out different.”

He merely grinned, yanked off a shoe and tossed it aside.

“Put that back on, or hobble out. Either way, I want you gone.”

He pulled off the other shoe, then his shirt. Her response to that was to scramble to her knees and spit out in Cajun so rapid and thick he caught only about every sixth word.

“Sorry,” he said in mild tones as he unbuttoned his jeans. “That was a little quick for me. Did you say I was a pig who should fry in hell, or that I should go to hell and eat fried pig?”

He was ready when she leaped, and laughing as she swiped at him. It was time for a fast tumble, fast and violent, and her clawing nails and bared teeth added the perfect punch.

She slapped, cursed, kicked. Then bucked like a wild mare when he crushed her under him on the bed and covered her snarling mouth with his in a hot, hungry kiss.

“Not what you expect from me, is it?” Breathless and randy, he tore at her shirt. “Given you too much of what you expect so far.”

“Stop it. Stop it now.” Her heart sprinted under his rough hand. No, it wasn’t what she expected from him, any more than her electrified response to his dominance was what she expected from herself.

“Look at me.” He clamped her hands on either side of her head. “Tell me you don’t want me, that you don’t want this. Say it and mean it, and I’m gone.”

“Let go of my hands.” Though her gaze remained steady, her voice shook. “You let go of my hands.”

He released one. “Say it.” His muscles quivered. “You want, or you don’t.”

She fisted a hand in his hair and dragged his mouth back to hers. “*J’ai besoin.*”

I need.

She used her teeth, gnawing restlessly at his lips. Used her legs, wrapping them around to chain him to her.

“Take me,” she demanded. “Fast. Fast and rough.”

His hand shot beneath the short, snug skirt, tore away

the thin panties beneath. Sweat already slicked his skin and hers as she arched to him.

“Hold on,” he warned, and plunged into her.

She cried out as the explosive sensation ripped through her, cried out again as he drove deeper, harder. Filled, invaded, took until needs, frantic, outrageous needs swarmed through her. Her nails scored down his back, pinched into his hips.

De plus en plus. More and more, her mind screamed. “More,” she managed. “I want more.”

So did he. He shoved her knees back, opened her and hammered himself inside her.

It burned. His lungs, his heart, his loins. The ferocious heat, the unspeakable pleasure of going wild with her hazed his vision until the world was drenched with it.

White sun beating through the windows, the brassy blast of a trumpet from the street, the mad squeak of springs as slick skin slapped rhythmically against slick skin.

And her eyes, dark and glossy as onyx, locked on his.

I love you. Endlessly.

He didn't know if he spoke, or if the words simply ran a desperate loop in his brain. But he saw her eyes change, watched emotion swirl into them, blind them.

He heard her sob for breath, felt her vise around him as she came. Helpless, half mad, he shattered. And poured into her.

Out of breath, out of his mind, he collapsed onto her. Beneath him she continued to quake, to quiver. And shudder, those aftershocks of eruption. Then she was still.

“Can't move yet,” he mumbled. He felt hollowed out, light as a husk that could be happily blown apart by the slightest breeze.

“Don't need to.”

Her lips were against the side of his throat, and their

movement there brought him an exquisite tenderness. A rainbow after the storm.

“Would you believe I came in to talk to you?”

“No.”

“Did. Figured we’d get to this after. Change of plans. I owe you a shirt and some underwear.”

“I’ve got more.”

He’d recovered just enough to prop on his elbows and look down at her. Her cheeks were flushed and glowing. Curls of damp hair clung to her temples, spilled over the rumpled spread.

He wanted to lap her up like a cat with cream.

“Pissing you off got me hot,” he told her.

“Me too. Seems like. I wasn’t going to do this with you again.”

“Weren’t you?”

“No.” She laid a hand on his cheek, amazed by the wave of tenderness. “I’d made up my mind about it. Then you come into my place, all sexy and good-looking, scoop me up that way. You mess with my mind, *cher*. You just go and unmake it for me, time and again.”

“You’re everything I want.”

“And nothing that’s good for you. Go on.” She gave his shoulder a little push. “Get off me. Two of us are a sweaty mess.”

“We’ll take a shower, then we’ll talk. Talk,” he repeated when she raised a brow. “Scout’s honor.” He held up two fingers.

“I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Angelina.”

“All right.” She waved him away. It was, she knew, no use arguing with him. God *knew* why she found that mule-headed streak of his so appealing. “Go get yourself cleaned up. I’ll call down and make sure everything’s covered for the next little while.”

* * *

She stepped into the shower just as he got out. He imagined she'd timed it that way, to avoid the intimacy. Giving her room, he went to the kitchen, found the expected pitcher of tea, and poured two glasses.

When she came in, wearing that same sexy skirt and a fresh shirt, he offered her a glass.

She took it into the living room.

In the last few days, she'd resigned herself to what needed to be. Throughout, part of her had indeed pined for him. And every time she'd caught herself glancing toward the bar door, looking for him, or waking up in the night reaching for him, she'd cursed herself for being a weak fool.

Then she'd glanced at the door, and there he was. Her own soaring pleasure, depthless relief, had annoyed her even before he'd nipped at her pride by plucking her out of her own bar.

"Declan," she began. "I wasn't fair to you the other day. I wasn't in the mood to be fair."

"If you're going to apologize for it, save it. I wanted to make you mad. I'd rather see you angry than sad. She makes you both."

"I suppose she does. Mostly I hate knowing she's out there with Grandmama, knowing she'll hurt her again. I can't stop it, I can't fix it. That troubles me. But you shouldn't have been brought into it."

"You didn't bring me into it. It happened." He angled his head. "Correct me if I'm wrong. You've got the impression that since I come from where and who I come from, I'm not equipped to handle the darker, the more difficult, the stickier aspects of life. Your life, in particular."

"*Cher*, I'm not saying you're not tough. But this partic-

ular aspect of life, my life, is out of your scope. You wouldn't understand someone like her."

"Since I've been so sheltered." He nodded. "She came to see me today."

The healthy flush sex and heat had put in Lena's cheeks drained. "What do you mean?"

"Lilibeth paid me a call around noon. I debated whether to tell you about it or not, and decided that I'm not going to keep secrets from you, or tell lies. Not even to spare your feelings. She came by, invited herself in for a cold one. Then she tried to seduce me."

"I'm sorry." Her lips felt stiff and ice cold as she formed the words. Her throat burned like fire. "It won't happen again; I'll see to it."

"Shut up. Do I look like I need your protection? And save your outrage until I'm done," he told her. "When she reached for my zipper, I told her not to embarrass herself. Her next tack was to fling herself down on the kitchen table and cry."

He eased down on the arm of Lena's sofa. The tone of conversation, he thought in some corner of his brain, didn't lend itself to lounging among all those soft, colorful pillows. "She didn't manage to work up many tears along with the noise, but I give her marks for effort. The story was how bad, mean people were after her. They'd hurt her, you, Miss Odette if she didn't give them five thousand dollars. Where could she turn, what could she do?"

Color rushed back into Lena's face, rode high on her cheekbones. "You gave her money? How could you believe—"

"First a sheltered wimp, now a moron." He gave an exaggerated sigh and sipped his tea. "You're really pumping up the ego here, baby. I didn't give her a dime, and let her know, clearly, I wasn't going to be hosed. That irri-

tated her into threatening to go to my family. Seems she's asked around about me and got the picture. She figured they'd be shocked and shamed by the idea of their fair-haired boy falling under your spell. For good measure, she'd tell them I'd fucked her, too."

"She could do it." It was more than the cold now. The sickness roiled in her belly. "Declan, she's perfectly capable of—"

"Didn't I tell you to wait until I was finished?" His voice didn't whip, didn't sting. It was simply implacable. "The cost doubled to ten thousand for this spot of blackmail. I don't think she was pleased with my response. I kicked her out. That's about it, so you can be outraged now if you want. Don't cry." He spoke roughly when her eyes filled. "She's not worth one tear from you."

"I'm mortified. Can't you understand?"

"Yes. Though we're both smart enough to know this had nothing to do with you, I understand. And I'm sorry for it, sorry to add to it."

"It's not you. It's never been you." She wiped a tear from her lashes before it could fall. "That's what I've been trying to get through your head from the start."

"It's not you, either, Lena. It's never been you. I looked at her. I looked close and hard, and there's nothing there that's part of you. Family's the luck of the draw, Lena. What you make of yourself, because of or despite it, that's where the spine and heart come in."

"I'll never be rid of her, not all the way. No matter what I do."

"No, you won't."

"I'm sorry. No, damn it, I will say it," she snapped when his face tightened. "I'm sorry she came into your home. I'm sorry she touched on your family. I need to ask you not to say anything about this to my grandmama."

"Why would I?"

She nodded, then rising, wandered the room. She loved this place because she'd made it herself. She respected her life for the same reasons. Now, because she cared for, because she respected the man who was so determined to be part of her life, she'd explain.

"She left me before I was two weeks old," she began. "Just went out one morning, got in her mama's car, and drove off. Dumped the car in Baton Rouge. I was three before she came back around."

"Your father?"

She shrugged. "Depends on her mood. Once she told me it was a boy she loved and who loved her, but his parents tore them apart and sent him far away. Another time, she told me she was raped on the way home from school. Still another it was a rich, older man who was going to come back for both of us one day and set us up in a fine house."

She turned back so she could face him. "I was about eighteen when I figured she told me the truth. She was high enough, careless enough, mean enough for it to be the truth. How the hell should she know, she said. There were plenty of them. What the hell did she care who planted me in her? One was the same as the other.

"She was whoring when she got pregnant with me. I heard talk when I was old enough to understand what the talk meant. When she got in trouble, she ran back to my grandparents. She was afraid of an abortion—afraid she'd die of it, then go to hell or some such thing. So she had me, and she left me. Those are the only two things in this world I owe her."

She drew a breath, made herself sit again. "Anyway, she came back when I was three, made what would become her usual promises that she'd learned her lesson, she was sorry, she'd changed. She stayed around a few days, then took off again. That's a pattern that's repeated since. Sometimes she'd come back beat up from whatever bastard she'd taken up with most recently. Some-

times she'd come back sick, or just high. But Lilibeth, she always comes back."

She fell silent, brooding over that single, unavoidable fact.

"It hurts when she does," Declan said quietly. "Hurts you, hurts Miss Odette."

"She hurts everyone. It's her only talent. She was high when she showed up on my thirteenth birthday. We were having a *fais do-do* at the house, all the friends and family, and she stoned, with some lowlife. It got ugly pretty quick, and three of my uncles turned them off. I need a smoke," she said, and left the room.

She came back a moment later with a cigarette. "I had a boy I was seeing, crazy about that boy. I was sixteen, and she came back. She got him liquor and drugs and had sex with him. He was hardly older than I was, so it's hard to blame him for being an idiot. She thought it was funny when I stumbled over them out in the bayou. She laughed and laughed. Still, when I got this apartment, and she came back, I took her in. Better me than Grandmama, I thought. And maybe this time . . . Just maybe.

"But she turned tricks in my bed and brought her drugs into my home. She stole from me, and she left me again. From then I've been done with her. I'm done with her. And I'll never be done with her, Declan. Nothing I can do changes her being my mother."

"And nothing she does can change who you are. You're a testament to your own grit, Lena, and a credit to the people who raised you. She hates you for what you are."

She stared at him. "She hates me," she whispered. "I've never been able to say that to anyone before. Why should saying such a thing, such an awful thing, help so much?"

"I won't say she can't hurt you anymore, because she can. But maybe now she won't be able to hurt you as much, or for as long."

Thoughtfully, she tapped out her cigarette. "I keep underestimating you."

"That's okay. That way I can keep surprising you. How's this one? She's connected to Manet Hall."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, exactly, and can't explain it. I just know she is. And I think maybe she was meant to come back now, to say what she said to me. One more link in the chain. And I think she's pretty well done around here, this time out. Call your grandmother, Lena. Don't let this woman put a wedge between you."

"I've been thinking of it. I guess I will. Declan." She picked up her glass, set it down again. The useless gesture made him raise his eyebrows. "I was going to end things between us."

"You could've tried."

"I mean it. We'd both be better off if we stepped back a ways, tried to be friends of some sort."

"We can be friends. I want our children to have parents who like each other."

She threw up her hands. "I have to get back to work."

"Okay. But listen, speaking of weddings, slight change of plans in Remy and Effie's. We're having the whole deal at my place."

She rubbed her temple, tried to switch gears and moods as smoothly as he did. "In . . . with half-finished rooms and tools and lumber, and—"

"That's a very negative attitude, and not at all helpful, especially since I was going to ask you for a hand. How are you with a paintbrush?"

She let out a sigh. "Do you save everyone?"

"Just the ones who matter."

*S*omewhere between Declan's leaving the Hall, and Effie's arrival, Lilibeth paid another call. She was riding

on coke and insult. The lousy son of a bitch couldn't spare a few bucks for the mother of the woman he was screwing, she'd just help herself.

She'd cased the first floor when he'd led her back to the kitchen, and going in through the back, she arrowed straight to the library and the big rolltop desk she'd spotted.

People with money kept cash handy, in her experience. Moving quickly, she yanked open drawers, riffled through, then let out a shout when she found a neat pile of fifties. Those she stuffed into her pocket.

She figured the books he'd shelved and the ones yet in boxes were probably worth something. But they'd be heavy, and hard to sell. He'd likely have more cash, a few pieces of jewelry up in his bedroom.

She raced up the main stairs. The fact that he could come back at any time only added to the thrill of stealing.

A door slammed, had her falling straight to her knees. Just a draft, she told herself as she caught her breath, as the pulse in her throat began to pop. Big, drafty old house. In fact, she felt cold air whisk over her as she jumped to her feet again.

She touched a doorknob, yanked her hand away again. The knob was so cold it all but burned.

Didn't matter. What the fuck? His room was down the hall. She wasn't as stupid as people thought she was. Hadn't she watched the house over the last few days? Hadn't she seen him come out on the gallery from the room at the far corner?

Laughing out loud, the sound rolling back over her, she dashed down, streaked through the open door. She yanked open the top drawer of a dresser and hit pay dirt with the old carved box inside.

Gold cuff links—at least she assumed they were real gold. Silver ones, too, with some sort of fancy blue stone. Diamond studs, a gold watch. And in a box inside the

box, a woman's ring of . . . ruby maybe, diamond and ruby, fashioned in interlocking hearts.

She set the box on the dresser, hunted through a couple more drawers until she found another wad of cash.

Paid anyway, didn't you, you bastard. Paid just fine.

She tossed the bills into the jewelry box, tucked the box under her arm.

Standing there, her breath whistling out in excitement, cocaine dancing in her blood, she debated the satisfaction of trashing the place. It would be satisfying—more payment. But it wasn't smart. And she was smart.

She needed time to turn the jewelry into cash, time to turn some of the cash into drugs. Time to get the hell out of Dodge. Best to leave things as they were.

She'd go out the other side, just in case her long-nosed mama was looking this way.

But when she stepped back into the hall, she found herself staring at the third-floor stairs.

What was up there? she wondered. Maybe something good. Maybe something she could come back for later. Something that would make her rich.

Her breath wasn't just whistling now, but wheezing. Her skin was ice cold. But she couldn't resist the urge to climb those stairs. She was alone in the house, wasn't she? All alone, and that made it *her* house.

It was her house.

Swallowing continually to wet her dry throat, she started up. Shivering.

Voices? How could she hear voices when there was no one there? But they stopped her, urged her to turn back. *Something wrong here, something bad here. Time to go.*

But it seemed hands pressed to her back, pushed her on until, with trembling fingers, she reached for the door.

She meant to ease it open, slowly—just take a peek. But at the touch of her hand, it swung violently open.

She saw the man and woman on the floor, heard the

baby screaming in the crib. Saw the woman's eyes—staring and blind. And dead.

And the man, his hair gold in the dim light, turned to look at her.

Lilibeth tried to scream, but couldn't grab the air. As she opened her mouth, something *pushed* into her. For one horrifying moment it became her. Then it swept through her. Cold, vicious, furious.

Another figure formed in the room. Female, sturdy, in a long night robe.

Julian.

And in speechless terror, Lilibeth turned and ran.

Within twenty-four hours, Declan discovered he had more help on the house than he knew what to do with. Apparently everyone in Louisiana was invited to the wedding, and they were all willing to lend a hand.

He had painters, plumbers, carpenters and gofers. And though it occurred to him in the middle of the melee that if half that amount had pitched in to repair the original venue, the job would have been done in about twenty minutes, he decided to keep the thought to himself.

It seemed rude to voice it.

And he appreciated the labor, sincerely. Reminded himself of it whenever he felt certain pieces of the house slipping away from him into someone else's charge.

He'd been looking forward to screening in the lower rear gallery himself, but comforted himself that one good hurricane would demand rescreening.

He'd intended to sand and varnish the ballroom floors, but bucked up when he thought of all the other floors waiting for him throughout the house.

And he sure as hell didn't mind turning over the exterior painting to others. It was a hot, exacting and laborious job, and crossing it off his list left him free to tackle the downstairs powder room, and to hang the blown-glass chandelier he'd bought for the foyer, and to finish plans for the mud room. And . . .

Well, there was plenty to go around, he reflected.

Then there was the pure pleasure of watching Effie zip in and out on her lunch hour or after work. Even when she brought her mother in tow. Mrs. Renault was a spit-and-polished older version of her daughter with an eye like an eagle and a voice like a drill sergeant.

Remy was right, she was pretty scary. Declan hid from her, whenever possible and without shame.

On the second day of the full-out campaign, Declan strode toward the rear gallery to check progress. He was feeling pretty peppy from the tile he'd just set, was covered with ceramic dust from cutting it.

The noise level was amazing. Voices, radios, power tools. As much as he enjoyed people, he'd have given a thousand dollars for five minutes alone in his house.

"Jim Ready? I want those windows sparkling, you hear? How's it going to look in the wedding pictures if those windows are dull? Put your back into it, boy!"

The sound of Mrs. Renault's voice had Declan turning sharply on his heel and changing direction. He all but bowled over Odette.

"Hey, sorry. You all right? I didn't see you. I was running away."

"You got a houseful."

"You're right about that. If this place isn't fixed up enough to suit General Renault by D Day, we're all going to be shot." He took her arm as he spoke and, thinking only of self-preservation, hustled her into the library. Shut the doors.

"Can I come live at your house?"

She smiled—a curve of lips that didn't reach her eyes. “You're such a good boy, Declan, doing all this for your friend.”

“I'm not doing much more right now than staying the hell out of the way.”

“And you'd rather all these people go back where they came from, and leave you be so you can play with your house.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged, pushed his dusty hand through his dusty hair. “There'll still be plenty to do once they go. We're not touching the third floor or the servants' area, and only doing one other room on the second. Tell me what's wrong, Miss Odette.”

“I gotta work up to it.” She set down the shopping bag she carried, then walked over to look at some of his books. There were still boxes of them to be shelved, but she saw what it would be. Towers of words, some old and worn, some fresh and new. Small treasures, deep colors.

“You got vision,” she said at length. “You picture what you want, then you make it happen. That's a fine skill, *cher*.”

“Some people call it single-minded.”

“You're anything but. You've got a lot of channels in that head of yours. Working on one at a time till it's done shows character to me. I'm awful fond of you, Declan.”

“I'm awful fond of you, too. I wish you'd sit down, Miss Odette. You look tired.” And troubled. “Why don't I get us a cold drink?”

“No, don't you trouble and risk getting shanghaied by Sarah Jane Renault. Now that's a single-minded individual, and I don't fault her for it.”

“She told me to get a haircut by the end of the week so I don't look shaggy or freshly shorn for the wedding.” Sulking over it a little, Declan ran a testing hand through his hair. “And that she'll be putting fancy soaps, towels and so on in all the bathrooms the day before the wed-

ding. I'm not to use them under penalty of death. And I'm to get more green plants inside the house. A house can't breathe without green plants."

"She's just nervous, honey. Effie's her baby. Her youngest daughter." Odette pressed her lips together. "Declan, I'm shamed to say what I have to say to you, and I won't blame you if, after I'm done, you ask me not to come back in your home again."

The words alarmed him, nearly as much as the pain in her eyes. "There's nothing you can say that would make you unwelcome in my home, Miss Odette. Who hurt you?"

"Oh, *mon Dieu*, if this spoils what I see between you and my Lena, I'll never forgive myself. My daughter stole from you," she blurted out. "She came in your house and took what was yours."

With a heavy heart she reached into her bag, took out his carved box. "This was in her room. I knew it was yours even before I looked in and saw a set of cuff links with your initials. I don't know if it's all here, but that's all there was. If anything's missing—"

"Let's just see. I want you to sit down now. I mean it."

She nodded, sank into a chair.

He chained down his rage as he set the box on a table, opened it. He saw the ring box first, opened it, and felt the worst of the anger fade when the stones glittered up at him.

"Okay." He breathed out. "The most important thing's still here." As was, as far as he could see, everything else but the couple thousand in twenties he kept secured with the money clip that had been his great-grandfather's.

"It's all here."

"You're not telling me the truth," Odette said dully.

"A little cash, that's all."

"I need to know how much so I can pay it back."

"Do you think I'd take money from you?" Some of the

anger lashed out, made her wince. “Look at my face. Do you think I’d take money from you for this, for anything?”

Her lips wanted to quiver, so she pressed them into a firm line. “She’s my responsibility.”

“The hell she is. Don’t insult me again by talking about restitution.”

Despite her promise not to shed one in front of him, a tear spilled over. “I know what she is. And I know she’ll never be what I hoped for, worked for, wished for from the moment I knew she was inside me. But she gave me Lena.”

She dug out a tissue, patted her cheeks. There would be no more tears. “I expected she’d steal from me before she took off again, but I didn’t think she’d take from you. I never thought of it, and I’m sorry for that.”

“You want to look at my face again and see if I blame you?”

“No, you don’t blame me. Oh, I want you for my Lena. I’m sitting here knowing my child stole from you, and all I can think is I want you for my baby.”

“Good thing, because I want me for her, too.” He picked up the ring box, crossed over to her chair. “I bought this for her. Maybe you could put in a good word for me so when I give it to her, she takes it.”

Odette looked at the ring and sighed. “Suits her. Sure does suit her. She’s got a good heart, Declan, but it’s got scars on it. She’s so strong. Sometimes I worry she’s too strong, and she’ll forget how to give. I’ll have to tell her about this.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll have to figure out how to keep her from pulling away from you when she knows. That’s what she’ll want to do.”

“Don’t worry. Where’s Lilibeth?”

“Gone. I found this in her room this morning. She’s barely come out of there since the day before. When I went in and found it, I put it away where she wouldn’t find it. Then we had words about it. She packed up and left. She’ll come back,” she said in the same hollow tone he’d heard from Lena. “In a year or two. And we’ll go through it once more.”

“We’ll deal with it when it happens.” He leaned down, kissed her cheek. “I love you.” When her eyes filled again, he took her hand. “Whether Lena’s ready for it or not, we’re family now. Family sticks.”

“When I meet your mama,” Odette managed, “I’m gonna give her one big, rib-cracking hug.”

“That’ll set her up. Why don’t we take a look at what’s happening around here, and you can protect me from General Renault.”

He didn’t expect it to take long, and wasn’t disappointed. About the time most of his free labor was packing up for the day, and Effie and her mother had him out in the back garden, Lena strode around the side of the house.

Since he was in the middle of the series of uh-huhs, you-bets and no-problems that had become his litany of responses to the Renault women’s wedding agenda, he decided the confrontation in Lena’s eyes would be a relief.

“The railings and baluster will be wrapped in tulle and lace.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And we’ll have baskets—white baskets—of flowers set out on the gallery there.”

“You bet.”

“The florist will need to start early on the day of the

wedding, so you just scoot out of the way and make sure they have access to all the areas of the house I've got marked off on my chart here."

"No problem. Lena." He reached out and clutched her hand. A drowning man grabbing a rope. "We're just talking about flower arrangements."

"Flowers are the landscape of a wedding," Mrs. Renault declared, and made more notations on the clipboard she carried everywhere. "How are you, Lena?"

"I'm just fine, Miss Sarah Jane. Isn't this exciting? Counting right down to the big day. Effie, you must be half mad with the details."

"I've passed half, working toward pure insanity."

"It'll all be beautiful." She kept her smile bright, her voice light even as the dark heat coursed through her. "Those rhododendrons are going to be spectacular on your day."

"The gardens are going to be a sight," Mrs. Renault agreed, and ran down her checklist again. "Pity, though, there wasn't time to put up an arbor, train some sweet peas up." She looked over the tops of her reading glasses at Declan with a faintly accusatory gleam.

"Maybe the Franks can rig something. Ah, can you excuse me a minute? There's something I need to show Lena."

He escaped, pulling her toward the steps to the second-floor gallery. There were still some of General Renault's militia on the lower level. "They're like ants," he babbled. "Crawling out of the woodwork when you're not looking."

"What're you talking about?"

"People. Everywhere. Watch that bucket. I think the ballroom's safe."

"Feeling a little pressed, are you, *cher*?"

"I'm thinking of a nice vacation in Maui until this is over. I've got to say, I admire women."

“Really.” She glanced down at the ladders, the tarps, the debris of construction—and the two women picking their way through it with visions of tulle and lace in their heads. “Why is that?”

“You can be spitting mad, and still carry on a polite conversation about rhododendrons.” He peeked through the ballroom doors, sighed. “All clear. Anyway, when most guys work up a head of steam, it spews. Well . . .” He stepped inside. “What do you think?”

The walls were a pale rose, the floor gold and gleaming.

“It’s big.”

“It’ll need to be for this little do. The General says we’ve got two-fifty coming. Otherwise, you can use the pocket doors to turn it into a couple of parlors.”

He crossed the floor, drew one of the big doors out of its slot. “Isn’t this amazing?” He trailed his fingers over the carved wood reverently. “The craftsmanship in these. More than a hundred years ago. I hate hiding them. See how the pattern matches the ceiling medallions? Tibald did a hell of a job restoring those.”

She had worked up a head of steam since her conversation with her grandmother, but found it dispersing now as she watched his undiluted pleasure and pride.

“It’s true love, isn’t it? You and this house. Most men don’t look at a woman the way you look at those doors.”

“I look at you that way.”

She had to turn away. “You make it damn hard to hold on to a mad. Tell me why you’re not mad, Declan. Why aren’t you mad she stole from you?”

“I am. And if I have occasion to see her again, she’ll know it.”

“You should go to the police.”

“I thought about it. I might get some of the money back, but it would embarrass Miss Odette.”

“She’s already embarrassed.”

“I know. Why add to it? I got back the things that mattered.”

The bitterness gushed through her anew. “She came in your house, she went through your things. She *took* from you.”

He lifted a brow at the tone of her voice. “Working up that steam again?”

“Goddamn it. Goddamn it, Declan, she violated your home. It’s not like taking from me or Grandmama. How much did she take?”

“Couple thousand.”

The muscles in Lena’s jaw tightened. “I’ll have you a check tomorrow.”

“You know I’ll tear it up. Put it away, Lena. I figure it was a cheap lesson. If you’re going to live in the country, have a houseful of valuables and spare cash, you don’t walk off and leave it unlocked and unattended.”

“She’d have broken a window.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m getting a couple of dogs. Always wanted a pack of dogs. I thought I’d go to the shelter after the wedding. Want to come with me?”

She just shook her head. “You lose two thousand dollars—and I bet it was more—to a thieving junkie, and your response is to buy some dogs.”

“Figured I’d get some fun out of it. How about it? They’ll be your dogs, too.”

“Stop it, Declan.”

“Uh-uh.” With a satisfied smirk on his face, he walked toward her. “Let’s get us a couple mongrel puppies, Lena. They’ll be good practice before the kids come along.”

“You get your own puppies.” But he’d teased a smile out of her. “And run around after them when they pee on your rugs and chew on your shoes.”

“Maybe Rufus will teach them their manners. You’re wearing my earrings,” he said as he slipped his arms around her and glided into a dance.

“They’re my earrings now.”

“You think of me when you put them on.”

“Maybe. Then I think how nice they look on me, and I forget all about you.”

“Well, then I’ll have to find other ways to remind you.”

“A necklace.” She skimmed her fingers up the nape of his neck, into his hair. “Couple of nice glittery bracelets.”

“I was thinking of a toe ring.”

She laughed, eased in closer so that she could rest her cheek on his. They were waltzing, and a tune was playing in her head. One she’d heard him hum or whistle countless times. She could smell his workday on him—the sweat, the dust—and under it the faint, faint drift of soap from his morning shower. His cheek was a little rough against hers as he’d neglected to shave.

If life were a fairy tale, she thought, they could stay just like this. Waltzing around and around on the satiny floor, while the sun slid down, the flowers rioted, and the lights from hundreds of tiny crystal prisms showered over them.

“I’ve got such feelings for you. More than I ever had for anyone, or wanted to. I don’t know what to do with them.”

“Give them to me,” he pleaded, turning his lips into her hair. “I’ll take good care of them.”

She hadn’t realized she’d spoken aloud. Hadn’t meant to. Now, when she would have drawn back, he pulled her closer. So close, so tight, she couldn’t get her breath.

Her head spun, and the music inside it soared. The strong scent of lilies rose up and almost smothered her.

“Do you hear it?” His hands trembled as he gripped her arms. “Violins.”

“I can’t . . .” His voice sounded far off, and as she fought to focus on his face, another seemed to float over it. “I’m dizzy.”

“Let’s sit down.” He kept his hands on her arms, low-

ered them both to the floor. “You heard it, too. The music. You felt it, too.”

“Just hold on a minute.” She had to regain her bearings. The room was empty but for the two of them. There was no music, no crystal light, no pots heaped with fragrant white lilies. Yet she had heard, seen, smelled. “I didn’t know hallucinations were catching.”

“It’s not hallucination. It’s memory. Somehow, it’s memory. They’d have danced here, Lucian and Abigail, like we were. Loved each other, like we do.” When she shook her head, he swore. “All right, damn it, he loved her, the way I love you. And there’s something still alive between them. Maybe something that needs to be finished, or just acknowledged. We’re here, Lena.”

“Yes, we’re here. And I’m not living someone else’s life.”

“It’s not like that.”

“It *felt* like that. And living someone else’s life might just mean dying someone else’s death. He drowned himself in that pond outside there, and she—”

“She died in this house.”

Lena took a calming breath. “Depending on whose story you believe.”

“I know she did. Upstairs, in the nursery. Something happened to her up there. And he never knew. He grieved himself to death not knowing. I need to find out for him. And for myself. I need you to help me.”

“What can I do?”

“Come to the nursery with me. We’re closer now. Maybe you’ll remember this time.”

“Declan.” She took his face in her hands. “There’s nothing for me to remember.”

“You hang witch bottles out in my tree, but sit here denying any possibility of reincarnation, which you brought into the mix in the first place.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. There’s nothing for me to remember because I’m not Abigail. You are.”

She might as well have slipped on a pair of brass knuckles and plowed her fist into his stomach. The shock of her words had him reeling.

“Get out. That’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because . . .” Flustered, oddly embarrassed, he pushed to his feet. “You’re trying to say I was a *girl*?”

“I don’t know why that’s such a shock to your system. A lot of us get along just fine female.”

“I don’t. I’m not. I wasn’t.”

“It makes the most sense, if any of this makes sense.”

“No sense. None. No way.”

“You’re the one who keeps hearing the baby cry.” She’d never seen him quite so flustered. “Mothers do, before anyone else. And you’re drawn to that room upstairs, the way a mother would be to her baby. Even though the room scares you, you’re pulled back. You said how you wandered through the servants’ wing, how easy it was to find your way. She’d have known it, but why would Lucian?”

“It was his house.” But he remembered how he’d imagined looking out the window, imagined seeing the two men riding toward the house. Why would he imagine seeing Lucian riding home if he’d *been* Lucian?

“A couple other things,” Lena continued. “One telling one. That day when I came along and saw you walking toward the pond. Trancelike. You walked oddly. I couldn’t figure out what it was about the way you walked that struck me. But now I know. You were walking the way a very pregnant woman walks. Waddling a bit,” she said as he turned and gaped at her with something like horror. “A hand pressed to the small of your back. Small, careful steps.”

“Now you’re saying I wasn’t just a girl, but a pregnant girl?”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, *cher*, some people believe you can come back as a poodle. What’s so bad about a pregnant woman?”

“Because pregnant women go into labor at a certain point, then have to push several pounds of baby out of a very limited space.”

The horror on his face was comical, and enough to have her relaxing into the theory. “I don’t think you’ll have to repeat that performance in this life. Have you considered that if you look at this puzzle from this new angle, you might find the answers you want?”

He found himself wanting to rub at his crotch just to make sure everything was where it should be. Maybe work up a good, manly belch. “I like it better the other way.”

“Keep an open mind, *cher*. I’ve got to get to work.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.” He dashed after her. “You’re just going to drop this bombshell on me, then leave?”

“I’ve got to work for a living.”

“Come back after closing. Stay.”

“I need to stay at Grandmama’s for a night or two, till she’s feeling steadier.”

“Okay. Okay.” He let out a breath when they reached the main floor. “Let me try this.” He spun her around, crushed his mouth to hers. Then took the kiss deep and dreamy.

“You didn’t get any lesbian-type vibe from that, did you?” he asked when he drew back.

“Hmm.” She touched her tongue to her top lip, pretended to consider. “No. I can attest that you’re all man this time around. Now, shoo. You’ve got plenty to do the next few days to keep your mind occupied. This whole

thing's waited a hundred years, it can wait till after Remy's wedding."

"Come back and stay when Miss Odette's feeling better."

"All right."

"I love you, Lena."

"I'm afraid you do," she whispered, and walked away.

Lena left the bar as early as she could manage, but it was still after one in the morning when she pulled up to the bayou house. The porch light was burning, and the moths seduced to death by it. She sat for a moment, listening to the music of the frogs and night birds, and the teasing whisper of a faint breeze.

This was the place of her girlhood. Perhaps the place of her heart. Though she'd made her life in the city, it was here she came when she was most happy, or most troubled. Here she came to think her deepest thoughts or dream her most secret dreams.

She'd let herself dream once—those innate female dreams of romance and a handsome man to love her, of home and children and Sunday mornings.

When had she stopped?

That sticky summer afternoon, she admitted. That hot, hazy day when she'd seen the boy she'd loved with all her wild heart and foolish youth coupling like an animal with her mother on a ragged blanket in the marsh.

The marsh that was hers, the boy that was hers. The mother that was hers.

It had sliced her life in two, she thought now. The time before, when there was still hope and innocent dreams and faith. And the time after, where there was only ambition, determination and a steely vow never, never to believe again.

The boy didn't matter now, she knew. She could barely see his face in her mind. Her mother didn't matter, not at the core of it. But the *moment* mattered.

Without it, who knew what direction her life would have taken? Oh, she and the boy would have parted ways soon enough. But it might've been with some sweetness, it might have left her with some soft memory of first loves.

But that stark vision of sex and betrayal had forged her. She'd understood then what it might have taken her years to learn otherwise. That a woman was smarter, safer, to drive the train herself. Men came, men went, and enjoying them was fine.

Loving them was suicide.

Suicide? she shook her head as she climbed out of the car. That was overly dramatic, wasn't it? Heartbreak wasn't death.

He'd died from it.

She all but heard the voice in her head. It hadn't been the knife wound, it hadn't been the pond that had killed Lucian Manet.

It had been a broken heart.

She let herself into the house and immediately saw the spill of light from Odette's room. Even as she approached, Lena heard the quick thump-thump of Rufus's tail on the floor.

She stepped to the doorway, cocked her head. Odette was sitting up in bed, a book open on her lap, the faithful dog curled on the floor.

"What are you doing up so late?"

"Waiting for my baby. I didn't think you'd be back for another hour or more."

"Business was light enough to spare me."

Odette patted the side of the bed in invitation. "You took off early because you were worried about me. You shouldn't."

“You used to tell me worrying was your job.” Lena lay down on top of the sheets, her head in the curve of her grandmother’s arm. “Now it’s mine, too. I’m sorry she hurt you.”

“Oh, baby, I think that must be her job. God knows she’s good at it.” Odette stroked Lena’s hair. “I got you, though. I got my Lena.”

“I was thinking what it was like for you and Grandpapa to raise a baby after you’d already raised your own.”

“You were nothing but pure pleasure to both of us.”

“It made me think about how the Manets brought your grandmama back here when she was a baby. You remember her pretty well, don’t you?”

“I remember her very well. You’ve the look of her. You’ve seen the old pictures, so you know that.”

“Did she ever say how the Hall should’ve been hers?”

“Never heard her say anything like. She was a happy woman, Lena. Maybe happier here than she would’ve been in the Hall, had things been different. She had a fine hand with baking, and that she passed to me. She told good stories, too. Sometimes when I’d come spend time with her, she’d make them up just like they were real. I think she could’ve been a writer if she’d wanted that for herself.”

“She must’ve thought of her parents, and the Manets. No matter how happy she was here, she must’ve thought of them.”

“I expect so. She used to take flowers to her papa’s grave. Took them every year on her birthday.”

“Did she? You never told me that.”

“Said she owed him life—hers, her children, her grandchildren. She even laid flowers on the graves of Josephine and Henri Manet. Though she never stopped there to say a prayer. And she did one more thing on her birthday, every year until she died. She took flowers and tossed them into the river. And there she said a prayer.”

“For her mother, you think?”

“She never said, but that’s what I think.”

“And do you think that’s where Abigail is? In the river?”

“Some say.”

Lena raised her head. “I’m not asking some. I’m asking you.”

“I know sometimes I walk along the bank, and I feel an awful sadness. And I think, sometimes, old souls search for new life. And keep searching until it comes out right. What’re you searching for?”

Lena laid her head down again, closed her eyes. “I thought I’d found it. Now I’m not so sure. He loves me, Grandmama.”

“I know he does.”

“If I love him back, everything changes.”

Odette smiled, leaned over to shut off the light. “It surely does,” she murmured and continued to stroke Lena’s hair. “It surely does.”

As host of Remy's bachelor party, Declan felt socially obligated to stay till the bitter end. The bitter end was some dingy, backstreet dive in the Quarter where the liquor burned holes in what was left of a man's stomach lining and the strippers were woefully past their prime.

Nobody seemed to care.

In the spirit of good fellowship, Declan tucked a final dollar in the frayed garter on a flabby white thigh, then hauled a glassy-eyed Remy to his feet.

"Let's go, pal of mine."

"Huh? What? Is it morning?"

"Close enough."

As they stumbled out, arm in arm as much for necessity as friendship, Remy looked around. His head bopped like a puppet's on a jerked string. "Wherez everybody?"

"Passed out, in jail, dead in an alley."

"Oh. Wimps." Remy grinned his rubber grin. "You 'n me, Dec, we still got it."

"I'm starting a course of antibiotics in the morning to

get rid of it.” He tripped and had to wrap both arms around Remy to keep from falling on his face. “Too much gravity. There’s entirely too much gravity out here.”

“Let’s go find us another naked woman.”

“I think we found all of them already. Time to go home, old buddy, old pal.”

“I’m getting married in three days.” Remy held up four fingers to demonstrate. “No more carousing for Remy.” He looked around. The streets were nearly deserted and oily with the light drizzle. “Do we have to bail anybody out?”

“Screw ’em.”

“Damn right. Where’s my girl? Effie!” He shouted it, and the name echoed back, making Declan snort drunkenly.

“Stella!” Cracked up by his own wit, he sat down hard in a puddle. “Fuck it, Remy. Let’s just sleep here.”

“Gotta go find my girl, gonna make sweet, sweet love to my Effie.”

“You couldn’t get it up right now with a hydraulic pump.”

“Bet?” Remy fumbled for his zipper, and Declan had just enough brain cells left to stagger up and stop him.

“Put that thing away before you hurt yourself. Get us arrested for decent exposure.”

“’S okay. We’re lawyers.”

“Speak for yourself. Find cabs. We must find cabs.”

“Cab to Effie. Where’s my blushin’ bride?”

“Home in bed, like every other good woman is at . . .” He lifted Remy’s wrist, tried to focus on the watch. “Whatever o’clock in the morning. Lena, she’s in bed. She thinks I’m a woman.”

“You must not be fucking her right then.”

“No, you ass. And remind me to punch you for that later. She thinks I’m Abigail.”

“You haven’t been trying on her underwear or anything weird like that, have you, son?”

“I like the little black lace panties with the roses best. They slim down my hips.”

“Pretty sure you’re joking. Wait.” He stopped, leaned over the curb, hands braced on his knees. Then slowly straightened again. “False alarm. Not gonna puke.”

“There’s good news. Cab!” Declan waved desperately when he saw one cruising. “In the name of God. You first,” he said and all but shoved Remy inside before diving in after.

“Where do I live?” Remy demanded. “I used to know, but I forgot. Can I call Effie and ask her?”

Fortunately Declan remembered, and as Remy snoozed on his shoulder, he concentrated on remaining conscious until he fulfilled the last of his duties and got his friend home alive.

At the curb, he elbowed Remy and brought him up like an arrow from a bow. “What? Where? Sum bitch, I’m home. How ’bout that?”

“Can you make it from here?” Declan asked him.

“I can hold my liquor. All six gallons of it.” Shifting, Remy caught Declan’s face in his hand and kissed him hard on the mouth. “I love you, *cher*. But if you’d been Abigail, I’d’ve slipped you some tongue.”

“Ugh,” was the best Declan could manage as Remy climbed out.

“You’re the goddamnedest best friend I ever had, and that was the goddamnedest best bachelor’s party in the history of bachelor’s parties. I’m gonna go up, puke, and pass out now.”

“You do that. Wait till he gets in the door,” Declan told the driver, and watched Remy waver, split in two. Both of them stumbled inside the building.

“Okay, the rest is his business. You know where the old Manet Hall is?”

The driver eyed him in the rearview mirror. “I guess I do.”

“I live there. Take me home, okay?”

“That’s a long way out.” The driver shifted, turned, eyed Declan up and down. “You got enough for the fare?”

“I got money. I got lotsa money.” Declan pawed through his pockets, came up with bills, littered the cab with them. “I’m loaded.”

“You’re telling me.” With a shake of his head, the driver pulled away from the curb. “Must’ve been some party, buddy.”

“Tell me,” Declan muttered, then slid face first on the backseat.

The next thing he knew, clearly, a Dixieland band was blasting in his head. He was still facedown, but the beach of Waikiki had ended up in his mouth and his tongue had grown a fine fur coat.

Some sadist was hammering spikes into his shoulder.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.”

“No point falling back on that now. Just roll over nice and slow, *cher*. Don’t open your eyes yet.”

“I’m dying here. Call a priest.”

“Here now, Lena’s got you.” Gently and with great amusement, she eased him over, supported his head. “Just swallow this.”

He glugged, choked, felt something vile wash over the fur, through the sand and down his throat. In defense, he tried to push the glass away from his lips, and opened his eyes.

He’d go to his grave denying the sound that had come out of his mouth had in any way resembled a girlish scream.

Lena clucked her tongue. “I told you not to open your eyes.”

“What eyes? What eyes? They’ve been burned to cinders.”

“Drink the rest.”

“Go away, go very far away, and take your poison with you.”

“That’s no way to talk to someone who’s come to tend you on your deathbed.”

He slid back down, dragged a pillow over his face. “How’d you know I was dying?”

“Effie called.”

“When’s Remy’s funeral?”

“Fortunately, he’s marrying a woman with a great deal of tolerance, understanding and humor. How many titty bars did y’all hit last night?”

“All of them. All the titty bars in all the land.”

“I suppose that explains why you have a pasty on your cheek.”

“I do not.” But when he groped under the pillow, he felt the tassel. “Oh God. Have some mercy and just kill me.”

“Well, all right, honey.” She applied just enough pressure to the pillow to have him flapping his hands and shoving up.

His face was flushed, his bloodshot eyes just a little wild. “That wasn’t funny.”

“You had to see it from this side.” And she laughed. He still wore his clothes, the wrinkled, liquor-spotted shirt half in, half out of his jeans. Another pasty peeked out of the shirt pocket. This one was pink and silver. His eyes were narrowed to a pained squint.

“You’re going to feel better in a bit—not good but better. You get a shower and some food, on top of that potion I poured into you, you’ll get the feeling back in your extremities in two, maybe three hours.”

Someone had shaved the fur off his tongue, he discov-

ered. He wasn't sure it was an improvement. "What was in that stuff you gave me?"

"You don't want to know, but I laced it with four aspirin, so don't take any more for a while. I'm going to fix you a nice light omelette and some toast."

"Why?"

"Because you look so pitiful." She started to kiss him, then jerked back, waving a hand between them. "Christ Jesus, do something about that breath, *cher*, before you kill someone with it."

"Who asked you?"

"And make that a long shower. You smell like the bar-room floor." She pushed to her feet. "How come nobody's around here today?"

"In anticipation of a hangover, I let it be known that anyone who came around this house before three in the afternoon would be executed without trial."

She checked her watch. "Looks like you got a few hours yet."

"If I have to get out of this bed, I'm getting a gun. I'll feel bad about killing you, but I'll do it."

"I'll be in the kitchen." She cocked a brow. "Bring your gun, *cher*, and we'll see if you remember how to use it."

"Is that a euphemism?" he called after her, then immediately regretted raising his voice. Holding his head to keep it in place, he eased creakily out of bed.

She chuckled all the way downstairs. Laughed harder when she heard a door slam. Bet he's sorry he did that, she thought, then stopped, looked back when she heard another two slams.

Ah well . . . she supposed he couldn't threaten ghosts with a gun.

"Make all the racket you want," she said as she headed back toward the kitchen. "You don't worry me any."

The library doors shook as she passed them. She ignored them. If a surly, smelly man didn't chase her off, a mean-tempered ghost wouldn't.

He'd looked so damn cute, she thought as she hunted up the coffee beans. All pale and male and cross. And with that silly pasty plastered on his cheek.

Men just lost half their IQ when they had a look at a naked woman. Put a pack of them together with women willing to strip to music, and they had the common sense of a clump of broccoli.

She ground the beans, set coffee to brew. She was mixing eggs in a bowl when it occurred to her that it was the first time in her life she'd made breakfast for a man she hadn't slept with the night before.

Wasn't that an odd thing?

Odder still that she was humming in the kitchen of an annoyed, smelly, hungover man who'd snapped at her. *Out of character, Lena. Just what's going on here?*

She'd been so intrigued by Effie's cheerful amusement over Remy's condition. And here she was, feeling the same thing over Declan's.

She peered out the window at the garden that had been wild and abandoned only months before. It bloomed now, beautifully, with new sprigs, fresh green spearing out.

She'd gone and done it after all. Gone and let him sneak into her, right through the locks and bolts.

She was in love with him. And oh God, she didn't want to be—as much for his sake as for her own.

He'd blown the dust off those young dreams she'd so rigidly put away. The ones colored with love and hope and trust. They were so shiny now that they were staring her in the face. So shiny they blinded her.

And terrified her.

Marriage. The man wanted marriage, and she didn't

believe in making promises unless you'd shed blood to keep them.

Would she? Could she?

"I think I'd want to," she said quietly. "I think I'd want to, for him."

As she spoke, a cupboard door flew open. A thick blue mug shot out and smashed at her feet.

She leaped back, heart hammering as shards rained over her ankles. Grimly, she stared down at the blood seeping out of tiny nicks.

"Seems I already have. You don't want that, do you?" Bowl still clutched in her hand, she spun a circle. "You want anything but our being together. We'll see who wins in the end, won't we? We'll just see."

Deliberately she reached down for one of the shards, then ran it over her thumb. As the blood welled, she held her hand up, let it drip. "I'm not weak, as he was. If I take love, if I promise love, I'll keep it."

The sound of chimes had her bolting straight up. It was Declan's tune. The first ringing notes of it. Fear and wonder closed her throat, had her bobbling the bowl.

"Goddamn it, answer the door, will you?" His voice blasted downstairs, full of bitter annoyance. "Then murder whoever rang that idiot doorbell."

Doorbell? She pushed her free hand through her hair. He'd installed a doorbell that played "After the Ball." Wasn't that just like him?

"You keep shouting at me," she called as she marched down the hall, "you're going to have worse than a hang-over to deal with."

"If you'd go away and let me die in peace, I wouldn't have to shout."

"In about two shakes, I'm coming up there and wringing your neck. And after I wring your neck, I'm going to kick your ass."

She wrenched open the door on the final threat, and found herself glaring at a very handsome couple. It took only one blink to clear the temper for her to see Declan's eyes looking curiously back at her out of the woman's face.

"I'm Colleen Fitzgerald." The woman, tidy, blond and lovely, held out an elegant hand. "And who are you? If that's my son's ass you're intending to kick, I'd like to know your name."

"Mom?" Dripping from the shower, wearing nothing but ripped sweatpants, Declan rushed to the top of the stairs. "Hey! Mom, Dad." Despite the ravages of the hangover, he bolted down, threw one arm around each of them and squeezed. "I thought you were flying down tomorrow."

"Change of plans. Are you just getting up?" Colleen demanded. "It's after one in the afternoon."

"Bachelor party last night. Hard liquor, loose women."

"Really?" Colleen said and eyed Lena.

"Oh, not this one. She came over to play Florence Nightingale. Colleen and Patrick Fitzgerald, Angelina Simone."

"Good to meet you." Patrick, long, lanky, with his dark hair gorgeously silvered at the temples, sent Lena a generous smile. His blue eyes were bright and bold as he held out a hand.

Then they narrowed in concern as he saw her thumb. "You've hurt yourself."

"It's nothing."

"What'd you do? You're bleeding. Jesus, Lena." Panicked, Declan grabbed her wrist, all but plucked her off her feet and rushed her toward the kitchen.

"It's just a scratch. Stop it, Declan. Your parents. You're embarrassing me," she hissed.

"Shut up. Let me see how deep it is."

Still in the doorway, Patrick turned to his wife. "She's the one?"

"He certainly thinks so." Colleen pursed her lips, stepped into the house. "Let's just see about all this."

"Hell of a looker."

"I've got eyes, Patrick." And she used them to take in the house as they followed Declan's hurried path.

It was more, a great deal more than she'd expected. Not that she doubted her son's taste. But she'd been led to believe the house was in serious, perhaps fatal, disrepair. And what she saw now were gracious rooms, charming details, glinting glass and wood.

And in the kitchen she saw her son, hovering over the hand of a very annoyed, very beautiful woman who looked perfectly capable of carrying out her earlier threat.

"I beg your pardon." Lena elbowed Declan aside and smiled coolly at his parents. "I dropped a cup, that's all. It's nice to meet both of you."

Declan turned to root through cupboards. "You need some antiseptic and a bandage."

"Oh, stop fussing. You'd think I cut my hand off. And if you don't watch yourself you'll step on the shards and be worse off than I am. I'm sorry your welcome's so disrupted," she said to his parents. "I'm just going to sweep up this mess, then I'll be on my way."

"Where are you going?" Declan demanded. "You promised food."

She wondered if he could hear her teeth grinding together. "Pour what's in that bowl into a skillet, turn on the burner and you'll have food." She yanked open the broom closet. "Why aren't you getting your parents coffee or a cold drink after their long trip? They raised you better than that."

"We certainly did," Colleen agreed.

"Sorry. Seeing the woman I love bleeding all over the floor distracted me."

“Declan.” Though her voice was low, Lena’s warning was loud and clear.

“Coffee sounds great,” Patrick said cheerfully. “We came here straight from the airport. Wanted to see this place—and you, too, Dec,” he added with a wink.

“Where’s your luggage?”

“Had it sent to the hotel. Son, this place is enormous. A lot of space for one man.”

“Lena and I want four kids.”

She heaved the broken shards into the trash and rounded on him.

“Okay, three,” he amended without a hitch in his stride. “But that’s my final offer.”

“I’ve had enough of this.” She shoved the broom and dustpan into his hands. “You clean up your own messes. I hope you enjoy your stay,” she said stiffly to Colleen and Patrick. “I’m late for work.”

She strode out the back because it was closer, and fought off the towering urge to slam the door until the windows cracked.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Declan said with a huge grin. “Isn’t she perfect?”

“You annoyed and embarrassed her,” Colleen told him.

“Good. I tend to make more progress that way. Let me get the coffee, then I’ll show you around.”

*A*n hour later, Declan sat with his mother on the rear gallery while Patrick—who’d lost the debate—made sandwiches.

The worst of the hangover had receded. Declan imagined he had whatever mysterious potion Lena had given him to thank for it—and the pleasure of seeing her in the same room as his parents.

Jeez, he’d missed them, he thought. He’d had no idea how much he’d missed them until he’d seen them.

“So,” he said at length, “are you going to tell me what you think?”

“Yes.” But she continued to sit and look out over his gardens. “Warm, isn’t it? Early in the year to be so warm, I’d think.”

“Actually, it’s cooler today. You should’ve been here a couple days ago. You could’ve poached eggs out here.”

She heard the way he said it, with a kind of pride. “You were never a big fan of the cold. Even when we went skiing, you’d prefer rattling around the lodge to charging down the slopes.”

“Skiing’s something people invented so they can pretend snow’s fun.”

“See if we invite you to Vermont this season.” But her hand moved over, touched his. “The house is beautiful, Declan. Even what you haven’t gotten to yet is beautiful, in its way. I liked to think your fiddling with tools and wood and so on was a nice little hobby. I preferred to think that. As long as you were a lawyer, it was probable you’d stay in Boston. You’d stay close. I dreaded seeing you go, so I made it hard on you. I’m not sorry. You’re my baby,” she said, and touched him in the deepest chamber of his heart.

“I don’t have to be in Boston to be close.”

She shook her head. “You won’t come swinging in the house unexpectedly. We won’t run into you in restaurants or at parties or the theater. That’s a wrench in me, one you’ll understand when you have those three or four children.”

“I don’t want you to be sad.”

“Well, of course I’m sad. Don’t be a boob. I love you, don’t I?”

“You keep saying so,” he said playfully.

She looked at him, gray eyes steady on gray eyes. “Lucky for both of us, I love you enough to know when to let go. You found your place here. I won’t deny I hoped

you wouldn't, but since you have, I'm glad for you. Damn it."

"Thanks." He leaned over, kissed her.

"Now, as for this woman . . ."

"Lena."

"I know her name, Declan," Colleen said dryly. "As a potential mother-in-law, I'm entitled to refer to her as 'this woman' until I get to know her a little better. As for this woman, she's nothing like what I'd imagined for you. Not when I imagined you climbing up the ranks in the law firm, buying a house close by and within easy access to the country club. Jessica would have suited my requirements as daughter-in-law quite well in that scenario. A good, challenging tennis partner who plays a decent hand of bridge and has the skill to chair the right committees."

"Maybe you should adopt Jessica."

"Be quiet, Declan." Colleen's voice was mild—and steel. Lena would have recognized the tone instantly. "I'm not finished. Jessica, however well suited for me, was very obviously not suited for you. You weren't happy, and I'd begun to see, and to worry about that just before you broke it off. I tried to convince myself it was just pre-wedding jitters, but I knew better."

"It wouldn't have hurt for you to clue me in on that one."

"Maybe not, but I was annoyed with you."

"Tell me."

"Don't sass, young man, especially when I'm about to be sentimental. You were always a happy child. Bright, clever, a smart tongue, but I respect that. You had, I'd call it, a bounce in your heart. And you lost it. I see you've gotten that back today. I saw it in your eyes again when you looked at Lena."

He took Colleen's hand, rubbed it against his cheek. "You called her Lena."

“Temporarily. I haven’t made up my mind about her. And believe me, boy, she hasn’t made hers up about your father and me, either. So, I’d advise you to stay out of it and let us get on with the job of doing so.”

She stretched out her legs. “Patrick? Did you have to hunt down the pig for those ham sandwiches?”

Declan grinned, gave the hand he held a big, noisy kiss. “I love you guys.”

“We love you, too.” She squeezed his fingers, hard, then let them go. “God knows why.”

He dreamed of storms and pain. Of fear and joys.

Rain and wind lashed the windows, and the pain that whipped through him erupted in a sobbing scream.

Sweat and tears poured down his face—her face. Her face, her body. His pain.

The room was gold with gaslight and the snap and simmer of the fire in the grate. And as that storm raged outside, another spun through her. Through him.

Agony vised her belly with the next contraction. She was blind with it. Her cry against it was primal, and burned his throat with its passion.

Push, Abby! You have to push! You’re almost there.

Tired, she was so tired, so weak. How could she live through such pain? But she grit her teeth. Almost mad. Everything she was, everything she had, focused on this one task, this one miracle.

Her child. Her child, Lucian’s child, was fighting to come into the world. She bore down with all the strength she had left. Life depended on it.

There’s the head! Et là! Such hair! One more, Abby. One more, chère.

She was laughing now. Better than screaming, even if the laugh was tinged with hysteria. She braced herself on

her elbows, threw her head back as fresh, unspeakable pain rolled through her.

This one moment, this one act, was the greatest gift a woman could give. This gift, this child, would be held safe, would be cherished. Would be loved for all of her days.

And on the pain, with lightning flashing, on the roar of thunder, she pushed, pushed, pushed wailing life into the world.

A girl! You have a beautiful girl.

Pain was forgotten. The hours of sweat and blood and agony were nothing now in the brilliant flash of joy. Weeping from it, she held out her arms for the small wriggling baby who cried out in what sounded like triumph.

My rose. My beautiful Marie Rose. Tell Lucian. Oh, please bring Lucian to see our daughter.

They cleaned both mother and baby first, smiling at the mother's impatience and the child's irritable cries.

There were tears in Lucian's eyes when he came into the room. When he clasped her hand, his fingers trembled. When he looked at the child they'd created, his face filled with wonder.

She told him what she had vowed on the instant Marie Rose had been placed in her arms.

We'll keep her safe, Lucian. No matter what, we'll keep her safe and happy. She's ours. Promise me you'll love and care for her, always.

Of course. She's so beautiful, Abby. My beautiful girls. I love you.

Say the words. I need to hear you say the words.

Still holding Abigail's hand, Lucian laid a tender finger on his daughter's cheek. *I'll love and I'll care for her, always. I swear it.*

Patrick Fitzgerald took his wife's hand as they strolled through the Quarter. He knew their destination was Et Trois and their mission another look at Angelina Simone.

"You know, Colleen, this is very close to interference, and spying."

"And your point is?"

He had to laugh. After nearly forty years of marriage, the woman could always make him laugh. He considered that, above all, a sign of a successful partnership.

"You realize she might not be there. Owning a bar doesn't mean you're in it all day, every day."

"So, we'll get a look at her place of business, and have a drink. It's perfectly up front and respectable."

"Yes, dear."

He used that phrase, that tone, only when he was making fun of her. Colleen debated between giving him a good elbow shot in the ribs and laughing. Then did both.

The crowds, the noise, the *heat* and the somehow florid and decaying elegance of the city weren't things that ap-

pealed to her for more than a brief visit. She preferred the Old-World charm, and yes, the dignity, of Boston.

Certainly Boston had its seamier sides, but it wasn't so overt, so celebratory about it. Sex was meant to be fun and interesting—she wasn't a prude, for God's sake. But it was also meant to be private.

And still, the tragic wail of a tenor sax weeping on the air touched some chord in her.

If her son was determined to make his home here, she'd accept that. Maybe, with a bit more study and debate, she'd accept the woman.

"You'll have time and opportunity to grill her at the wedding tomorrow," Patrick pointed out.

Colleen only sighed at the minds of men. God bless them, they were simple creatures. Guileless, really. The first step, obviously, was to observe the girl in her own milieu.

She considered the neighborhood, the positioning of the bar, the level of traffic. She decided Lena had chosen wisely, and had taste and sense enough to let the exterior of the bar blend smoothly into the other establishments.

She liked the gallery over it, the pots of flowers—bright colors against the soft creams. It demonstrated taste and style, an appreciation for atmosphere.

She'd pried the information out of Declan that Lena lived above the bar, and wondered now if she should wheedle a visit upstairs to check out the living quarters.

She stepped inside *Et Trois*, made a good, objective study.

It was clean, which met with her approval. It was crowded but not jammed, which met with her business sense. Too early for the rowdy night crowd, Colleen judged, too late for the lunch shift.

The music coming out of the speakers was Cajun, she supposed, and she approved of that as well. It was lively, but not so loud as to make simple conversation a chore.

A black man in a bright red shirt worked behind the bar. A good face, she decided, smooth hands. A young waitress—blond, perky, wearing jeans perhaps just a tad too tight—served one of the tables.

Colleen spotted what she decided were a number of tourists from their camera and shopping bags. Others she assumed were locals.

Whatever food had been or was being served put a hot, spicy scent over the air.

Lena stepped out of the kitchen. Their eyes met immediately and with instant acknowledgment. Colleen let her lips curve in a small, polite smile and walked to the bar with Patrick following.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Fitzgerald, Mr. Fitzgerald.” An equally small, equally polite smile curved Lena’s lips. “You’ve been taking in the Quarter?” she asked with a glance at the shopping bags Patrick carried.

“Colleen rarely passes a store without seeing something that needs to be bought.”

“That must be where Declan gets it. Can I show you a menu?”

“We’ve had lunch, thanks.” Colleen slid onto a stool. “I’d love a martini, Stoli, very cold, dead dry, straight up, shaken. Three olives.”

“And for you, Mr. Fitzgerald?”

“Make it the same, and make it Patrick.” He took the stool beside his wife. “You’ve got a nice place here. Live music?” he asked with a nod toward the stage area.

“Every night, nine o’clock.” As she began to mix the martinis, she sent him a genuine smile. “You like to dance, you should come back. We’ll get your feet moving. You enjoying your visit?”

“We’re looking forward to the wedding,” Colleen commented. “Remy’s like family. And we’re pleased to see Declan making such progress on the house.”

“He’s happy there.”

“Yes.”

Lena took out the two martini glasses she'd chilled during the mixing. “Be nicer for you if he'd be happy in Boston—and with the one he almost married.”

“Yes, it would, wouldn't it? But we can't choose other people's lives. Even our children's. And you certainly can't select the person they'll love. Are you in love with my son, Lena?”

Hands rock steady, Lena strained the martinis into the cold glasses. “That's something I'll talk to him about, when I'm ready. These are on the house,” she added, sliding the olives in. “I hope they suit your tastes.”

“Thank you.” Colleen picked up her glass, sipped. Raised an eyebrow. “It's excellent. I've always felt mixing the perfect martini is a kind of art, and have been surprised and disappointed that often those who own a bar or club or restaurant make or serve imperfect martinis.”

“Why do anything if you don't set out to do it right?”

“Exactly. It's a matter of pride, isn't it? In self, in one's work, one's life. Flaws are acceptable, even necessary to make us human and humble. But to serve a guest or customer less than the best one is capable of, strikes me as arrogant or sloppy. Often both.”

“I don't see the point in doing anything halfway,” Lena said, and filled a bowl with fresh snack mix. “If I can't make a martini, fine, then I step back until I learn how it's done. Otherwise I'd disappoint myself and the person who was counting on me.”

“A good policy.” Colleen sampled an olive. “Without high standards, we tend to settle for less than what makes us happy and productive, and can shortchange the people who matter to us.”

“When someone matters to me—and I'm careful about who does—I want the best for them. They may settle for less. But I won't.”

When Patrick leaned over, peered closely at Colleen's

martini, she frowned at him. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to see what's in yours that isn't in mine."

It made Lena laugh, had her shoulders relaxing. "He's an awful lot like you, isn't he? Got his mama's eyes though. Sees right through you. Even when you don't want him to. He loves you both like crazy, and that says something to me. So I'm going to say something to you."

She leaned a little closer. "I come from plain stock. Strong, but plain. My mother, she's a dead loss, and more of an embarrassment to me than I care to speak of. But my grandfather was a fine and decent man. My grandmama's as good as anybody, and better than most. I run this bar because I'm good at it—and I like it—and I don't waste my time on things I don't like."

She swept her hair behind her ear, kept her gaze level on Colleen's. "I'm selfish and I'm stubborn, and I don't see a damn thing wrong with that. I don't care about his money, or yours, so let's just set that aside. He's the best man I ever met in my life, and I'm not good enough for him. I say that knowing I'm good enough for damn near anybody, but he's different. Turns out under that affable exterior that man's even more stubborn than I am, and I haven't figured out what to do about that quite yet. When I do, he'll be the first to know. I expect he'll fill you in on that particular outcome."

"Now." Unconsciously, Lena toyed with the key she wore around her neck. "Would you like another drink?"

"We'll just nurse these for a while," Colleen told her.

"Excuse me a minute. I see I have an order to fill." She moved down the bar to where her waitress waited with an empty tray.

"Well?" Patrick asked. "I believe she set you neatly in your place."

"Yes." Well satisfied, Colleen took another sip of her martini. "She'll do."

* * *

“I’m not nervous.” Pale, jittery, Remy stood in the library while Declan attached the boutonniere of lily of the valley to his friend’s tuxedo lapel.

“Maybe if you say that *another* dozen times, you’ll believe it. Hold still, damn, Remy.”

“I’m holding still.”

“Sure, except for the mild seizure you seem to be having, you’re steady as a rock.”

“I want to marry Effie. Want to live my life with her. This is the day we’ve both been looking forward to for months.”

“That’s right. Today,” Declan said in sober tones, “is the first day of the rest of your life.”

“I feel a little sick.”

“It’s too late to puke,” Declan said cheerfully. “You’re down to the final fifteen. Want me to call your dad back in?”

“No. No, he’ll have his hands full with Mama. How many people did you say were out there?”

“Couple hundred last I looked, and more coming.”

“Jesus. Jesus. Why didn’t we elope? How’s a man supposed to stand up in front of hundreds of people and change his life forever?”

“I think the tradition started so the groom couldn’t run away. They’d go after him like a lynch mob.”

“That sure does settle me down, *cher*. How about you find me a couple fingers of bourbon?”

Declan merely strolled over to a painted cabinet and took out a bottle. “I figured you’d need a hit.” He pulled out a tin of Altoids as well. “And these. Don’t want to be breathing whiskey on the bride. She might be the one who runs.”

Declan started to pour, but when the door opened after

a cursory knock and his mother marched in, he whipped bottle and glass behind his back.

“Don’t you both look handsome! Declan, don’t give him more than one shot of that whiskey you’ve got behind you, and make sure he chases it with mouthwash.”

“I got Altoids.”

“Fine.” Smiling, she walked over and fussed with Remy’s tie. “You’re nervous because this is the most important day of your life. There’d be something wrong with you if you didn’t have some shakes. I promise, they’ll go away the minute you see Effie. She looks beautiful.”

Colleen framed Remy’s face in her hands. “I’m very proud of you.”

“How about me?” Declan demanded. “I thought of the Altoids.”

“I’ll get to you later. You’re marrying the woman you love,” Colleen went on. “You’re surrounded by friends and family who love you both. It’s a beautiful day, and your brother—the one of your heart—has seen to it that you have a beautiful setting. Now you take a shot of that bourbon, then take a deep breath. Then get your butt out there and get married.”

“Yes, ma’am. I purely love you, Miss Colleen.”

“I know it. I love you, too, but I’m not going to kiss you and smear my lipstick. One drink, Declan. This boy goes out there tipsy, I’m holding you responsible.”

Later, Declan would think his mother was right, as usual. When he stood beside Remy, and Effie, frothy in white, stepped out on the gallery, Declan felt the nerves drain out of his friend—his brother. He saw the wide, wide grin stretch over Remy’s face, heard his soft: “That’s my girl.”

He found his own gaze traveling through the rows of people, meeting Lena's. *And you're mine*, he thought. *This time around we're going to make it work.*

So he stood in the spring garden, with the old white house rising over the green lawn, and watched his friends marry.

When they kissed, when they turned to be announced as husband and wife, cheers rang out, so much more liberating and celebratory than the applause Declan was more accustomed to.

He felt his own grin stretch, nearly as wide as Remy's.

The music started up almost immediately. Fiddles, washboards, accordions. When the photographer whittled down to just the bride and groom, Declan broke free and wove his way through the sea of people to Lena.

She wore red. Bright, poppy red that left her back bare but for an intriguing web of thin straps. Just above her heart, she'd pinned the enamel watch and gold wings Lucian had once given Abigail.

"I wondered if you'd ever wear it."

"It's special," she said, "so I save it for special. It was a beautiful wedding, Declan. You did a fine job getting this place ready for it. You're a good friend."

"I have lots of good qualities, which makes you a very lucky woman. I've missed you the last couple days."

"We've both been busy."

"Stay tonight." He caught her hand, seeing denial and excuses in her eyes. "Angelina, stay tonight."

"Maybe. You've got a lot of people you should be talking to."

"They're all talking to each other. Where's Miss Odette?"

Lena scowled. "Your mother swept her off somewhere."

"You want me to find them, cut Miss Odette loose?"

Pride stiffened her spine, her voice. "My grandmama can hold her own against your mama any day of the week."

"Oh yeah?" Amused, Declan narrowed his eyes in challenge. "If they get physical, my money's on Colleen. She's got a wicked left. Why don't we get some champagne and go find them? See what round they're in."

"If she hurts my grandmama's feelings—"

"She would never do that." No longer amused, Declan gave her shoulders a little shake. "What do you take her for, Lena? If she went off with Miss Odette, it's because she'd like to get to know her."

"I suppose that's why she dragged your daddy into my place. So she could get to know me better."

"They were in your place?"

"My bar, yeah." Annoyed with herself for *being* annoyed, Lena reached out to take a flute from a waiter passing champagne. "She came in to check the place out, and me with it. So, she got her an eyeful, and a damn good martini. And I set her straight."

He experienced jittery male panic at the image of the two most important females in his life squaring off. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I said what I had to say, that's all. We understand each other fine now."

"Why don't you bring me up to date so I can understand you fine, too?"

"This isn't the time or the place."

"We're going to find the time and the place."

Because she heard the temper in his voice, she shrugged. Then smiled and traced a finger down his cheek. "Now don't get all riled up, *cher*. We got us a party here. You and me, we can fight anytime."

"Okay, we'll schedule it in for a little later." He caught her chin in his hand. "I can't figure out who you're selling

short, Lena. Me, my family or yourself. Let me know when you've got the answer."

He bent, brushed his lips over hers. "See you later."

The reception moved into the ballroom, and still managed to spill onto the galleries, onto the lawn. For the first time in decades, the house filled with music and laughter. Racing children, crying babies, flirting couples and gossiping friends filled the great room, relaxed in the shade of white umbrellas at tables around the gardens or plopped down on the gallery.

Declan liked to imagine the house absorbing all that positive energy, even into the dark corners of the rooms he'd kept locked.

"Declan." Effie laid a hand on his arm. "May I have this dance?"

"Did somebody kill Remy?" He led her out on the floor. "I figure that's the only way he'd let you more than a foot away from him." He kissed her hand before taking her into his arms. "Can't blame him. When you've got the most beautiful woman in the room, you keep her close."

"Oh, Declan." She laid her cheek on his. "If I wasn't madly in love with my husband, I'd make such a play for you."

"If you ever get tired of him, let me know."

"I want to thank you for everything you did to give me this perfect day. I know my mama, my sister and I drove you a little crazy the last couple weeks."

"Has it only been a couple weeks?" He laughed. "It was worth every hour I hid in closets so none of you could find me."

"I'm so happy. I'm so happy, and I love you. I love everybody today," she said with a laugh. "Everyone in the world, but today, next to Remy, I love you best of all so I want you to be happy."

“I am.”

“Not enough.” She turned her lips to his ear. “Declan, there’s something in this house that’s just not finished. I didn’t think I believed in that sort of thing, but . . . I feel it. Whenever I’m here, I feel it. I feel it even today.”

He could feel the tremor move through her, rubbed his hand over her back to soothe it away. “You shouldn’t think about it today. You shouldn’t worry today.”

“I’m worried for you. Something . . . it isn’t finished. Part of it, somehow part of it’s my fault.”

“Yours?” He eased her back now so he could see her face, then circled her toward one of the corners. “What do you mean?”

“I wish I knew what I meant. I only know what I feel. Something I did, or didn’t do for you. It doesn’t make a bit of sense, but it’s such a strong feeling. The feeling that I wasn’t there for you when you needed me most. I guess I’m a little afraid something bad’s going to happen again if it’s not all made right. So, well, as silly as this sounds, I just want to tell you I’m sorry, so awfully sorry for letting you down however I did.”

“It’s all right.” He touched his lips to her forehead. “You couldn’t know. Whatever it was, if it was, you couldn’t know. And sweetheart, this isn’t a day for looking back. It’s all about tomorrow now.”

“You’re right. Just . . . just be careful,” she said as Remy walked up and gave Declan a mock punch.

“That’s my wife you’re holding, *cher*. You go get your own girl.”

“Good idea.”

He hunted up Lena, found her in a clutch of people. The red of her dress was like a sleek tongue of flame over her dusky skin. He imagined his reaction to it, to her, transmitted clearly enough as he saw that knowing and essentially female look come into her eyes as he stepped toward her.

He turned slightly and held out a hand to her grandmother. "Miss Odette, would you dance with me?"

"Day hasn't come when I'll turn down a dance with a handsome man."

"You look wonderful," he told her when they took the floor.

"Weddings make me feel young. I had a nice talk with your mama."

"Did you?"

"You're wondering," she said with a chuckle. "I'll tell you we got on just fine. And she seemed pleased when I told her I saw how you'd been raised up right the first time I met you. She paid me back the compliment by saying the same about my Lena. Then we chatted about things women often chat about at weddings, which would likely bore you—except to say we agreed what a handsome young man you are. And handsome young men should find more reasons to wear tuxedos."

"I could become a maître d'. But they get better tips when they have a snooty accent, and I'm not sure I could pull that part off."

"Then I'll just have to wait until your own wedding to see you all slicked up again."

"Yeah." He looked over her head, but Lena had moved on. "This one's working out pretty well anyway. I was a little panicked that the storm last night would screw things up."

"Storm? *Cher*, we didn't have a storm last night."

"Sure we did. A mean one. Don't tell me you slept through it."

"I was up till midnight." She watched his face now. "Finishing the hem on this dress. Then I was up again 'round four when Rufus decided he needed to go outside. I saw lights on over here then. Wondered what you were doing up at that hour. Night was clear as a bell, Declan."

"I . . . I must've dreamed about a storm. Pre-wedding

stress.” But he hadn’t been up at four. Hadn’t been up at all, as far as he knew, after midnight—when he’d walked through the house to turn off all the lights before going to bed.

Dreams, he thought. Wind and rain, the flash of lightning. The yellow flames of the fire in the grate. Pain, sweat, thirst. Blood.

Women’s hands, women’s voices—Effie’s?—giving comfort, giving encouragement.

He remembered it now, clearly, and stopped dead in the middle of the dance.

He’d had a baby. He’d gone through childbirth.

Good God.

“*Cher?* Declan? You come on outside.” Gently, Odette guided him off the floor. “You need some air.”

“Yeah. Southern ladies are big on swooning, right?”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind.” He was mortified, he was awed, at what had happened to him inside his own dream. Inside, he supposed, his own memories.

“Go on back in,” he told her. “I’m just going to take a walk, clear my head.”

“What did you remember?”

“A miracle,” he murmured. “Remind me to buy my mother a really great present. I don’t know how the hell you women get through it once. She did it four times. Amazing,” he mumbled, and headed down the steps. “Fucking amazing.”

He walked all the way around the house, then slipped back in for a tall glass of icy water. He used it to wash down three extra-strength aspirin in hopes of cutting back on the vicious headache that had come on the moment he’d remembered the dream.

He could hear the music spilling down the steps from the ballroom. He could feel the vibrations on the ceiling from where dozens of feet danced.

He had to get back up, perform his duties as best man and host. All he wanted to do was fall facedown on the bed, close his eyes, and slide into oblivion.

“Declan.” Lena came in through the gallery doors, then shut them behind her. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Just a headache.”

“You’ve been gone nearly an hour. People are asking about you.”

“I’m coming up.” But he sat on the side of the bed. “In a minute.”

She crossed to him. “Is it bad?”

“I’ve had worse.”

“Why don’t you just lie down a few minutes?”

“I’m not crawling into bed on my best friend’s wedding day—unless you want to keep me company.”

“It’s tempting. Seeing a man in a tux always makes me want to peel him out of it.”

“Maître d’s must just love you.”

“There now, you made a stupid joke, so you must be feeling better.”

“Considering I gave birth less than twenty-four hours ago, I’d say I’m doing great.”

Lena pursed her lips. “*Cher*, just how much have you had to drink this evening?”

“Not nearly as much as I plan on having. You know how you had this theory that I was Abigail Manet? Well, I’m starting to think you’re onto something seeing as I dreamed I was in that room down the hall, in the bed I’ve seen in there—that one that isn’t there. I wasn’t seeing Abigail on that bed, in the last stages of labor. I experienced it, and let me tell you, it ain’t no walk on the beach. Any woman who doesn’t go for the serious drugs is a lunatic. It beats anything they dreamed up for that entertaining era known as the Spanish Inquisition.”

“You dreamed you were Abigail, and you—”

“It wasn’t like a dream, Lena, and I think I must’ve

been in that room when I had the—flash or hallucination, or whatever we call it. I can remember the storm—the sound of it, and how scared I was, how focused I was on bringing that baby out.”

He paused, replayed his own words. “Boy, that sounded weird.”

“Yes. Yes, it did.” She sat beside him.

“I heard the voices. Other women helping me. I can see their faces—especially the young one. The one close to my age—Abigail’s age. I can feel the sweat running down my face, and the unbelievable fatigue. Then that sensation, that peak of it all when it was like coming to the point of being ripped open. Bearing down, then the relief, the numbness, the fucking *wonder* of pushing life into the world. Then the flood of pride and love when they put that miracle in my arms.”

He looked down at his hands while Lena stared at him. “I can see the baby, Lena, clear as life, I can see her. All red and wrinkled and pissed off. Dark blue eyes, dark hair. A rosebud mouth. Tiny, slender fingers, and I thought: There are ten, and she is perfect. My perfect Rose.”

He looked at Lena now. “Marie Rose, your great-great-grandmother. Marie Rose,” he repeated, “our daughter.”

Their daughter. She couldn't dismiss it, and something deep inside her grieved. But she couldn't speak of it, wouldn't speak of it, not when her head and heart were so heavy.

Lena threw herself back into the crowds, the music, the laughter. This was *now*, she thought. Now was what counted.

She was alive, with the warm evening air on her skin, under the pure, white moonlight with the fragrance of the flowers and gardens rioting around her.

Roses and verbena, heliotrope, jasmine.

Lilies. Her favorite had been the lily. She kept them, always, in her room. First in the servants' quarters, then in their bedroom. Clipped in secret from the garden or the hothouse.

And for the nursery, there were roses. Tiny pink buds for their precious Marie Rose.

Frightened, she pushed those thoughts, those images, aside. Grabbing a partner, she flirted him into a dance.

She didn't want the past. It was dead and done. She didn't want the future. It was capricious and often cruel. It was the moment that was to be lived, enjoyed. Even controlled.

So when Declan's father took her hand, she smiled at him, brilliantly.

"This one here's a Cajun two-step. Can you handle it?"

"Let's find out."

They swung among the circling couples with quick, stylish moves that had her laughing up at him. "Why, Patrick, you're a natural. You sure you're a Yankee?"

"Blood and bone. Then again, you have to factor in the Irish. My mother was a hell of a step-dancer, and can still pull it off after a couple of pints."

"How old's your mama?"

"Eighty-six." He twirled her out and back. "Fitzgeralds tend to be long-lived and vigorous. Something's upset you."

She kept her cheerful expression in place. "Now what could upset me at such a lovely time and place?"

"That's the puzzle. Why don't we get a glass of champagne, and you can tell me?"

He didn't give her a chance to refuse. Like father, like son, she thought as he kept her hand firmly in his. He drew her to the bar, ordered two flutes, then led her outside.

"A perfect night," she said, and breathed it in. "Look at those gardens. It's hard to believe what they were like just a few months back. Did Declan tell you about the Franks?"

"About the Franks, Tibald. About Effie and Miss Odette. About the ghosts, about you."

"He bit off a lot here." She sipped champagne, wandered to the baluster. Below, people were still dancing on the lawn. A group of women sat at one of the white tables

under a white moon, some with babies sleeping on their shoulders, some with children drooping in their laps.

“He was bored in Boston.”

Intrigued, Lena looked away from the people, the charm of the fairy lights, and looked at Patrick. “Bored?”

“Unhappy, restless, but in a large part bored. With his work, his fiancée, his life. The only thing that put any excitement in his face was the old house he was redoing. I worried he’d go along, end up married to the wrong woman, working in a field he disliked, living a life that only half satisfied him. I shouldn’t have worried.”

He leaned back on the baluster and looked through the open doors into the ballroom. “His mind, his heart, was never set on the path we—his mother and I—cleared for him. We didn’t want to see that, so for a long time, we didn’t.”

“You only wanted the best for him. People tend to think what’s best for them is best for the people they love.”

“Yes, and Declan’s nature is to do whatever he can to make those he loves happy. He loves you.”

When she said nothing, Patrick turned to her. “You said he was stubborn. It’s more than that. Once Declan sets his mind on a goal, on a vision, he’s got a head like granite. He won’t be turned away by obstacles or excuses or lukewarm protests. If you don’t love him, Lena, if you don’t want a life with him, hurt him. Hurt him quick and make it deep. Then walk away.”

“I don’t want to hurt him. That’s the whole point and problem.”

“He didn’t think he was capable of loving anyone. He told me that after he broke it off with Jessica. He said he didn’t have that kind of love inside him. Now he knows he does, and he’s better for it. You’ve already made a difference in his life, an important one. Now you have to

love him back, or leave him. To do anything in between would be cruel, and you're not cruel."

She reached up, closed her fingers around the key on its chain, then dropped them—nervous now—to the wings on her breast. "He's not what I planned for. He's not what I was looking for."

He smiled then, kindly, and patted her hand. "Life's full of surprises, isn't it? Some of them are a real kick in the ass." Then he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you again," he said, and left her alone.

The party rolled on a good two hours after the bride and groom were seen off in a shower of confetti—which Declan imagined he'd be finding in his lawn, his clothes, perhaps even his food for the next six months.

The music stayed hot, and the guests stayed happy. In the early hours of the morning, some walked to their cars. Others were carried, and not all of them were children.

Declan stood on the curve of his front steps and watched the last of them drive away. The sky in the east was paling, just a gentle lessening of the dark. Even as he stood, he saw a star go out.

Morning was waking.

"You must be tired," Lena said from the gallery above him.

"No." He continued to look at the sky. "I should be, but I'm not."

"It's going to take you a week to clean this place up."

"Nope. The General and her troops are coming over tomorrow to deal with it. I'm ordered to keep out of the way, and that's one command I won't have any trouble obeying. I didn't think you'd stay."

"Neither did I."

He turned now, looked up at her. A kind of Romeo and Juliet pose, he thought, and hoped for a better ending. "Why did you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know what to do about you, Declan. I swear to God, I just don't know. Men've never been any trouble for me. Maybe I've been trouble for them," she said with a faint smile. "But you're the first who's given me any."

He started up to her. "None of them loved you."

"No, none of them loved me. Wanted me. Desired me, but that's the easy part. You can be careless with wants. And I'll tell you the truth. Sometimes, most times, I enjoyed that carelessness. Not just the sex, but the dance. The game. Whatever you want to call that courtship that's no courtship at all. When the music stops, or the game's over, there might be some bumps and bruises, but nobody's really hurt."

"But this isn't a game between the two of us."

"I've already hurt you."

"Bumps and bruises so far, Lena." He stopped, face-to-face with her. "Bumps and bruises."

"When you look at me, what are you seeing? Someone, something else from before. You can't run the living on the dead."

"I see you clear enough. But I see something else in both of us that shouldn't be ignored or forgotten. Maybe something that needs to be put right before we can move on."

He reached in his pocket, pulled out Lucian's watch. "I gave this to you once before, about a hundred years ago. It's time you had it back."

Her fingers chilled at the idea of holding it. "If this is true, don't you see it all ended in grief and death and tragedy? We can't change what was. Why risk bringing it on again?"

"Because we have to. Because we're stronger this time." He opened her hand, put the watch into her palm, closed her fingers over it. "Because if we don't set it right, it never really ends."

“All right.” She slipped the watch into the pocket of the short jacket she’d put on. Then she unspined the watch on her dress. “I gave this to you once before. Take it back.”

When he took it, held it, the clock that had once stood inside the Hall began to bong.

“Midnight,” he said with perfect calm. “It’ll strike twelve times.” And he looked down at the face of the enameled watch he held. “Midnight,” he repeated, showing it to her. “Look at yours.”

Her fingers weren’t so steady when she pulled it out. “Jesus,” she breathed when she saw both hands straight up. “Why?”

“We’re going to find out. I have to go inside.” He looked up, toward the third floor. “I have to go up to the nursery. The baby . . .”

Even as he spoke, they heard the fretful cries.

“Let’s just go. Declan, let’s just get in the car and drive away from here.”

But he was already moving inside. “The baby’s crying. She’s hungry. She needs me. Lucian’s parents are sleeping. I always go upstairs early when he’s not home. I hate sitting with them in the parlor after dinner. I can feel the way she dislikes me.”

His voice had changed, Lena realized as she followed him. There was a Cajun cadence to it. “Declan.”

“Claudine will walk her, or change her, but my pretty Rosie needs her mama. I don’t like having her up on the third floor,” he said as he hurried down the corridor. “But Madame Josephine always gets her way. Not always,” he corrected, and there was a smile in his voice now. “If she always did, I’d be alligator bait ’stead of married to Lucian. He’ll be home tomorrow. I miss him so.”

As he started up the stairs, his gait slowed, and Lena heard the rapid pace of his breath. “I have to go up.” It was his own voice now, with fear at the edges. “I have to go in. I have to see.”

Gathering all her courage, Lena took his hand. "We'll go in together."

His hand shook. The cold that permeated the air speared into the bone. Nausea rolled through his belly, rose up his throat. Clamping down against it, he shoved the door open.

He stumbled, and even as Lena tried to catch him, fell to his knees.

"He comes in. He's drunk. I don't want him coming up here, but he won't go away. Everyone says, they say how he looks just like Lucian, but they don't see his eyes. I have to make him go away, away from my baby. I wish Claudine hadn't gone off to meet Jasper. I don't like being alone up here with Julian. He scares me, but I don't want him to see it."

His eyes were glazed, glassy smoke in a face that had gone pale as death. "Declan, oh God, Declan, come back." She squeezed his hand until she felt bone rub against bone.

"When he grabs at me, I get away." His voice was breathless now. He still knelt, a rangy man with sun-streaked hair, wearing a tuxedo with the tie dangling loose. A man with a woman's memories, a woman's terror storming inside him.

"But I can't leave my baby. I get the poker from the fireplace. I'll kill him if I have to. I'll kill him if he touches me or my baby. Oh God, oh God, oh God."

As her knees seemed to melt away, Lena sank to the floor beside him, tried to wrap her arms around him.

"He's stronger than me. I scream and I scream, but nobody comes to help me. He's drunk and he's crazy. He's crazy and he's drunk. He knocks me down, and he rips at my clothes. I can't get away. My baby's crying, but I can't get to her. I can't stop him."

"Oh." Shaking, Lena tried to hold him, rock him. "No. No, no, no."

“He rapes me.” Fire burned in the center of him. Pain, the pain, and the fear. Oh God, the fear. “I call for help. I call for you, but you’re not here.”

His voice tore with tears. “You don’t come. I need you.”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t.” It was all she could say as she clung to him.

“He hurts me, but I fight him. I try to stop him, but he won’t stop. I’m so scared, I’m so scared, but even then I know he’s not doing this because he wants me. It’s because he hates you.”

He turned his head, those storm-gray eyes drenched. “He hates you. And because I’m yours, he has to break me. The way he broke your toys when you were children. I beg him to stop, but he won’t. He tries to make me stop screaming, but I can’t stop. I can’t. His hands are around my throat.”

It doubled him over, that hideous pressure, that shocking loss of air. “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. My baby’s crying for me, and I can’t breathe. He kills me. While my baby’s crying in her crib. Our baby. While he’s still inside me. He breaks me like a toy that belongs to his brother.”

He lifted his head, looked at her now. And when he spoke, his voice was so full of grief she wondered they both didn’t die of it. “You didn’t come. I called, but you didn’t come.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“She came.” Declan got rockily to his feet. “She came, and she saw what he had done to me. She looked down at me like I was a mess that had to be cleaned up before the neighbors came to call.”

His eyes were dry now, and narrowed at the slamming of doors on the second floor. “Her house, her sons, and I was the bayou slut who’d trespassed. I watched her look down on me. It was like a dream, that watching. I saw her

tell him to carry me out, down to the bedroom, while she cleaned up the blood, and the candle wax, and the broken crockery. He took my body out the gallery, but I watched her, watched her go over to my sweet baby, and I heard her mind wonder if it would be best just to smother the child. She considered it, and I believe if she'd tried, there was enough of me left that I could have struck her down like a lightning bolt."

He walked back to the door. "She thought I was weak, but she was *wrong*. They could kill me, but they couldn't end me."

"Declan, that's enough."

"No, not yet." He walked down the steps, down the hall, opened the door to Abigail's bedroom. "He laid me on the bed in here. And he wept. Not for me, but for himself. What would happen to him? His hand had defiled me, and killed me, but he thought only of himself. And does still. For he's in this house, he and Josephine. Walking and waiting in their little hell."

He crossed over to the wall where the armoire had been, opened the door of it in his mind. "They took some of my clothes. I had the gown in here for the ball. I was so proud of it. I wanted to be beautiful for you. Make you proud of me. She dropped my watch, but didn't notice. She had Julian wrap me up, and they carried me out, with the suitcase full of my things. They got old bricks to weigh me down, and they carried me away."

"It was hard. Even though there was moonlight, even though it was cool, it was a hard walk carting all of that. Julian got sick, but she brooked no nonsense. They would say I ran off with another man. They would let the gossip spread that my baby was a bastard, fawned off on you as your own. She told Julian how it would be as they put the bricks over me, as they tied the cloak around me with rope, as they pushed me into the bayou."

He looked back at her. "You believed them."

"No." Lena was weeping now. For him, for Abigail, for herself, for Lucian. "No."

"Not at first. You feared for me. You searched for me. You wept for me. I tried to reach you, but you wouldn't let me in. You wouldn't let me in because some part of you already believed their lies. I *loved* you. With all my heart, my soul, my body. I died for you."

"I couldn't stop what happened to you. I wasn't here to stop it."

"No, you weren't here that night. And you were never really here again. Not for me, and not for our child. You broke your promise to me, the solemn vow you made to me in that bed the night she was born. More than death, that is what doomed us."

"How did I break my promise?"

"You promised to love our child, to *care* for her always. I was always true to you, Lucian. You have to know."

"I do know." She closed her hand over the watch in her pocket and felt the weight, the grief, the sorrow.

"How could you leave her alone? How could you turn from her? You were all she had. You swore to me."

"I don't know. I was weak. I wasn't as brave or as true as you. Maybe . . . I think maybe you were the making of me, and when you were gone, I had nothing to hold me straight."

"You had Marie Rose."

"Perhaps I loved you too much, and her not enough. Forgive me. Forgive me for what I did, for what I didn't do. I can't go back and change it." She drew out the watch, held it face up in her palm. "No matter how often time stops, it's too late. If I could, I would never leave you. I'd take you and the baby away. I'd do anything to stop what happened to you."

“I loved you. And my heart *ached* every minute since they took me from you. Ached with grief, then with hope, and then with sorrow. You chose death, Lucian, rather than life. Still you choose loneliness rather than love. How can I forgive, when you can’t? Until you do, they’ve won, and the house that should’ve been ours still holds them. None of us will ever be free, until you choose.”

He turned, opened the gallery doors and walked outside.

The door slamming at her back made her jolt. It was, Lena thought, like a rude laugh aimed at someone else’s misery. Ignoring it, she stepped outside, took a deep breath.

“Declan.”

He was leaning on the baluster, staring out at the first hints of dawn. “Yeah. I’m trying to figure out if I need an exorcist, a psychiatrist, or if I should cash in and see about starring in a remake of *The Three Faces of Eve*.”

He rolled his shoulders, as if trying to shrug off an irritating weight. “I think I’ll settle for a Bloody Mary.”

Cautious, she stepped up behind him. “I’ll make us both one,” she began, and started to lay her hand on his back. He sidestepped, evading her touch, and left her standing there with her hand suspended.

“I don’t need to be petted and stroked. Still a little raw here. Comes from getting raped and murdered, I guess.” Jamming his hands in his pockets, he strode down the steps.

She waited a moment, struggling for balance, then walked down to join him in the kitchen. “Let me make them. I’m the professional.”

“I can make my own goddamn drink.”

It stung when he snatched the bottle of vodka out of her hand. Stung like a slap. “All right then, make your

own goddamn drink. While you're at it, you oughta think about living your own goddamn life."

She spun away, and when he grabbed her arm, she lashed out with her own slap. When her hand cracked across his cheek, the clock began to strike again, and the doors to slam.

Cold settled gleefully into the bone.

"You ever been raped?"

She yanked her arm free. "No."

"Probably haven't been strangled to death, either?" Forgoing the niceties, he took a long drink straight from the bottle. "Let me give you a clue. It tends to put you in a really foul mood."

Temper drained out of her. "Don't drink like that, *cher*. You'll only get sick."

"I'm already sick. I need a shower."

"Go on and take one. You'll feel better for it. I'm going to make some tea. Just let me do this," she snapped out before he could argue. "Maybe it'll settle us both down some."

"Fine. Whatever." He stomped up the stairs.

She sat for a moment, just sat because her legs were still shaking. Then she took the watch out of her pocket, studied the face. The second hand ticked around and around. But the time never went beyond midnight.

Putting it away again, she rose to brew the tea.

She carried it up, along with the tidy triangles of toast. The sickbed meal her grandmother had made for her in childhood. He was sitting on the side of the bed, wearing a tattered pair of sweatpants. His hair was still wet. His skin was reddened from vicious scrubbing. She set the tray beside him.

"Do you want me to go?"

"No." When she poured a mug of tea, he took it, tried to warm his hands. Despite the blasting heat of the shower, he still felt chilled.

“I didn’t just see it, or remember it. I *felt* it. The fear, the pain, the violation. The humiliation. And more—like that isn’t bad enough—part of me was still me. That part, the big, tough guy part, was helpless, just helpless watching a terrified woman be raped and strangled. I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t have to. I felt some of it. Not as strong, not as clear as you, but . . . When you looked at me, when she was looking at me out of your eyes, I felt such grief, such regret. Such guilt. Drink your tea now, sweetheart.”

He lifted the mug obediently. “It’s good. Pretty sweet.”

“Sweet tea and toast. It’s good for you.” She crawled onto the bed behind him, knelt and began to knead at his shoulders. “She was stronger than he was. It’s not his fault so much. He was raised weak. But he loved her, Declan. I know that without a doubt. Even without knowing the terrible thing that happened to her, he blamed himself. For not being with her, not giving her enough of himself.”

“He deserted the child.”

There was such finality in his voice. “He did. Yes, he did,” Lena replied. “And though it was wrong of him, wrong to take his own life and leave their baby an orphan, she had a better life because of it. She was surrounded by people who loved her, who valued the memory of her mother. She would never have had that life here, in the Hall.”

“She was entitled to it. He should have seen to it.”

She laid her cheek on the top of his head. “You can’t forgive him.”

“I can’t understand him.”

“No, a man like you wouldn’t understand a man like him. Maybe I do, maybe I understand a man who’d run off with a woman rather than stand up to his parents. One who’d bring her back into a house full of resentment and shadows instead of making them a home. One who’d fall

apart enough to drown himself rather than live with the hurt and raise his own child with the love and compassion that had been denied him. He wanted to be more than he was. With her, he would have been.

“You shouldn’t despise him, Declan. You should pity him.”

“Maybe. It’s hard. I’ve still got a lot of her despair inside me.” Abigail’s, he thought, and a good portion of his own.

“Can you rest?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why don’t you try? I need to go change.” She slid off the bed, then lifted the tray and set it aside. “Try to sleep awhile. I won’t be long.”

He didn’t try to stop her. It was probably best to be alone. He lay back, stared at the ceiling as the first birds began to sing.

Abigail had been broken, he thought. Body and heart. He was feeling pretty much the same himself.

He must have dozed, for when he opened his eyes the sun was up. Still early, he decided, but the General and her troop of whirlwinds would be coming along shortly to storm through his house with mops and brooms and God knew.

Maybe the place needed to be cleaned up, shaken out. It was still his. He wasn’t giving it up. Whatever had happened, whatever shared it with him, he wasn’t giving it up.

And by Christ, he wasn’t giving Lena up, either.

He sat up, scowling, and saw her sitting in the chair across the room. She wore jeans, a plain white T-shirt. There were three small bouquets lying in her lap.

“You up for a little drive?” she asked him.

“I guess.”

“Put a shirt on, and some shoes.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’ll tell you on the way.”

She drove, and he kept the flowers in his lap now.

“I want to take flowers to her. To Marie Rose.” As her ancestor, Lena thought, as her father. “I thought you might like to visit there, too.”

He said nothing.

“Grandmama told me,” Lena continued, “how Marie Rose used to go to the cemetery once a year on her birthday. She’d bring him flowers. This morning, when I went over to change my clothes, she told me where we’d find his crypt, and we picked these from the marsh. I want to take flowers to Lucian, too.”

He picked one clutch up. “Your symbol of pity?”

“If that’s the best we can do.”

“And the others?”

“Marie Rose took them to her mother, once a year as well. A part of her must’ve known. She went to the river, every year on her birthday, and dropped flowers in the water. Grandmama told me where.”

She drove smoothly, a little fast, then slowed to turn into the cemetery. “I know you’re still angry with him, and with me. If you don’t want to do this, you can wait in the car. I won’t blame you.”

“Why are you doing it?”

“He’s part of me. Through blood, and more. If I can find a way to accept who birthed me, if I can live with that, then I can find a way to accept this. To live with it.”

She stopped the car, took two of the bouquets. “It’s a little walk from here. It shouldn’t take me long.”

“I’m coming with you.”

He got out, but didn’t—as she’d grown used to—reach for her hand. They wound their way over the paths between the tombs, the ornate grilles, the marble angels and through shadows thrown by crosses.

She stopped at one of the raised tombs. There were many, simple and unadorned. Her grandfather rested here, and others who were parts and pieces of her. But today she had come only for one.

Her hands gripped tight on the flowers. Marie Rose, she read. Blood of my blood, heart of my heart.

“Grandmama, she told me Marie Rose was a happy woman, she had a good life. She was content with it. That might not be enough to make up for what was done, but if it had been done different . . . Well, I don’t see how I’d be standing here with you this morning.”

She started to lay the flowers, and Declan closed his hand over hers on the stems. They placed them on the grave—the baby, the girl, the old woman, together.

“He’s a ways from here,” Lena managed. Her voice was thick, her vision blurry as she turned away.

They walked through the sunlight, through the shadows of the tombs, in silence.

The Manet crypt was a towering square, its porticoes carved, its doors thick and studded. Topping it was a fierce angel, holding a harp as a soldier might a shield.

“Cheerful,” Declan commented. “I’d say none of them went gently into that good night.” He glanced around, saw the plain concrete box on a raised slab. The plaque read: LUCIAN EDUARD MANET. 1877–1900.

“He’s out here?”

“He wasn’t to be forgiven,” Lena explained. “Not for his marriage, his child, his embarrassing death. They called it accidental drowning, though everyone knew it was suicide. But though Josephine wouldn’t have him in the family crypt, she wanted him buried on consecrated ground. Otherwise, there would have been yet another scandal.”

Declan looked back at the crypt. “Bitch.”

“He had no grandparents, as I did, to love him. To soften the blows. He had a twin brother who loathed him simply because he existed. He had money and position,

education and privilege. But no love. Until Abigail. Then they took her from him.”

She laid the flowers for him. “He did the best he could. It just wasn’t enough.”

“You’re stronger than he ever was. Smarter, more resilient.”

“I hope so. And I hope he rests soon. The flowers won’t last long in this sun, but . . . Well, you do what you can.”

She walked away without another word. Declan lingered a moment more, staring at the plaque, then the flowers. Then he went with his impulse, took a single flower out of the bouquet, and laid it on top of the tomb.

Lena put her sunglasses on because her eyes were tearing. “That was kind.”

“Well, you do what you can.” This time, he took her hand.

They didn’t speak on the drive back. Nor did Rufus or Odette come out of the house when Lena parked in front of it. He remained silent as she led the way through the marsh. Silent, as he remembered the way in the night, with the chill in the air, the flitting moonlight, the call of an owl. And the panting breaths of a killer and his accomplice.

“Do you want to go back? You’re awfully pale.”

“No.” Sweat ran down his back despite the cold under his skin. “I need to do this.”

“It’s not much farther.”

There were marsh flowers springing up along the edges of the narrow, beaten path. He concentrated on them, on the color, the small beauty. But when she stopped on the bank, he was out of breath and dizzy.

“It was here. Right here.”

“I know. Marie Rose came here, to this spot. Her heart knew.” This time she handed him the bouquet and drew a single flower out.

Declan let the flowers fall into the river, watched the color, the small beauty, float on the brown water. "Not everybody can put flowers on his own grave."

"I'm sorry." Tears slid down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry." She knelt, tossed the flower where it would drift alone. She groped for Declan's hand. "I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"Don't." He drew her to her feet, into his arms. "It's all right."

"He didn't trust enough. I didn't. Too much grief and not enough faith. Then, now."

"There's been enough grieving. Then, now." He tipped up her face. And said what he'd realized was inside him—inside Abigail—at the moment they'd taken flowers to Marie Rose. "I forgive you."

"You're more forgiving than she was."

"Maybe. Maybe that's why we keep going around. Gives us a chance to fix things we screwed up."

"Or make the same mistakes again. I've got something else to give you. But not here. Back at the Hall. It's the right place to give it to you."

"Okay." He kissed her hand. "We're okay."

"I think we're getting there. I'd like to walk back, get my bearings."

"Good idea."

"There's something I'd like to ask you to do," she said as they took the path again. "I'd like to put up three markers, maybe near the pond. One for Lucian, one for Abby and one for Marie Rose. I think it's time they were together."

"I think they are together now." Or nearly, he thought. Very nearly, because there was a lightness in his heart he hadn't expected to feel again. "But the markers would be a nice memory. We'll pick out a spot, put them in. Then we'll plant something there, together."

She nodded. "A willow maybe."

“Like the one she liked so much.” He nodded. “Sometimes you put things back the way they were, sometimes you change them. We’ll do both. Then when our kids come along, we can have picnics near there, and tell them the story.” He waited a beat. “You didn’t tell me to shut up.”

“*Cher*, you just wear me out. Looks like your soldiers are here.”

He glanced over, wincing when he saw the cars. “Won’t this be fun? Look, let’s sneak up the front stairs and lock ourselves in my bedroom. I feel like I could sleep for a week now.”

“The bedroom’s fine, but I’ve only got an hour. Then I’ve got to go in to work.”

“I’ve got an hour in me,” he replied, then tapped a finger to his lips and crept up the stairs. “Ever roll around naked in bed with a houseful of women scrubbing floors outside the room?”

“No, and that’s not on the schedule for this morning.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Declan. No, leave the doors open. No, just hold on—”

“That’s what I’m doing,” he said when he’d locked her in his arms. “Holding on. And God, *God*, it feels good. I’ve missed you,” he murmured, and understood it was Abby as much as himself who held close.

A circle, nearly forged again, he thought. And this time, it wouldn’t break.

She’s losing, he realized. Josephine. It was all slipping out of her hands.

“I’ve got things to say to you.”

“I’m done with talking.” He laid his lips on hers in a soft, sumptuous kiss. “Lie down with me, Lena. Just lie down with me. I’ve really missed holding you.”

“I need to do this standing up.” She eased away and stood in the spill of sunlight. “I’ve done things my way up till now, and that’s worked out just fine for me. You’ve

complicated things, confused things, irritated me, and turned my life upside down with what was, what is, what might be. I've never cared much for might be's, Declan."

"How about will be's?"

"That's your hard head talking. I love that about you. I love so many things about you, I've lost count. So here I am stuck with some damn rich Yankee."

Everything inside him swelled, then went bright as the sun. "Angelina."

"You just wait till I'm finished." She sighed, paused until she was certain she could speak calmly. "I've got a lot of friends who care about me, maybe even love me the way friends do. I had my grandpapa, who made me the light of his life. I've got Grandmama. But nobody ever loved me just like you do. And the hell of it is, I never loved anybody the way I love you. So."

She lifted her arms, unclasped the chain around her neck. She held it out to him, the little key dangling. "This is yours now, and has been for some time, I guess. You're the key, *cher*. You always were."

He took it, then delighted her by clasping it around his own neck. "I'm going to make you so happy."

"You damn well better. We getting married or what?"

"You better believe it." With a laugh, he scooped her off her feet, spun her around in circles. "Do you feel it?"

"Feel what? My head's spinning."

"The house is ours now. Only ours." He set her on her feet. "No more ghosts. No more lives but ours. And we're just beginning."

She slid her arms around him, lifted her mouth to his. "Welcome home."

Still holding close, she drew out the pocket watch, turned it faceup. They watched time move on.

Three Fates

Nora Roberts



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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THREE FATES

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*To Dan and Stacie:
May the tapestry of your lives be woven
with rosy threads of love,
the deep reds of passion,
the quiet blues of understanding and contentment,
and the bright, bright silver of humor.*

When the *Lusitania* sank, one survivor became a changed man, giving up his life as a petty thief—but keeping the small silver statue he lifted, a family heirloom to future generations. Now, nearly a century later, that priceless heirloom, one of a long-separated set of three, has been stolen. And Malachi, Gideon, and Rebecca Sullivan are determined to recover their great-great-grandfather's treasure, reunite the Three Fates, and make their fortune.

The quest will take them from their home in Ireland to Helsinki, Prague, and New York, where they will meet a brilliant scholar who will aid them in their hunt—and an ambitious woman who will stop at nothing to acquire the Fates . . .

Three Fates

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PART ONE

Spinning

*Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive!*

SIR WALTER SCOTT

One

May 7, 1915

HAPPILY unaware he'd be dead in twenty-three minutes, Henry W. Wyley imagined pinching the nicely rounded rump of the young blonde who was directly in his line of sight. It was a perfectly harmless fantasy that did nothing to distress the blonde, or Henry's wife, and put Henry himself in the best of moods.

With a lap robe tucked around his pudgy knees and a plump belly well satisfied by a late and luxurious lunch, he sat in the bracing sea air with his wife, Edith—whose bum, bless her, was flat as a pancake—enjoying the blonde's derriere along with a fine cup of Earl Grey.

Henry, a portly man with a robust laugh and an eye for the ladies, didn't bother to stir himself to join other passengers at the rail for a glimpse of Ireland's shimmering coast. He'd seen it before and assumed he'd have plenty of opportunities to see it again if he cared to.

Though what fascinated people about cliffs and grass eluded him. Henry was an avowed urbanite who preferred the solidity of steel and concrete. And at this particular moment, he was much more interested in the dainty chocolate cookies served with the tea than the vista.

Particularly when the blonde moved on.

Though Edith fussed at him not to make a pig of him-

self, he gobbled up three cookies with cheerful relish. Edith, being Edith, refrained. It was a pity she denied herself that small pleasure in the last moments of her life, but she would die as she'd lived, worrying about her husband's extra tonnage and brushing at the crumbs that scattered carelessly on his shirtfront.

Henry, however, was a man who believed in indulgence. What, after all, was the point of being rich if you didn't treat yourself to the finer things? He'd been poor, and he'd been hungry. Rich and well fed was better.

He'd never been handsome, but when a man had money he was called substantial rather than fat, interesting rather than homely. Henry appreciated the absurdity of the distinction.

At just before three in the afternoon on that sparkling May day, the wind blew at his odd little coal-colored toupee, whipped high, happy color into his pudgy cheeks. He had a gold watch in his pocket, a ruby pin in his tie. His Edith, scrawny as a chicken, was decked out in the best of Parisian couture. He was worth nearly three million. Not as much as Alfred Vanderbilt, who was crossing the Atlantic as well, but enough to content Henry. Enough, he thought with pride as he considered a fourth cookie, to pay for first-class accommodations on this floating palace. Enough to see that his children had received first-class educations and that his grandchildren would as well.

He imagined first class was more important to him than it was to Vanderbilt. After all, Alfred had never had to make do with second.

He listened with half an ear as his wife chattered on about plans once they reached England. Yes, they would pay calls and receive them. He would not spend all of his time with associates or hunting up stock for his business.

He assured her of all this with his usual amiability, and because after nearly forty years of marriage he was deeply fond of his wife, he would see that she was well entertained during their stay abroad.

But he had plans of his own, and that driving force had been the single purpose of this spring crossing.

If his information was correct, he would soon acquire the second Fate. The small silver statue was a personal quest, one he'd pursued since he'd chanced to purchase the first of the reputed three.

He had a line on the third as well and would tug on it as soon as the second statue was in his possession. When he had the complete set, well, that would be first class indeed.

Wyley Antiques would be second to none.

Personal and professional satisfaction, he mused. All because of three small silver ladies, worth a pretty penny separately. Worth beyond imagining together. Perhaps he'd loan them to the Met for a time. Yes, he liked the idea.

THE THREE FATES

ON LOAN FROM THE PRIVATE COLLECTION
OF HENRY W. WYLEY

Edith would have her new hats, he thought, her dinner parties and her afternoon promenades. And he would have the prize of a lifetime.

Sighing with satisfaction, Henry sat back to enjoy his last cup of Earl Grey.

FELIX GREENFIELD WAS a thief. He was neither ashamed nor prideful of it. It was simply what he was and had always been. And as Henry Wyley assumed he'd have other opportunities to gaze upon the Irish coast, Felix assumed he'd remain a thief for many years to come.

He was good at his work—not brilliant at it, he'd be the first to admit, but good enough to make ends meet. Good enough, he thought as he moved quickly down the corridors of first class in his stolen steward's uniform, to have gathered the means for third-class passage back to England.

Things were just a bit hot professionally back in New York, with cops breathing down his neck due to that bungled burglary. Not that it had been his fault, not entirely. His only failing had been to break his own first rule and take on an associate for the job.

Bad choice, as his temporary partner had broken another primary rule. Never steal what isn't easily, discreetly fenced. Greed had blinded old Two-Pint Monk, Felix thought with a sigh as he let himself into the Wyley stateroom. What had the man been thinking, laying sticky fingers on a diamond-and-sapphire necklace? Then behaving like a bloody amateur by getting drunk as a sailor—on his usual two pints of lager—and bragging over it.

Well, Two-Pint would do his bragging in jail now, though there'd be no lager to loosen his idiot tongue. But the bastard had chirped like the stool pigeon he was and given Felix's name to the coppers.

It had seemed best to take a nice ocean voyage, and what better place to get lost than on a ship as big as a damn city?

He'd been a bit concerned about the war in Europe, and the murmurs about the Germans stalking the seas had given him some pause. But they were such vague, distant threats. The New York police and the idea of a long stretch behind bars were much more personal and immediate problems.

In any case, he couldn't believe a grand ship like the *Lusitania* would cross if there was any real danger. Not with all those wealthy people on board. It was a civilian vessel after all, and he was sure the Germans had better things to do than threaten a luxury liner, especially when there was a large complement of American citizens on board.

He'd been lucky indeed to have snagged a ticket, to have lost himself among all the passengers with the cops two steps behind him and closing.

But he'd had to leave quickly, and had spent nearly all his wherewithal for the ticket.

Certainly there were opportunities galore to pluck a bit of this, a bit of that on such a fine, luxurious vessel filled with such fine, luxurious people.

Cash would be best, of course, for cash was never the wrong size or the wrong color.

Inside the stateroom, he let out a low whistle. Imagine

it, he thought, taking a moment to dream. Just imagine traveling in such style.

He knew less about the architecture and design of where he was standing than a flea knew about the breed of dog it bit. But he knew it was choice.

The sitting room was larger than the whole of his third-class accommodations, and the bedroom beyond a wonder.

Those who slept here knew nothing about the cramped space, the dark corners and the smells of third class. He didn't begrudge them their advantages. After all, if there weren't people who lived high, he'd have no one to steal from, would he?

Still, he couldn't waste time gawking and dreaming. It was already a few minutes before three, and if the Wyleys were true to form, the woman would wander back before four for her afternoon nap.

He had delicate hands and was careful to disturb little as he searched for spare cash. Big bucks, he figured, they'd leave in the purser's keeping. But fine ladies and gentlemen enjoyed having a roll of bills close at hand for flashing.

He found an envelope already marked STEWARD and, grinning, ripped it open to find crisp dollar bills in a generous tip. He tucked it in the trouser pocket of his borrowed uniform.

Within ten minutes, he'd found and claimed nearly a hundred fifty dollars and a pair of nice garnet earbobs left carelessly in a silk evening purse.

He didn't touch the jewelry cases—the man's or the woman's. That was asking for trouble. But as he sifted neatly through socks and drawers, his fingers brushed over a solid lump wrapped in velvet cloth.

Lips pursed, Felix gave in to curiosity and spread open the cloth.

He didn't know anything about art, but he recognized pure silver when he had his hands on it. The lady—for it was a woman—was small enough to fit in his palm. She held some sort of spindle, he supposed it was, and was garbed in a kind of robe.

She had a lovely face and form. Fetching, he would

have said, though she looked a bit too cool and calculating for his personal taste in females.

He preferred them a bit slow of wit and cheerful of disposition.

Tucked in with her was a paper with a name and address, and the scrawled notation: *Contact for second Fate*.

Felix pondered over it, committed the note to memory out of habit. It could be another chicken for plucking once he was in London.

He started to wrap her again, replace her where he'd found her, but he just stood there turning her over and over in his hands. Throughout his long career as a thief, he'd never once allowed himself to envy, to crave, to want an object for himself.

What was taken was always a means to an end, and nothing more. But Felix Greenfield, lately of Hell's Kitchen and bound for the alleyways and tenements of London, stood in the plush cabin on the grand ship with the Irish coast even now in view out the windows, and wanted the small silver woman for his own.

She was so . . . pretty. And fit so well in his hand with the metal already warming against his palm. Such a little thing. Who would miss her?

"Don't be stupid," he muttered, wrapping her in velvet again. "Take the money, mate, and move along."

Before he could replace her, he heard what he thought was a peal of thunder. The floor beneath his feet seemed to shudder. Nearly losing his balance as the ship shook side to side, he stumbled toward the door, the velvet-cloaked statue still in his hand.

Without thinking, he jammed it into his trouser pocket, spilled out into the corridor as the floor rose under him.

There was a sound now, not like thunder, but like a great hammer flung down from heaven to strike the ship.

Felix ran for his life.

And running, he raced into madness.

The forward part of the ship dipped sharply and had him tumbling down the corridor like dice in a cup. He could hear shouting and the pounding of feet. And he tasted blood in his mouth, seconds before it went dark.

His first wild thought was, *Iceberg!* as he remembered what had befallen the great *Titanic*. But surely in the broad light of a spring afternoon, so close to the Irish coast, such a thing wasn't possible.

He never thought of the Germans. He never thought of war.

He scrambled up, slamming into walls in the pitch black of the corridor, stumbling over his own feet and the stairs, and spilled out on deck with a flood of others. Already lifeboats were being launched and there were cries of terror along with shouted orders for women and children to board them.

How bad was it? he wondered frantically. How bad could it be when he could see the shimmering green of the coastline? Even as he tried to calm himself, the ship pitched again, and one of the lowering lifeboats upended. Its screaming passengers were hurled into the sea.

He saw a mass of faces—some torn, some scalded, all horrified. There were piles of debris on deck, and passengers—bleeding, screaming—trapped under it. Some, he saw with dull shock, were already beyond screams.

And there on the listing deck of the great ship, Felix smelled what he'd often smelled in Hell's Kitchen.

He smelled death.

Women clutched children, babies, and wept or prayed. Men ran in panic, or fought madly to drag the injured clear of debris.

Through the chaos stewards and stewardesses hurried, passing out life jackets with a kind of steady calm. They might have been handing out teacups, he thought, until one rushed by him.

"Go on, man! Do your job! See to the passengers."

It took Felix one blank moment before he remembered he was still wearing the stolen steward's uniform. And another before he understood, truly understood, they were sinking.

Fuck me, he thought, standing in the middle of the screams and prayers. We're dying.

There were shouts from the water, desperate cries for help. Felix fought his way to the rail and, looking down,

saw bodies floating, people floundering in debris-strewn water. People drowning in it.

He saw another lifeboat being launched, wondered if he could somehow make the leap into it and save himself. He struggled to pull himself to a higher point, to gain ground was all he could think. To stay on his feet until he could hurl himself into a lifeboat and survive.

He saw a well-dressed man take off his own life jacket and put it around a weeping woman.

So the rich could be heroes, he thought. They could afford to be. He'd sooner be alive.

The deck tilted again, sent him sliding along with countless others toward the mouth of the sea. He shot out a hand, managed to grab the rail with his clever thief's fingers and cling. And his free hand closed, as if by magic, over a life jacket as it went tumbling by.

Muttering wild prayers of thanks, he started to strap it on. It was a sign, he thought with his heart and eyes wheeling wild, a sign from God that he was meant to survive this.

As his shaking fingers fumbled with the jacket, he saw the woman wedged between upturned deck chairs. And the child, the small, angelic face of the child she clutched against her. She wasn't weeping. She wasn't screaming. She simply held and rocked the little boy as if lulling him into his afternoon nap.

"Mary, mother of God." And cursing himself for a fool, Felix crawled across the pitched deck. He dragged and heaved at the chairs that pinned her down.

"I've hurt my leg." She continued to stroke her child's hair, and the rings on her fingers sparkled in the strong spring sunlight. Though her voice was calm, her eyes were huge, glazed with shock and pain, and the terror Felix felt galloped inside his own chest.

"I don't think I can walk. Will you take my baby? Please, take my little boy to a lifeboat. See him safe."

He had one moment, one heartbeat to choose. And while the world went to hell around them, the child smiled.

"Put this on yourself, missus, and hold tight to the boy."

"We'll put it on my son."

"It's too big for him. It won't help him."

"I've lost my husband." She spoke in those clear, cultured tones, and though her eyes were glassy, they stayed level on his as Felix pushed her arms through the life jacket. "He fell over the rail. I fear he's dead."

"You're not, are you? Neither is the boy." He could smell the child—powder, youth, innocence—through the stench of panic and death. "What's his name?"

"Name? He's Steven. Steven Edward Cunningham, the Third."

"Let's get you and Steven Edward Cunningham, the Third, to a lifeboat."

"We're sinking."

"That's the God's truth." He dragged her, trying once more to reach the high side of the ship.

He crawled, clawed his way over the wet and rising deck.

"Hold on tight to Mama, Steven," he heard her say. Then she crawled and clawed with him while terror raged around them.

"Don't be frightened." She crooned it, though her breath was coming fast with the effort. Her heavy skirts sloshed in the water, and blood smeared over the glinting stones on her fingers. "You have to be brave. Don't let go of Mama, no matter what."

He could see the boy, no more than three, cling like a monkey to his mother's neck. Watching her face, Felix thought as he strained for another inch of height, as if all the answers in all the world were printed on it.

Deck chairs, tables, God knew what, rained down from the deck above. He dragged her another inch, another, a foot. "Just a little farther." He gasped it out, without any idea if it were true.

Something struck him hard in the back. And his hold on her slipped.

"Missus!" he shouted, grabbed blindly, but caught only the pretty silk sleeve of her dress. As it ripped, he stared at her helplessly.

"God bless you," she managed and, wrapping both arms tight around her son, slid over the edge of the world into the water.

He barely had time to curse before the deck heaved and he pitched in after her.

The cold, the sheer brutality of it, stole his breath. Blind, already going numb with shock, he kicked wildly, clawing for the surface as he'd clawed for the deck. When he broke through, gasped in that first gulp of air, he found he'd plunged into a hell worse than any he'd imagined.

Dead were all around him. He was jammed into an island of bobbing, staring white faces, of screams from the drowning. The water was strewn with planks and chairs, wrecked lifeboats and crates. His limbs were already stiff with cold when he struggled to heave as much of his body as possible onto a crate and out of the freezing water.

And what he saw was worse. There were hundreds of bodies floating in the still sparkling sunlight. While his stomach heaved out the sea he'd swallowed, he floundered in the direction of a waterlogged lifeboat.

The swell, somehow gentle, tore at the island and spread death over the sea, and dragged him, with merciless hands, away from the lifeboat.

The great ship, the floating palace, was sinking in front of his eyes. Dangling from it were lifeboats, useless as toys. Somehow it astonished him to see there were still people on the decks. Some were kneeling, others still rushing in panic from a fate that was hurtling toward them.

In shock, he watched more tumble like dolls into the sea. And the huge black funnels tipped down toward the water, down to where he clung to a broken crate.

When those funnels touched the sea, water gushed into them, sucking in people with it.

Not like this, he thought as he kicked weakly. A man wasn't meant to die like this. But the sea dragged him under, pulled him in. Water seemed to boil around him as he struggled. He choked on it, tasted salt and oil and smoke. And realized, as his body bashed into a solid wall, that he was trapped in one of the funnels, would die there like a rat in a blocked chimney.

As his lungs began to scream, he thought of the woman and the boy. Since he deemed it useless to pray for him-

self, he offered what he thought was his last plea to God that they'd survived.

Later, he would think it had been as if hands had taken hold of him and yanked him free. As the funnels sank, he was expelled, flying out on a filthy gush of soot.

With pain radiating through him, he snagged a floating plank and pulled his upper body onto it. He laid his cheek on the wood, breathed deeply, wept quietly.

And saw the *Lusitania* was gone.

The plate of water where she'd been was raging, thrashing and belching smoke. Belching bodies, he saw with a dull horror. He'd been one of them, only moments before. But fate had spared him.

While he watched, while he struggled to block out the screams and stay sane, the water went calm as glass. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself onto the plank. He heard the shrill song of sea gulls, the weeping prayers or weeping cries of those who floundered or floated in the water with him.

Probably freeze to death, he thought as he drifted in and out of consciousness. But it was better than drowning.

IT WAS THE cold that brought him out of the faint. His body was racked with it, and every trickling breeze was a new agony. Hardly daring to move, he tugged at his sopping and ruined steward's jacket. Bright pain had nausea rolling greasily in his belly. He ran an unsteady hand over his face and saw the wet wasn't water, but blood.

His laugh was wild and shaky. So what would it be, freezing or bleeding to death? Drowning might have been better, after all. It would be over that way. He slowly shed the jacket—something wrong with his shoulder, he thought absently—and used the ruined jacket to wipe the blood from his face.

He didn't hear so much shouting now. There were still some thin screams, some moans and prayers, but most of the passengers who'd made it as far as he had were dead. And silent.

He watched a body float by. It took him a moment to recognize the face, as it was bone-white and covered with bloodless gashes.

Wyley. Good Christ.

For the first time since the nightmare had begun, he felt for the weight in his pocket. He felt the lump of what he'd stolen from the man currently staring up at the sky with blank blue eyes.

"You won't need it," Felix said between chattering teeth, "but I swear before God if I had it to do over, I wouldn't have stolen from you in the last moments of your life. Seems like robbing a grave."

His long-lapsed religious training had him folding his hands in prayer. "If I end up dying here today, I'll apologize in person if we end up on the same side of the gate. And if I live I take a vow to try to reform. No point in saying I'll do it, but I'll give doing an honest day's work a try."

He passed out again, and woke to the sound of an engine. Dazed, numb, he managed to lift his head. Through his wavering vision, he saw a boat, and through the roaring in his ears, heard the shouts and voices of men.

He tried to call out, but managed only a hacking cough.

"I'm alive." His voice was only a croak, whisked away by the breeze. "I'm still alive."

He didn't feel the hands pull him onto the fishing trawler called *Dan O'Connell*. Was delirious with chills and pain when he was wrapped in a blanket, when hot tea was poured down his throat. He would remember nothing about his actual rescue, nor learn the names of the men whose arms had hauled him to safety. Nothing came clear to him until he woke, nearly twenty-four hours after the torpedo had struck the liner, in a narrow bed in a small room with sunlight streaming through a window.

He would never forget the first sight that greeted him when his vision cleared.

She was young and pretty, with eyes of misty blue and a scatter of gold freckles over her small nose and round cheeks. Her hair was fair and piled on top of her head in some sort of knot that seemed to be slipping. Her mouth

bowed up when she glanced over at him, and she rose quickly from the chair where she'd been darning socks.

"There you are. I wonder if you'll stay with us this time around."

He heard Ireland in her voice, felt the strong hand lift his head. And he smelled a drift of lavender.

"What . . ." The old, croaking sound of his voice appalled him. His throat felt scorched, his head stuffed with rags of dirty cotton.

"Just take this first. It's medicine the doctor left for you. You've pneumonia, he says, and a fair gash on your head that's been stitched. Seems you tore something in your shoulder as well. But you've come through the worst, sir, and you rest easy for we'll see you through."

"What . . . happened? The ship . . ."

The pretty mouth went flat and hard. "The bloody Germans. 'Twas a U-boat torpedoed you. And they'll writhe in hell for it, for the people they murdered. The babies they slaughtered."

Though a tear trickled down her cheek, she managed to slide the medicine into him competently. "You have to rest. Your life's a miracle, for there are more than a thousand dead."

"A . . ." He managed to grip her wrist as the horror stabbed through him. "*A thousand?*"

"More than. You're in Queenstown now, and as well as you can be." She tilted her head. "An American, are you?"

Close enough, he decided, as he hadn't seen the shores of his native England in more than twelve years. "Yes. I need—"

"Tea," she interrupted. "And broth." She moved to the door to shout: "Ma! He's waked and seems to want to stay that way." She glanced back. "I'll be back with something warm in a minute."

"Please. Who are you?"

"Me?" She smiled again, wonderfully sunny. "I'd be Meg. Meg O'Reiley, and you're in the home of my parents, Pat and Mary O'Reiley, where you're welcome until you're mended. And your name, sir?"

“Greenfield. Felix Greenfield.”

“God bless you, Mr. Greenfield.”

“Wait . . . there was a woman, and a little boy. Cunningham.”

Pity moved over her face. “They’re listing names. I’ll check on them for you when I’m able. Now you rest, and we’ll get you some tea.”

When she went out, he turned his face toward the window, toward the sun. And saw, sitting on the table under it, the money that had been in his pocket, the garnet earbobs. And the bright silver glint of the little statue.

Felix laughed until he cried.

HE LEARNED THE O’Reileys made their living from the sea. Pat and his two sons had been part of the rescue effort. He met them all, and her younger sister as well. For the first day he was unable to keep any of them straight in his mind. But for Meg herself.

He clung to her company as he’d clung to the plank, to keep from sliding into the dark again.

“Tell me what you know,” he begged her.

“It’ll be hard for you to hear it. It’s hard to speak it.” She moved to his window, looked out at the village where she’d lived all of her eighteen years. Survivors such as Felix were being tended to in hotel rooms, in the homes of neighbors. And the dead, God rest them, were laid in temporary morgues. Some would be buried, some would be sent home. Others would forever be in the grave of the sea.

“When I heard of it,” she began, “I almost didn’t believe it. How could such a thing be? There were trawlers out, and they went directly to try to rescue survivors. More boats set out from here. Most were too late to do more than bring back the dead. Oh sweet God, I saw myself some of the people as they made land. Women and babies, men barely able to walk and half naked. Some cried, and others just stared. Like you do when you’re lost. They say the liner went down in less than twenty minutes. Can that be?”

“I don’t know,” Felix murmured, and shut his eyes.

She glanced back at him and hoped he was strong enough for the rest. "More have died since coming here. Exposure and injuries too grievous to heal. Some spent hours in the water. The lists change so quick. I can't think what terror of heart families are living with, waiting to know. Or what grief those who know their loved ones are lost in this horrible way are feeling. You said there was no one waiting for word of you."

"No. No one."

She went to him. She'd tended his hurts, suffered with him during the horrors of his delirium. It had been only three days since he'd been brought into her care, but for both of them, it was a lifetime.

"There's no shame in staying here," she said quietly. "No shame in not going to the funeral today. You're far from well yet."

"I need to go." He looked down at his borrowed clothes. In them he felt scrawny and fragile. And alive.

THE QUIET WAS almost unearthly. Every shop and store in Queenstown was closed for the day. No children raced along the streets, no neighbors stopped to chat or gossip. Over the silence came the hollow sound of church bells from St. Colman's on the hill, and the mournful notes of the funeral dirge.

Felix knew if he lived another hundred years he'd never forget the sounds of that grieving music, the soft and steady beat of drums. He watched the sun strike the brass of the instruments, and remembered how that same sun had struck the brass of the propellers as the stern of the *Lusitania* had reared up in her final plunge into the sea.

He was alive, he thought again. Instead of relief and gratitude, he felt only guilt and despair.

He kept his head down as he trudged along behind the priests, the mourners, the dead, through the reverently silent streets. It took more than an hour to reach the graveyard, and left him light-headed. By the time he saw the three mass graves beneath tall elms where choirboys stood with incense burners, he was forced to lean heavily on Meg.

Tears stung the backs of his eyes as he looked at the tiny coffins that held dead children.

He listened to the quiet weeping, to the words of both the Catholic and the Church of Ireland services. None of it reached him. He could still hear, thought he would forever hear, the way people had called to God as they'd drowned. But God hadn't listened, and had let them die horribly.

Then he lifted his head and, across those obscene holes, saw the face of the woman and young boy from the ship.

The tears came now, fell down his cheeks like rain as he lurched through the crowd. He reached her as the first notes of "Abide with Me" lifted into the air. Then he fell to his knees in front of her wheelchair.

"I feared you were dead." She reached up, touched his face with one hand. The other peeked out of a cast. "I never got your name, so couldn't check the lists."

"You're alive." Her face had been cut, he could see that now, and her color was too bright, as if she were feverish. Her leg had been cast as well as her arm. "And the boy."

The child slept in the arms of another woman. Like an angel, Felix thought again. Peaceful and unmarked.

The fist of despair that gripped him loosened. One prayer, at least one prayer, had been answered.

"He never let go." She began to weep then, soundlessly. "He's such a good boy. He never let go. I broke my arm in the fall. If you hadn't given me your life jacket, we would have drowned. My husband . . ." Her voice frayed as she looked over at the graves. "They never found him."

"I'm sorry."

"He would have thanked you." She reached up to touch a hand to her boy's leg. "He loved his son, very much." She took a deep breath. "In his stead, I thank you, for my son's life and my own. Please tell me your name."

"Felix Greenfield, ma'am."

"Mr. Greenfield." She leaned over, brushed a kiss on Felix's cheek. "I'll never forget you. Nor will my son."

When they wheeled her chair away, she kept her shoulders straight with a quiet dignity that brought a wash of shame over Felix's face.

"You're a hero," Meg told him.

Shaking his head, he moved as quickly as he could away from the crowds, away from the graves. "No. She is. I'm nothing."

"How can you say that? I heard what she said. You saved her life, and the little boy's." Concerned, she hurried up to him, took his arm to steady him.

He'd have shaken her off if he'd had the strength. Instead, he simply sat in the high, wild grass of the graveyard and buried his face in his hands.

"Ah, there now." Pity for him had her sitting beside him, taking him into her arms. "There now, Felix."

He could think of nothing but the strength in the young widow's face, in the innocence of her son's. "She was hurt, so she asked me to take the boy. To save the boy."

"You saved them both."

"I don't know why I did it. I was only thinking about saving myself. I'm a thief. Those things you took out of my pocket? I stole them. I was stealing them when the ship was hit. All I could think about when it was happening was getting out alive."

Meg shifted beside him, folded her hands. "Did you give her your life jacket?"

"It wasn't mine. I found it. I don't know why I gave it to her. She was trapped between deck chairs, holding on to the boy. Holding on to her sanity in the middle of all that hell."

"You could've turned away from her, saved yourself."

He mopped at his eyes. "I wanted to."

"But you didn't."

"I'll never know why." He only knew that seeing them alive had changed something inside him. "But the point is, I'm a second-rate thief who was on that ship because I was running from the cops. I stole a man's things minutes before he died. A thousand people are dead. I saw some of them die. I'm alive. What kind of world is it that saves a thief and takes children?"

"Who can answer? But there's a child who's alive today because you were there. Would you have been, do you think, just where you were, when you were, if you hadn't been stealing?"

He let out a derisive sound. "The likes of me wouldn't have been anywhere near the first-class deck unless I'd been stealing."

"There you are." She took a handkerchief from her pocket and dried his tears as she would a child's. "Stealing's wrong. It's a sin and there's no question about it. But if you'd been minding your own, that woman and her son would be dead. If a sin saves innocent lives, I'm thinking it's not so great a sin. And I have to say, you didn't steal so very much if all you had for it were a pair of earbobs, a little statue and some American dollars."

For some reason that made him smile. "Well, I was just getting started."

The smile she sent him was lovely and sure. "Yes, I'd say you're just getting started."

Two

Helsinki, 2002

SHE wasn't what he'd expected. He'd studied the picture of her on the back of her book, and on the program for the lecture—would it never end?—but there was a difference in flesh and blood.

She was smaller than he'd imagined, for one thing. Nearly delicate in her quiet gray suit that should, in his opinion, be a good inch shorter at the hem. From what he could see of her legs, they weren't half bad.

In person she didn't look nearly as competent and intimidating a woman as she did on the dust jacket. Though the little wire glasses she wore onstage added a sort of trendy intellectual tone.

She had a good voice. Maybe too good, he thought, as it was damn near putting him to sleep. Still, that was primarily the fault of the subject matter. He was interested in Greek myths—in one particular Greek myth. But Christ Jesus, it was tedious to have to sit through an hour's lecture on the entire breed of them.

He straightened in his chair and did his best to concentrate. Not on the words so much. He didn't give a rat's ass about Artemis turning some poor slob into a stag because he'd seen her naked. That only proved that women, goddesses or not, were peculiar creatures.

To his mind, Dr. Tia Marsh was damn peculiar. The woman came from money. Great gobs and hordes of money, yet instead of sitting back and enjoying it, she spent her time steeped in long-dead Greek gods. Writing about them, lecturing about them. Interminably.

She had generations of breeding behind her. Blood as blue as the Kerry lakes. But here she was, giving her endless talk in Finland, days after she'd given what he assumed was the same song and dance in Sweden, in Norway. Hyping her book all over Europe and Scandinavia.

Certainly it wasn't for the money, he mused. Maybe she just liked to hear the sound of her own voice. Countless did.

She was, according to his information, twenty-nine, single, the only child of the New York Marshes and, most important, the great-great-granddaughter of Henry W. Wyley.

Wyley Antiques was, as it had been for nearly a hundred years, one of the most prestigious antique and auction houses in New York.

It was no coincidence that Wyley's offshoot had developed such a keen interest in the Greek gods. It was his assignment to find out, by whatever means worked best, what she knew about the Three Fates.

If she'd been, well, softer, he supposed, he might have tried and enjoyed a seduction angle. It was fascinating what people would tell each other when sex was tangled into the mix. She was attractive enough, in a scholarly sort of way, but he wasn't entirely sure what button to push, romantically speaking, with the intellectual type.

Frowning a bit, he turned the book over on his lap and gave the photo another look. In it she had her sunny blond hair tucked back in some sort of bun. She was smiling, rather dutifully, he thought now. As if someone had said, "Say cheese!" It wasn't a smile that reached the eyes—very sober and serious blue eyes that suited the somewhat sober and serious curve of her lips.

Her face tapered down to a bit of a point. He might have called it elfin but for that primly styled hair and the somber stare.

He thought she looked like a woman in need of a good laugh . . . or a good lay. Both his mother and his sister would have belted him for that opinion. But a man's thoughts were his own business.

Best, he decided, to approach the prim Dr. Marsh on very civilized, very businesslike terms.

When the applause, a great deal more enthusiastic than he'd expected, broke out, he nearly cheered himself. But even as he started to rise, hands shot up.

Annoyed, he checked his watch, then settled himself for the question-and-answer session. As she was working with an interpreter, he decided the session might take the rest of his life.

He noted she took the glasses off for this portion, blinked like an owl in sunlight, and seemed to take a very long breath. The way a diver might, he mused, before plunging off a high board into a dark pool.

When inspiration struck, he lifted his hand. It was always best, he thought, to knock politely on a door to see if it opened before you just kicked it in.

When she gestured to him, he got to his feet and sent her one of his best smiles. "Dr. Marsh, I'd like to thank you first for a fascinating talk."

"Oh."

She blinked, and he saw she'd been surprised by the Irish in his voice. Good, something else to use. Yanks, for reasons that eluded him, were so often charmed silly by an accent.

"You're welcome," she said.

"I've always been interested in the Fates, and I wonder, in your opinion, if their power held individually or only because of their union."

"The Moerae, or the Fates, were a triad," she began, "each with a specific task. Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who measures it, and Atropus, who cuts that thread and ends it. None could function alone. A thread might be spun, but endlessly and without purpose or its natural course. Or without the spinning, there's nothing to measure, nothing to cut. Three parts," she added, sliding her fingers into an interlocking steeple. "One pur-

pose.” And closed them into a joined fist. “Alone they would be nothing but ordinary if interesting women. Together, the most powerful and honored of gods.”

Exactly so, he thought as he resumed his seat. Exactly.

SHE WAS SO tired. When the Q-and-A session was finished, Tia wondered how she didn't simply stumble her way to the signing area. Despite the precautions of melatonin, diet, aromatherapy and cautious exercise, her internal time clock was running ragged.

But she was tired, she reminded herself, in Helsinki. And that counted for something. Everyone was so kind, so interested here. Just as they had been at every stop since she'd left New York.

How long ago was that? she wondered as she took her seat, picked up her pen, plastered on her author smile. Twenty-two days. It was important to remember the days, and that she was more than three-quarters of the way through this self-imposed torture.

How do you conquer phobia? Dr. Lowenstein had asked. By facing the phobia. You've got chronic shyness with whiffs of paranoia? Get out there and interact with the public. She wondered when a patient came to Lowenstein with a fear of heights if his solution was a fast leap off the Brooklyn Bridge.

Had he listened when she'd assured him she was positive she had social anxiety disorder? Perhaps agoraphobia combined with claustrophobia?

No, he had not. He'd insisted she was merely shy, and had suggested she leave the psychiatric evaluations and diagnoses to him.

As her stomach churned when the first members of the audience walked up for a word and a signature, she wished she could face Dr. Lowenstein right this minute. So she could punch him.

Still, it was better, she was forced to admit. She was better. She'd gotten through the lecture, and this time without a Xanax or a quick, guilty shot of whiskey.

The trouble was the lecturing wasn't nearly as hard as

this one-on-one business. With lecturing there was a nice cushion of distance and dispassion. She had *notes* when she lectured, a clear-cut plan that moved from Ananke to Zeus.

But when people came up to a signing table, they expected spontaneity and chat and, God, charm.

Her hand didn't shake as she signed her name. Her voice didn't quaver as she spoke. That was progress. At her first stop in London she'd been nearly catatonic by the end of the program. By the time she'd gotten back to her hotel, she'd been a quivering, quaking mess and had solved that little problem by taking a couple of pills and sliding into the safe cocoon of drug-induced sleep.

God, she'd wanted to go home. She'd wanted to run like a rabbit back to her bolt-hole in New York, lock herself in her lovely apartment. But she'd made commitments, given her word.

A Marsh never broke her word.

Now she could be glad, even proud, she'd held on, had white-knuckled her way through the first week, quivered through the second and gritted her way through the third. At this point she was nearly too exhausted from the rigors of travel to be nervous at the prospect of speaking to strangers.

Her face was numb from smiling by the time the end of the line tailed around. She lifted her gaze, met the grass-green eyes of the Irishman who'd asked her about the Fates.

"A fascinating lecture, Dr. Marsh," he said in that lovely lilt.

"Thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed it." She was already reaching for his book when she realized he'd held out a hand. She fumbled a bit, then switched her pen to her left and shook his.

Why was it people always wanted to shake hands? she wondered. Didn't they *know* how many germs were transferred that way?

His hand was warm, firm, and lingered on hers just long enough to have embarrassed heat creeping up her neck.

"Speaking of fate," he said and gave her an easy, dazzling smile. "I was pleased with mine when I saw you'd

be here while I was in Helsinki on business. I've admired your work for some time." He lied without a flicker.

"Thank you." Oh God, conversation. First rule, have them do the talking. "You're from Ireland?"

"I am, yes. County Cork. But traveling just now, as you are."

"Yes, as I am."

"Traveling's an exciting part of life, isn't it?"

Exciting? she thought. "Yes, very." It was her turn to lie.

"I seem to be holding you up." He handed her the book. "I'm Malachi, Malachi Sullivan."

"It's nice to meet you." She signed his book in a careful and lovely hand, struggling to calculate how best to end the conversation and, at last, the event. "Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Sullivan." She got to her feet. "I hope your business in Finland is successful."

"So do I, Dr. Marsh."

NO, SHE WASN'T what he'd expected, and that had Malachi reevaluating his approach. He might have taken her for aloof, cool and a bit of a snob. But he'd seen the flush warm her cheeks and the occasional glint of panic in her eyes. What she was, he decided as he loitered on the corner, watching the hotel entrance, was shy.

What a woman floating in money, status and privilege had to be shy about, he couldn't say. But it took all kinds to make the world, he supposed.

The question could be asked, he admitted, why a perfectly sane man with a reasonably content life, a reasonably decent income should travel to Helsinki on the chance that a woman he'd never met might lead him to a treasure that may or may not exist?

The question, he thought, had too many layers for a single easy answer. But if he had to choose one, it would be family honor.

No, that wasn't quite enough. The second part was that he'd held Fate in his hand, and wouldn't rest until he had a hold on it again.

Tia Marsh was connected to his past and, to his way of

thinking, to his future. He checked his watch. He hoped, in very short order, they'd take the first step ahead.

It pleased him when his guess proved out. She'd come straight back to the hotel from the university, he noted as he watched her climb out of the cab. And she'd come alone.

He sauntered down the sidewalk, gauging his timing. He glanced toward her just as she turned. Once again they were face-to-face.

"Dr. Marsh." The tone of his voice, the spread of his smile were calculated for surprise and flattery. "You're staying here as well, then?"

"Ah yes. Mr. Sullivan." She remembered his name. In fact, she'd been thinking how attractive he was while she'd rubbed antibacterial lotion on her hands in the taxi.

"It's a lovely hotel. Fine service." He turned as if to walk to the door and open it for her, then stopped. "Dr. Marsh, I hope you won't think this out of line, but I wonder if I might buy you a drink."

"I . . ." Part of her brain fizzled. She'd actually woven a complex little fantasy on the taxi ride as well. One where she'd been witty and sophisticated during their conversation, and they'd ended up finishing the evening with a mad, reckless affair. "I don't really drink," she managed.

"Don't you?" Amusement touched his face. "Well, that knocks down the first approach a man might use to spend some time with an interesting and attractive woman. Would you fancy a walk?"

"Excuse me?" She couldn't keep up. He couldn't be hitting on her. She wasn't the type men hit on, particularly wildly attractive strangers with fabulous accents.

"One of the charms of Helsinki in the summer is the sun." Taking advantage of her confusion, he took her arm, gently, and steered her away from the hotel entrance. "Here it is, half past nine already, and bright as day. It's a shame to waste such a light, isn't it? Have you been down to the harbor?"

"No, I . . ." Baffled by the turn of events, she looked back at the hotel. Solitude. Safety. "I really should—"

"Have you an early flight in the morning?" He knew she didn't, but wondered if she'd have the guile to lie.

“No. No, actually, I’m here until Wednesday.”

“Well then. Let me take that case for you.” He slid her briefcase off her shoulder and onto his own. Though the weight surprised him, it was a smooth move. “It must be a challenge giving talks and seminars and such in a country where you don’t have the primary language.”

“I had an interpreter.”

“Yes, she was very good. Still, it’s a bit of work, isn’t it? Do you wonder at such interest here in the Greeks?”

“There are correlations between the Greek gods and myths and the Norse. Deities with human failings and virtues, the adventures, the sex, the betrayals.”

And if he didn’t steer the conversation as he was steering her, Malachi thought, they’d be right back in lecture mode. “You’re right, of course. I’m from a country that prizes its myths. Have you ever been to Ireland?”

“Once, when I was a child. I don’t remember it.”

“That’s a shame. You’ll have to go back. Are you warm enough?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” The minute she said it, she realized she should have complained of a chill and gotten away. The next problem was she’d been so flustered she’d paid no attention to the direction. Now she hadn’t a clue how to get back to the hotel. But surely it couldn’t be difficult.

The streets were straight and neat, she noted as she worked to calm herself. And though it was moving toward ten at night, crowded with people. It was the light, of course. That lovely, luminous summer light that drenched the city in warm charm.

She hadn’t even looked around until now, she admitted. Hadn’t taken a stroll, done any foolish shopping, had a coffee at one of the sidewalk tables.

She’d done here what she did all too often in New York. Stayed in her nest until she had to fulfill an obligation.

He thought she looked a bit like a sleepwalker coming out of a trance as she studied the surroundings. Her arm was still rigid in his, but he thought it less likely she’d bolt now. There were enough people around to make her feel safe with him, he assumed. Crowds and couples and tourists all taking advantage of the endless day.

There was music coming from the square, and the crowd was thicker there. He skirted the bulk of it, nudging her closer to the harbor, where the breeze danced. It was there, by the edge of that deep blue water where boats, red and white, bobbed, that he saw her smile easily for the first time.

“It’s beautiful.” She had to lift her voice over the music. “So streamlined and perfect. I wish I’d taken the ferry from Stockholm, but I was afraid I’d get seasick. Still, I’d have been sick on the Baltic Sea. That has to count for something.”

When he laughed, she glanced up, flustered. She’d nearly forgotten she’d been talking to a stranger. “That sounds stupid.”

“No, it sounds charming.” It surprised him that he meant it. “Let’s do what the Finns do at such a time.”

“Take a sauna?”

He laughed again, let his hand slide down her arm until it linked with hers. “Have some coffee.”

IT SHOULDN’T HAVE been possible. She shouldn’t have been sitting at a crowded sidewalk cafe, under pearly sunlight at eleven at night in a city thousands of miles from home. Certainly she shouldn’t have been sitting across from a man so ridiculously handsome she had to fight the urge to glance around to be sure he wasn’t talking to someone else.

His wonderful head of chestnut brown hair fluttered around his face in the steady breeze. It waved a bit, that hair, and caught glints of the sun. His face was smooth and narrow with just a hint of hollows in the cheeks. His mouth, mobile and firm, could light into a smile designed to make a woman’s pulse flutter.

It certainly worked on hers.

His eyes were framed by thick, dark lashes, arched over by expressive brows. But it was the eyes themselves that captivated her. They were the deep green of summer grass, with a halo of pale gold ringing the pupil. And they stayed fixed on hers when she spoke. Not in a probing, uncomfortable way. But an interested one.

She'd had men look at her with interest before. She wasn't a gorgon, after all, she reminded herself. But somehow she'd managed to reach the age of twenty-nine and never have a man look at her in quite the way Malachi Sullivan looked at her.

She should have been nervous, but she wasn't. Not really. She told herself it was because he was so obviously a gentleman, in both manner and dress. He spoke well, seemed so at ease with himself. The stone-gray business suit fit his tall, lanky form perfectly.

Her father, whose fashion sense was laser keen, would have approved.

She sipped her second cup of decaf coffee and wondered what generous gift of fate had put him in her path.

They were talking of the Three Fates again, but she didn't mind. It was easier to talk of the gods than of personal things.

"I've never decided if it's comforting or frightening to consider your life being determined, all before you've taken your first breath, by three women."

"Not just the length of a life," Tia put in, and had to bite back the urge to warn him of the perils of refined white sugar when he added a generous teaspoon to his coffee. "The tone of it. The good and the evil in you. The Fates distribute that good and that evil justly. It's still up to a man what he does with what's inside him."

"Not preordained then?"

"Every act is an act of will, or lack of it." She moved her shoulders. "And every act has consequences. Zeus, king of the gods, and quite the ladies' man, wanted Thetis. The Moerae prophesied that her son would be more famous, perhaps more powerful in some way, than Zeus himself. And Zeus, recalling just how he'd dealt with his own father, feared siring this child. So he gave Thetis up, thinking of his own welfare."

"It's a foolish man who gives up a woman because of what may happen down the road."

"It didn't do him any good anyway, did it, since Thetis went on to mother Achilles. Perhaps if he'd followed his

heart instead of his ambition, married her and loved the child, showed pride in his son's accomplishments, Zeus would have had a different fate."

What the hell had happened to Zeus? Malachi wondered, but thought it wiser not to ask. "So, he chose his own destiny by looking into the dark inside himself and projecting that on a child yet unconceived."

Her face lit at his response. "You could say that. You could also say the past sends out ripples. If you follow mythology, you know every finger dipped into the pool sends those ripples out, and they touch on those who come after. Generation after generation."

She had lovely eyes, he mused, when you got close enough to really look into them. The irises were a clear and perfect blue. "It's the same with people, isn't it?"

"I think so. That's one of the core themes of the book. We can't escape fate, but we can do a great deal to carve our own mark in it, to turn it to our advantage, or disadvantage."

"It seems mine's turned to advantage by scheduling this particular trip at this particular time."

She knew the heat was rising to her cheeks again, and lifted her cup in hopes of hiding it. "You haven't said what business you're in."

"Shipping." It was close to the truth. "It's a family business, several generations now. A fateful choice." He said it casually, but watched her like a hawk watches a rabbit. "When you consider my great-great-grandfather was one of the survivors of the *Lusitania*."

Her eyes widened as she lowered her cup. "Really? That's so strange. Mine died on the *Lusitania*."

"Is that the truth?" His astonishment was exactly the right tone. "That's a strong coincidence. I wonder if they knew each other, Tia." He touched a hand to hers, and when she didn't jolt, let it linger. "I'm becoming a champion believer in fate."

AS HE WALKED with her back to the hotel, Malachi debated how much more to say, and how to say it. In the end

he decided to temper his impatience with discretion. If he brought up the statues too soon, she might see through the layers of coincidence to cold calculation.

“Do you have any plans for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” She could barely get over that she’d ended up having plans tonight. “No, not really.”

“Why don’t I pick you up about one. We’ll have lunch.” He smiled as he led her into the lobby. “See where it takes us.”

She’d intended to pack, call home, work a bit on her new book and spend at least an hour doing her relaxation exercises.

She couldn’t think why.

“That would be nice.”

Perfect, he thought. He’d give her a little romance, a little adventure. A drive to the sea. And drop in the first mention of the little silver statues. At the desk he asked for her key and his own.

Before she could reach for her key, he had it in his hand and with the other pressed lightly to the small of her back, walked with her to the elevator.

It wasn’t until the doors whisked shut and she was alone with him in the elevator that she tasted the first bubble of panic. What was she doing? What was *he* doing? He’d only pressed the button for her floor.

She’d broken every rule in *The Businesswoman’s Travel Handbook*. Had obviously wasted \$14.95 and all the hours she’d spent studying every page. He knew her room number and that she was traveling alone.

He would force himself into her room, rape and murder her. Or, *or* with the imprint of the key he could be making even now, he’d sneak in later and rape and murder her.

And all because she’d paid no attention to Chapter Two. She cleared her throat. “Are you on four as well?”

“Hmm? No. I’m on six. I’ll walk you to your door, Tia, as my mother would expect. I need to find a present for her, some glass, I’m thinking. Maybe you’ll help me choose the right thing.”

The mention of his mother, as he’d expected, relaxed her again. “You’ll have to tell me what she likes.”

“She likes anything her children buy her,” he said as the elevator doors opened again.

“Children?”

“I’ve a brother and a sister. Gideon and Rebecca. She went biblical on the names, who knows why.” He stopped at her door, slid her key into the lock. After he’d turned the knob, eased it open a crack, he stepped back.

He heard and nearly chuckled at her quiet sigh of relief. And because he’d heard it, been amused by it, he took her hand. “I have to thank you, and the gods, for a memorable evening.”

“I had a lovely time.”

“Until tomorrow, then.” He kept his eyes on hers as he lifted her hand, brushed his lips over the knuckles. The little quiver of response did a great deal for his ego.

Shy, delicate and sweet. And as far from his type as the moon from the sun. Still, there was no reason a man shouldn’t experiment with a new taste now and again.

He might just have a sip of her tomorrow.

“Good night, Tia.”

“Good night.” A little flustered, she backed into the door, her gaze locked with his until she stepped over the threshold.

Then she turned. And she screamed.

He was in the room ahead of her like a bullet. Under other circumstances she’d have noted and admired the speed and grace with which he moved. But at the moment, all she saw was the wreck of her hotel room.

Her clothes were strewn everywhere. Her suitcases had been slit to pieces, the bed overturned, and all the drawers dumped. Her jewelry case had its contents spilled out and its lining ripped free.

The desk in the sitting area had been ransacked as well. And the laptop that had sat on it was gone.

“Bloody hell,” Malachi stated. All he could think was the bitch had beaten him to it.

Fury dark on his face, he whirled around. And one look at Tia had him biting back the rest of the oaths. She was white as a sheet, her eyes already going glassy with shock.

She doesn’t deserve this, he thought. And he had no

doubt it was his hunting her down that had brought this on her.

“You need to sit down.”

“What?”

“Sit.” Brisk now, he took her by the arm and pulled her to a chair, dumped her in it. “We’ll call security. Can you tell if anything’s missing?”

“My computer.” She tried to catch her breath, found it blocked. Fearing an asthma attack, she dug in her briefcase for her inhaler. “My laptop’s gone.”

He frowned at her while she sucked on the inhaler. “What was on it?”

She waved a hand as she drew in medication. “My work,” she managed between gulps. “New book. E-mail, accounts—banking.” She rooted through her bag again for pills. “I’ve got a disk copy of the book in here.” But it was a prescription bottle she pulled out.

Malachi nipped it out of her hand. “What’s this?” He read the label, and his frown deepened. “We’ll just hold off on this for now. You’re not going to be hysterical.”

“I’m not?”

“You’re not.”

She felt the telltale tickle at the back of her throat that presaged a panic attack. “I think you’re wrong.”

“Stop that, you’ll hyperventilate or some such thing.” Straining for patience, he crouched in front of her. “Look at me now, breathe slowly. Just breathe slowly.”

“Can’t.”

“Yes, you can. You’re not hurt, are you? Got a mess on your hands is all.”

“Someone broke into my room.”

“That’s right, but that’s done. You gobbling down tranquilizers isn’t going to change it. What about your passport, any valuables. Important papers.”

Because he made her think instead of react, the constriction on her chest loosened. She shook her head. “I have my passport with me all the time. I don’t travel with anything really valuable. But my laptop—”

“You’ll buy another, won’t you?”

Put that way, she could only nod. “Yes.”

He got up to close the door. "Do you want to call security?"

"Yes, of course. The police."

"Take a minute to be sure. You're in a foreign country. A police report'll generate a lot of red tape, take a lot of time and trouble. And there'd be publicity, I'd imagine."

"But . . . someone broke into my room."

"Maybe you should go through your things." He kept his voice calm and practical as he thought it the best way to handle her. It was the way his own mother handled temper fits, and what was hysteria but a kind of temper?

"Make sure exactly what was taken." He glanced around, then toed a little white machine with his foot. "What's this?"

"Air purifier." When he picked it up, set it on the desk, she got shakily to her feet. "I can't understand why anyone would do all this for a laptop computer."

"Maybe they were hoping for more." He wandered to the door of the bathroom, glanced in.

He'd already decided the Finns deserved some sort of grand prize for the luxury of their baths. Hers, being that her room was plusher, was more spacious than his, but his didn't lack for details.

The heated floor tiles, the jet tub, the glory of the six-headed shower and towels thick and big as blankets. On her long tiled counter he saw a half dozen pill bottles, most of which proved to be some sort of vitamin or herbal remedy. There was an electric toothbrush, a travel candle, a tube of antibacterial cream. Packets of something called N-ER-G and more packets of something called D-Stress. He counted eight bottles of mineral water.

"You're a bit of a case, aren't you, darling?"

She ran a hand over her face. "Traveling's stressful, it's hard on the system. I have allergies."

"Do you now? Why don't I help you set this place back to rights, then you can take one of your pills and get some sleep."

"I couldn't possibly sleep. I need to call hotel security."

"All right." It was no skin off his nose, really, and would put more of a hitch in her stride than his. Obliging, he

went to the phone and called the front desk to relay the situation.

He even stayed with her when management and security came. He patted her hand while she spoke to them, cooperatively gave his own version of the evening and his name and address, his passport number.

He had, essentially, nothing to hide.

It was nearly two A.M. before he made it back to his own room. He had a long, neat whiskey. Brooded over another.

When Tia woke the next morning, muzzy-brained, he was gone. All that was left to assure her he'd existed in the first place was a note slipped under her door.

Tia, I hope you're feeling steadier this morning. I'm sorry but I've had to change my plans and will have already left Helsinki when you read this. The best of luck with the rest of your traveling. I'll be in touch when I can. Malachi.

She sighed, sat on the edge of the bed and decided she'd never see him again.

Three

MALACHI called for a meeting the minute he arrived back in Cobh. Due to the import, schedules were hastily rearranged and concerned parties made themselves available.

He stood at the head of the table as he relayed to his partners the events that took place during his stay in Finland.

When the tale was told, he sat, picked up his cup of tea.

“Well, you dimwit, why didn’t you stay and give her another push?”

Since this came from the youngest partner, who also happened to be his sister, Malachi didn’t take particular offense. The meeting table, in the Sullivan tradition, was the kitchen table. Before he answered, he got to his feet again, took the biscuit tin off the counter and helped himself.

“First, because pushing would’ve done more harm than good. The woman has more brains than a cabbage, Becca. If I’d nudged her about the statues right after she’d had her room tossed, she might very well have thought I’d had something to do with the matter. Which,” he added with a scowl, “I suppose I did, indirectly.”

“We can’t blame ourselves for that. We aren’t hooligans, after all, or thieves.” Gideon was the middle child,

nearly dead center at not quite two years younger than Malachi, not quite two older than Rebecca. This accident of birth had, more often than not, put him in the position of playing peacemaker between them.

He was his brother's match in height and build, but had inherited his mother's coloring. The lean, hollow-cheeked features of the Sullivans were stamped on his face, but his were set off with jet-black hair and Viking blue eyes.

He was, in his way, the most fastidious of the lot. He preferred having everything lined up in tidy columns, and because of it—though Malachi had more of a talent with figures—did duty as family bookkeeper.

"The trip wasn't wasted," he went on. "Neither the time nor the expense of it. You made contact with her, and now we've reason to believe we're not alone in our belief that she might be a likely contact to the Fates."

"We don't know if she is or isn't," Rebecca disagreed. "Because it's plain as rain it was Malachi who led them to her. Better if you'd gone hunting for the one who'd broken into her room instead of running back home."

"And how, Mata Hari, would you suggest I do that?" Malachi queried.

"Look for clues," she said with a sweep of arms. "Interrogate hotel staff. Do *something*."

"If only I'd remembered to pack my magnifying glass and deerstalker hat."

Exasperated, she sighed. She could see the sense of what he'd done, but when it came to a choice between sense and action, Rebecca would always toss sense. "All I see is we're out the price of the travel, and no better off than we were before you had your little fling with the Yank."

"We didn't have a fling," Malachi said with the edge of temper in his voice.

"Well, whose fault is that?" she shot back. "Seems to me you'd've gotten more out of her if you'd softened her up in bed."

"Rebecca." The quiet censure came from the balance of power. Eileen Sullivan might have birthed three strong-

willed children, but she had been, and always would be, the power.

“Ma, the man’s thirty-one years old,” Rebecca stated sweetly. “Surely you’re aware he’s had sex before.”

Eileen was a pretty, tidy woman who took great pride in her family and her home. And when necessary, ruled both with an iron fist.

“This is not a discussion about your brother’s private behavior, but a discussion of business. We agreed Mal would go and see what he would see. And so he has.”

Rebecca subsided, though it wasn’t easy. She adored her brothers, but there were times she could have bashed their heads together just to shake up their brains a bit.

She had the long, lean Sullivan build as well, and could be mistaken for willowy if attention wasn’t paid to the strong shoulders and tough muscles under the skin she liked to pamper.

Her hair was shades lighter than Malachi’s, more a gilded red than chestnut, and her eyes were a softer, mistier green. They were long-lidded and balanced a wide and stubborn mouth in a face more given to angles than curves.

Behind the eyes was a sharp, clever and often impatient brain.

She’d campaigned hard to be the one to go to Helsinki and make initial contact with Tia Marsh. She was still fuming at being outvoted in Malachi’s favor.

“You’d have done no better with her,” Malachi commented, reading her mind easily. “And sex wouldn’t have been an option, would it? In any case, we are better off. She liked me, and she’s not, I’d say, a woman easily comfortable with people. She’s not like you, Becca.” He moved around the table as he spoke, tugged on his sister’s long curly hair. “She’s not adventurous and bold.”

“Don’t try to soften me up.”

He only grinned and tugged her hair again. “At your slowest pace, you’d have moved too fast for her. You’d’ve intimidated her. She’s a shy one, and a bit of a hypochondriac, I think. You wouldn’t have believed the stuff she

had. Bottles of pills, little machines. Air purifiers, white-noise makers. It was a wonder when we went through it all for the cops. She travels with her own pillow—some allergic matter.”

“Sounds a dead bore to me,” Rebecca replied.

“No, not a bore.” Malachi remembered that slow, sober smile. “Just a bit nervy is all. Still, when the police got there she pulled herself together. Went through the report, steady as you please, every step of it, from the time she left the hotel to go to her lecture until she walked back in again.”

And hadn’t, he remembered now, missed a single detail.

“She’s got a brain in there,” he mused. “Like a camera taking pictures and filing them in a proper slot, and a spine under all the worry.”

“You liked her,” Rebecca said.

“I did. And I’m sorry to have caused her the trouble. But, well, she’ll get over it.” He sat again, and dumped sugar in the cup of tea he’d let go nearly cold. “We’ll let that end simmer a bit, at least until she’s back in the States and settled. Then I might take a trip to New York.”

“New York.” Rebecca sprang to her feet. “Why do you get to go everywhere?”

“Because I’m the oldest. And because for better or worse, Tia Marsh is mine. We’ll be more careful with step two since it appears our movements are being watched.”

“One of us ought to go deal with that bitch directly,” Rebecca said. “She stole from us, stole what had been in our family for more than three-quarters of a century, and now she’s trying to use us to find the other two pieces. She needs to be told, in no uncertain terms, that the Sullivans won’t stand for it.”

“What she’ll do is pay.” Malachi leaned back. “And dearly when we have the other two Fates and she only the one.”

“The one she stole from us.”

“It’d be hard explaining to the proper authorities that she stole what had already been stolen.” Gideon held up a hand before Rebecca could snap at him. “Eighty-odd years in the past or not, Felix Greenfield stole the first

Fate. I think we could come around that, legally, as there's no one to know it save us. But on the same point, we've no real proof that the statue was in our possession, and that someone with Anita Gaye's reputation would steal it from under our noses."

Rebecca gave a little sigh. "It's mortifying she did, as if we were little woolly lambs led dancing to the slaughter."

"Separate, that statue's worth no more than a few hundred thousand pounds." Because it still grated, Malachi put aside how easily he'd been duped out of the little Fate. "But all three together, that's priceless to the right collector. Anita Gaye's the right one, and in the end, it's her wool that'll be fleeced."

Sitting in the cheerful butter-yellow kitchen with his granny's chintz curtains at the window and the smell of summer grass dancing through them, he thought of just what he'd like to do to the woman who'd stolen the family symbol out of his foolish hands.

"I don't think we should wait to take step two," he decided. "Tia won't be back in New York for a couple weeks yet, and I don't want to show up on her doorstep too soon. What we need to do now is work on unraveling that thread to the second statue."

Rebecca shook back her hair. "Some of us haven't been spending their time kicking up their heels in foreign parts. I've done quite a bit of unraveling in the last few days."

"Why the hell didn't you say so?"

"Because you've been blathering on about your new Yank sweetheart."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Becca."

"Don't take the Lord's name at my table," Eileen said mildly. "Rebecca, stop deviling your brother and preening."

"I wasn't preening. Yet. I've been searching on the Internet, doing the genealogy and so on. Day and night, by the way, and at great personal sacrifice. That was preening," she said with a grin to her mother. "Still, it's a big leap, as all we have to go on is Felix's memory of what he read on the paper with the statue. The dip in the ocean washed the ink away, and we're counting on him being

clear about what he read before what had to be the most traumatic experience of his life. More, we're counting on his veracity," she decided. "And the man was, after all, a thief."

"Reformed," Eileen put in. "By the grace of God and the love of a good woman. Or so the story goes."

"So it goes," Rebecca agreed. "With the statue was a piece of paper, with a name and address in London. His claim that he committed it to memory as he thought he might stop by one night and ply his trade seems reasonable enough. More reasonable when I roll up my sleeves at the keyboard and find there was indeed a Simon White-Smythe living in Mansfield Park in 1915."

"You found him!" Malachi beamed at her. "You're a wonder, Rebecca."

"I am, as I found more than that. He had a son, name of James, who had two daughters. Both married, but the one lost her husband in the second great war and died childless. The other moved to the States, as her husband was a well-to-do lawyer in Washington, D.C. They had three children, two sons and a daughter. They lost one son when he was just a lad in Vietnam, the other hightailed it to Canada, and I haven't been able to get a line on him. But the daughter married three times. Can you beat it? She's living in Los Angeles. She had one child with husband number one, daughter. I tracked her down, too, on the information highway. She's living at the moment in Prague, with employment at some club there."

"Well, Prague's closer than Los Angeles," Malachi replied. "Couldn't have just stayed in London, could they? We're taking a leap of faith here, that the man White-Smythe had the statue to begin with, or knew how to get it. That if he had it, it's been kept in the family, or there's a record where it went. And that all being the case, we can finagle it out of their hands."

"It was a leap of faith when your great-great-grandfather gave his life jacket to a stranger and her child," Eileen put in. "To my mind there's a reason he was spared when so many were lost. A reason why that little statue was in his pocket when he was saved. Because of

that, it belongs to this family,” she continued with her cool, unshakable logic. “And as it’s part of a piece, the others should come to us as well. It’s not the money, it’s the principle. We can afford a ticket to Prague to see if there’s an answer there.”

She smiled serenely at her daughter. “What’s the name of the club, darling?”

THE NAME OF the club was Down Under, and it escaped the sloppy slide down to dive due to the vigilance of its proprietor, Marcella Lubriski. Whenever the joint would start to waver, Marcella would kick it back up to level by the toe of her stiletto heel.

She was a product of her country and her time, part Czech, part Slavic, with a drop of Russian and a whiff of German in the blood. When the Communists had taken over, she’d gathered up her two young children, told her husband to go or stay, and fled to Australia, as it seemed just far enough away.

She’d had no English, no contacts, the equivalent of two hundred dollars tucked in her bra and, as her husband had opted to remain in Prague, no father for her babies.

What she’d had was spine, a shrewd mind and a body fashioned for wet dreams. She’d put all of them to use in a strip joint in Sydney, taking it off for the drunk and the lonely and ruthlessly banking her meager pay as well as her substantial tips.

She’d learned to love the Aussies for their generosity, their humor and their easy acceptance of the outcast. She saw that her children were well fed, and if she occasionally took a private job to see that they also had good shoes, it was only sex.

Within five years, she had enough socked away to invest in a small club with partners. She still stripped, she still sold her body when it suited her. Within ten years, she’d bought out her partners and retired from the stage.

By the time the wall came down, Marcella owned the club in Sydney, one in Melbourne, a percentage of an office complex and a good chunk of a residential apartment

building. She'd been pleased to see the Communists ousted from the land of her birth, but had given the matter little thought.

At first.

But she'd begun to wonder and, to her surprise, to yearn to hear her own language spoken in the streets, to see the domes and bridges of her own city. Leaving her son and daughter in charge of her Australian holdings, Marcella flew back to Prague for what she assumed would be a sentimental journey.

But the businesswoman in her smelled opportunity, and opportunities were not to be wasted. Prague would once more be a city that mixed Old World and New, would once again become the Paris of Eastern Europe. That meant commerce, tourist dollars, and getting in on the ground floor.

She bought property—a small, atmospheric hotel; a quaint, traditional restaurant. And, out of that sentiment for both her homelands, she opened Down Under.

She ran a clean place with healthy girls. She didn't mind if they took private jobs. She knew very well that sex often paid for the extras that made life bearable. But if there was a hint of drug use, employee or customer, the offender was shown the door.

There were no second chances at Down Under.

She developed a cordial relationship with the local police, regularly attended the opera and became a patron of the arts. She watched her city come to life again, with color, with music and with money.

Though she claimed she intended to return to Sydney, years passed. And she stayed.

At sixty, she maintained the body that had made her fortune, dressed in the latest Paris fashions and could spot a troublemaker at ten yards in the dark.

When Gideon Sullivan walked in, she gave him one long stare. Too handsome for his own good, she decided. And his gaze scanned the room rather than the stage, looking for something other than pretty, bouncing breasts.

Or someone.

THE CLUB WAS slicker than he'd expected. There was plenty of bass-heavy techno music blaring, and lights flashing in concert. Onstage a trio of women were performing some sort of routine on long silver poles.

He supposed some men liked to imagine their dick as the pole, but Gideon could think of better uses for his than having a woman hanging upside down on it.

There were plenty of tables, all of them occupied. The ones nearest the stage were jammed with both men and women sipping drinks and watching the naked acrobatics.

Hazy blue smoke fogged in the light streams, but the smell of whiskey and beer was no more offensive than in his own local pub. A lot of the clientele wore black, and a lot of the black was leather, but there were enough obvious couples to make him wonder why a man would bring a date along to watch other women strip.

Though the place was somehow more middle-class than the dive he and Malachi had spent one memorable evening in on a trip to London, he was glad his mother had sent him, over Rebecca's furious objections, rather than his sister.

This was no place for a young woman of good family.

Though apparently Cleo Toliver found it suitable enough.

He moved to the bar, ordered a beer. He could see the dancers, down to G-strings and tattoos now as they swung in unison on their poles, in the mirrors behind it.

He took out a cigarette, struck a match and considered his best approach. He preferred the direct route whenever possible.

As applause and whistles broke out, he gestured to the bartender. "Cleo Toliver working tonight?"

"Why?"

"Family connection."

The man didn't respond to Gideon's easy smile, but only mopped at the bar, shrugged. "She's around." And moved off before Gideon could ask where.

So I'll wait, Gideon thought. There were worse ways for a man to spend his time than watching well-built women peel off their clothes.

“You looking for one of my girls?”

Gideon turned from the performer who was currently crawling over the stage like a cat. The woman who stood beside him was nearly as tall as he was. Her hair was Harlow blonde and coiled in complicated, lacquered twists. She wore a business suit, without a blouse, and the milky tops of her rather amazing breasts spilled out between the lapels.

He felt a twinge of guilt for noticing them when he looked at her face and realized she was more than old enough to be his mother.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m looking for Cleo Toliver.”

Marcella’s brows lifted at the polite address, and she signaled for a drink. “Why?”

“Begging your pardon. I’d rather speak to Miss Toliver about that, if it’s all the same to you.”

Without glancing at the bar, Marcella lifted the neat scotch she knew would be there. Might be handsome as sin, she mused, and have the look of a man who could handle himself in a fight. But he’d been raised to be respectful to his elders.

While she didn’t necessarily trust such niceties, she appreciated them.

“You cause trouble for one of my girls, I cause trouble for you.”

“I’d as soon avoid trouble altogether.”

“See you do. Cleo is the next act.” She downed her scotch, set down the empty and strolled away on her ice-pick heels.

She made her way backstage, through the smell of perfume, sweat and face paint. Her dancers shared one room lined on both sides with long mirrors and communal counters. Each made her own nest out of a section, so that the counters were a messy sea of cosmetics, pasties, stuffed toys and candy. Photographs of boyfriends, film stars and the occasional toddler were pasted to the mirrors.

As usual, the room was a gaggle of languages, of bitching, gossip and complaints. Complaints ranged from cheap tips, cheating lovers and menstrual cramps to aching feet.

In the midst of it, like a cool island, Cleo stood putting the last pins in her long, sable-colored hair. She was friendly enough with the other girls, Marcella thought, but not friends with them. She did her work and did it well, collected her money and went home alone.

So, Marcella remembered, had she in her time.

“There is a man asking about you.”

Cleo’s eyes, a deep, dark brown, met Marcella’s in the mirror. “Asking what?”

“Just asking. He’s handsome, maybe thirty, Irish. Dark hair, blue eyes. Well mannered.”

Cleo shrugged shoulders currently covered in a conservative gray pin-striped suit jacket. “I don’t know anyone like that.”

“He asked for you by name, told Karl you were a family connection.”

Cleo leaned forward to slick murderous red over her lips. “I don’t think so.”

“You in trouble?”

She shot the cuffs of the tailored white shirt she wore under the jacket. “No.”

“If he gives you any, just signal to Karl. He’ll show him out.” Marcella nodded. “The Irishman’s at the bar. You won’t miss him.”

Cleo slipped into the spike-heeled black pumps that completed her costume. “Thanks. I can handle him.”

“I think this is so.” Marcella laid a hand on her shoulder briefly, then moved on to break up an argument between two of the dancers over a red-spangled bra.

If she was concerned someone had come in and asked for her by name, Cleo didn’t show it. She was, after all, a professional. Whether dancing *Swan Lake* or peeling it off for Euro-trash, there were professional standards for a performer.

I don’t know any Irishmen, she thought as she clipped out to wait for her cue. And she certainly didn’t buy that anyone remotely connected to her family would trouble themselves to ask about her. Even if they’d tripped over her bleeding body in the street.

Probably just some asshole, she decided, who’d gotten

her name from another customer and thought he might wrangle a cheap boink from an American stripper.

He was going to go home disappointed.

As her music came up, she pushed all thoughts but her routine out of her head. She counted the beats, and when the lights flashed on, Cleo erupted onto the stage.

At the bar, Gideon's hand froze in the act of lifting his beer.

She was dressed like a man. Though no one would mistake her for one, he admitted. Not if you were blind and on the back of a galloping horse. But there was something primitively erotic about the way she moved inside that traditional pin-striped suit.

The music was hot, edgy American rock, and her lighting a steamy and smoky blue. He found it clever and ironic that she'd select Bruce Springsteen's "Cover Me" to strip to.

She knew what she was about, he realized as she tugged the tailored jacket off her shoulders, moving, always moving, pulled it off.

While the others on the stage had been spinning or sliding, shaking or shimmying, this one was dancing. Sharp, complicated moves that demonstrated genuine style and talent.

Though when, with one of those sharp moves, she ripped the breakaway trousers aside, he lost track of the style for a moment.

Christ, she had legs, didn't she?

She used the poles as well, doing three fast circles with those long legs cocked up. Her hair tumbled free, past her shoulders in a straight rainfall of rich brown. He didn't see how she opened the shirt, but it was flying around her now, revealing a scrap of black lace over high, firm breasts.

He tried to tell himself they were likely manufactured, and either way they had nothing to do with him. But he found saliva pooling in his mouth when she stripped off the shirt.

To clear his throat, he sipped his beer, and watched her. She'd made him from her first turn. She couldn't see

him clearly, and wasn't concerned enough to worry about it. But she knew he was there, and that his attention was on her.

That was fine. That's what she got paid for.

With her back to the audience, she slid a hand down her back, flicked open the catch of her bra. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she spun back. There was a light dew of sweat on her skin now, and a small grin—ice cold—on her lips as she made eye contact with the men in the audience she'd deemed most likely to part with folded money.

She tossed her hair back and, wearing nothing but the heels and a black G-string, lowered to a crouch so they could see what they were paying for.

She ignored the fingers sliding over her hips and registered the money tucked under the G-string.

She eased back when one overenthusiastic patron reached for her. In a move that could have been mistaken for playful, she wagged a finger at him. And thought, Asshole.

She came up in a one-armed backbend, then using her legs surged to her feet.

She played the other side of the stage in much the same way. But here she got a better look at the man at the bar. Their eyes met, held for two beats. He held up a bill, cocked his head.

Then he went back to sipping his beer.

SHE WISHED SHE'D been able to make out the denomination of the bill. But she thought it might be worth five minutes of her time to find out how much he'd pay.

Still, she took her time, cooled off in the shower, then pulled on jeans and a T-shirt. It was a rare thing for her to go out into the club after a performance, but she trusted Karl and the other muscle Marcella kept on tap to keep her from being hassled.

In any case, most of the patrons kept their attention on-stage, toward the fantasy sex, rather than scoping out the real women in the area.

Except for Slick, she thought, at the bar. He wasn't

watching the stage. Though in her professional opinion the current act was one of the more creative ones. His gaze stayed on her as she crossed to the bar. And on her face—which she gave him points for—rather than on her tits.

“You want something, Slick?”

Her voice surprised him. It was smooth and silky and without any of the hard edge he’d expected from a woman in her line of work.

Her face did credit to her body. It was hot and sultry with those dark, almond-shaped eyes and the full, red-slicked mouth. There was a little mole, a beauty mark, he supposed you called it, just at the lower end of her right eyebrow.

Her skin was dusky, adding a touch of erotic gypsy.

She smelled of soap—another illusion shattered. And sipped idly from a tall bottle of water.

“I do if you’re Cleo Toliver.”

She leaned back on the bar. She wore tennis shoes now rather than heels, but the jeans were black and molded tight to her hips and legs.

“I don’t do private parties.”

“Do you talk?”

“When I have something to say. Who gave you my name?”

Gideon merely showed her the bill again, watched her gaze flick on it and narrow in speculation. “I think this should buy an hour’s conversation.”

“It might.” She’d reserve judgment on whether or not he was a moron, but at least he wasn’t cheap. She reached for the bill, annoyed when he moved it just out of reach.

“What time do you finish here?”

“Two. Look, why don’t you just tell me what you want, and I’ll tell you if I’m interested.”

“Conversation,” he said again and tore the bill in half. He handed her one part, pocketed the other. “If you want the rest of it, meet me after closing. The coffee shop in the Wenceslas Hotel. I’ll wait till two-thirty. If you don’t show, we’re both out fifty pounds.”

He finished his beer, set down the glass. “It was an entertaining performance, Miss Toliver, and lucrative from

the looks of it. But it's not every day you can make fifty pounds by sitting down and having a cup of coffee."

She frowned when he turned to walk away. "You got a name, Slick?"

"Sullivan. Gideon Sullivan. You've got till two-thirty."

Four

CLEO never missed a cue. But neither did she believe in giving her audience the appearance she'd rushed to hit one. Theater was rooted in illusions. And life, like the big guy had said, was just a bigger stage.

She strolled toward the coffee shop at two minutes to deadline.

If some jerk with a pretty face and a sexy voice wanted to pay her for some conversation, that was fine by her. She'd already determined the exchange rate from Irish pounds to Czech koruna, using the little calculator she carried in her bag to figure it to the last haleru. In her current position, the money would go a very long way.

She didn't intend to make her living stripping off her clothes for a bunch of suckers for long. The fact was, she'd never intended to make her living, however temporary, dancing naked in a Prague strip club.

But she'd been stupid, Cleo could admit. She'd walked straight into a con, blinded by good looks and a clever line. And when a girl was flat-ass busted in Eastern Europe, in a city where she could barely manage the simplest phrase in the guidebook, she did what she could to make ends meet.

She had one thing on her side, she thought now. She never made the same mistake twice.

In that regard, at least, she was not her mother's daughter.

The little restaurant was brightly lit, and there were a few patrons scattered around the tables having coffee or a late meal. The company, such as it was, was a plus. Not that she was particularly worried about the Irish guy making a move on her. She could handle herself.

She spotted him at a corner booth, drinking coffee and reading a book, with a cigarette smoking away in a black plastic ashtray. With those dark, romantic looks, she thought, he'd pass for some kind of artist, a writer maybe. No, she decided, a poet. Some struggling poet who wrote dark, esoteric free verse and had come to the great city for inspiration as others had before him.

Looks, she thought with a smirk, were always deceiving.

He glanced up as she slid into the booth across from him. His eyes, a deep and crystal blue in the poetic face, were the type that shot straight to a woman's glands.

Good thing, Cleo acknowledged, she was immune.

"You cut it close," he commented and continued to read.

She merely shrugged, then turned to the waitress who stepped up to the booth. "Coffee. Three eggs, scrambled. Bacon. Toast. Thanks." Cleo smiled when she saw Gideon studying her over the top of his book. "I'm hungry."

"I suppose what you do works up an appetite."

He marked his place, set the book aside. Yeats, Cleo noted. It figured.

"That's the point, isn't it? Working up appetites." She stretched out her legs as the waitress poured her coffee. "How did you like my act?"

"It's better than most." She hadn't removed her stage makeup. In the bright lights she looked both hard and sexy. He imagined she knew it. Had planned it. "Why do you do it?"

"Unless you're a Broadway scout, Slick, that's my business." Watching him, she lifted a hand, rubbed her thumb and two fingers together.

Gideon took the half bill out of his pocket, then slid it under his book. "Talk first." He'd already outlined how he wanted to approach the matter with her and had decided the direct—well, fairly direct—route would work best.

“You have an ancestor on your mother’s side. A Simon White-Smythe.”

More puzzled than interested, Cleo sipped her coffee, strong and black. “So?”

“He was a collector, art and artifacts. There was a piece in his collection, a small silver statue of a woman. Greek style. I represent a party that’s interested in obtaining that statue.”

Cleo said nothing as her breakfast was served. The scent of food, particularly food she wasn’t going to have to pay for, put her in a cooperative mood.

She scooped up a bite of egg, picked up a slice of bacon. “Why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah. This client got a reason for wanting some little silver woman?”

“Sentimental reasons, primarily. There was a man back in 1915 who was traveling to London to purchase it from your ancestor. He made an unwise choice in his mode of transportation,” Gideon added as he helped himself to Cleo’s bacon. “And booked passage on the *Lusitania*. He went down with it.”

Cleo studied the selection of jams and settled on black currant. She slathered a slice of toast generously as her mind worked through the story.

Her grandmother on her mother’s side, the one family member who’d been human and humorous, had been a White-Smythe by birth. So his story gelled, as far as it went.

“Your interested party’s waited over eighty years to track down this statue?”

“Some are more sentimental than others,” he said evenly. “You could say this man’s fate was determined by that small statue. My job is to locate it and, if it remains in your family, to offer a reasonable price for it.”

“Why me? Why not contact my mother? You’re a generation closer that way.”

“You were closer geographically. But if you’ve no knowledge of the piece, that’s my next step.”

“Your client sounds pretty screwy, Slick.” Her lips

curved as she bit into her toast. Her eyebrows winged up, making the beauty mark a velvet period on a sexy exclamation point. "What's his definition of a reasonable price?"

"I'm authorized to offer five hundred."

"Pounds?"

"Pounds."

Jesus, Jesus, she thought as she continued to eat with every appearance of calm. That kind of money would fatten her get-out-of-Dodge fund. More, it would help her get back to the States without losing face.

But the man must have tagged her as an idiot if he thought she was buying his story from top to bottom.

"A silver statue?"

"Of a woman," he said, "about six inches high, holding a kind of measuring spool. Do you know it or not?"

"Don't rush me." She signaled for more coffee and continued to plow her way through the eggs. "I might have seen it. My family has a lot of dust catchers, and my grandmother was the world title holder. I can check on it, if you add another fifty to that," she said with a nod toward the note sticking out from under Yeats.

"Don't wind me up, Cleo."

"A girl's got to make a living. And the extra fifty's less than it would cost your client to send you to the States. Plus, my family's more likely to cooperate with me than a stranger."

Which is bullshit, of course, she thought.

Considering his options, Gideon slid the half bill across the table. "You'll get the other fifty if and when you earn it."

"Come by the club tomorrow night." She plucked up the bill, stuffed it into her jeans pocket.

Not an easy feat, Gideon mused, as those jeans appeared to be painted on.

"Bring the money." She slid out of the booth. "Thanks for the eggs, Slick."

"Cleo." He closed a hand over hers, squeezed just hard enough to be sure he had her attention. "You try to hose me, it's going to make me irritable."

“I’ll remember that.” She tossed him an easy grin, tugged her hand free, then strolled out with a deliberate swing of hips.

She made a statement, Gideon mused. Any man with a single red corpuscle would want to fuck her. But only a fool would trust her.

Eileen Sullivan hadn’t raised any fools.

CLEO WENT STRAIGHT to her apartment, though calling the single room an apartment was like calling a Twinkie a fine dessert. You had to be either really young or stupidly optimistic.

Her clothes were hung on the iron rod that was screwed into a water-stained wall, stuffed into the banana-crate-sized dresser with its missing drawer, or tossed where they landed. She’d decided the problem with growing up with a maid was you never learned to be tidy.

Even with its single dresser, cot-sized bed and lopsided table, the room was crowded. But it was cheap and boasted its own bath. Such as it was.

While the room wasn’t to her taste—and she was neither really young nor in any way optimistic—she could cover the weekly rent with one night’s tips.

She’d installed the dead bolt lock herself after one of her neighbors had tried to muscle his way into her room for a free show. It gave her a considerable sense of security.

She switched on the light, tossed her purse aside. She went to the dresser, pawing her way through the top drawer. She’d had a considerable wardrobe when she’d landed in Prague, and a great deal of it had been new lingerie.

Bought, she thought viciously as she shoved through silk and lace, to delight one Sidney Walter. The prick. Then again, when a woman let herself spend a couple grand on undies because she was hot for a man, she deserved getting screwed. In every possible sense.

Sidney had certainly obliged her, Cleo thought now. Heating up the sheets in the presidential suite of the priciest hotel in Prague, then strolling away with all her cash and her jewelry and leaving her with a hefty hotel bill.

Leaving her, she added, flat broke and mortified.

Still, Sidney wasn't the only one who could cash in on an opportunity when it slapped him in the face. She smiled to herself as she yanked out a pair of athletic socks, unrolled them.

The little silver statue she uncovered was badly tarnished, but she remembered what it looked like when it was shiny and clean. Smiling to herself, Cleo rubbed a thumb over the face with absent affection.

"You don't much look like my ticket out of here," she murmured. "But we'll see."

SHE DIDN'T SHOW until nearly two the following afternoon. Gideon had just about given up on her. As it was, he nearly didn't recognize her when she finally came out into the broiling sunlight.

She wore jeans, a low-cut black top that offered peeks of her midriff. So it was her body he made out first. She'd pulled her hair back in a thick braid, shielded her eyes with dark, wraparound glasses and, walking briskly in some sort of thick-soled black boots, melded with pedestrian traffic.

About damn time, he thought as he followed her. He'd been stuck kicking his heels for hours waiting for her. Here he was in one of the most beautiful, most cultured cities in Eastern Europe, and he couldn't risk the time to see anything.

He wanted to drop in on the Mucha exhibit, to study the Art Nouveau foyer of the Main Station, to wander among the artists on the Charles bridge. Because the woman apparently slept half the day, he'd had to make do with reading a guidebook.

She didn't window-shop, never paused at the displays of crystal or garnets that flashed in the brilliant sunlight. She walked steadily, down sidewalks, over the cobbled bricks of squares and gave her shadow little time to admire the domes, the baroque architecture or the Gothic towers.

She stopped once at a sidewalk kiosk and bought a large

bottle of water, which she stuffed in the oversized purse on her shoulder.

Gideon regretted, when she kept up the clipped pace and the sweat began to run down his back, that he hadn't followed her lead.

He cheered a bit when he realized she was heading toward the river. Maybe he'd get a look at the Charles after all.

They passed pretty, painted shops thronged with tourists, restaurants where people sat under umbrella tables and cooled off with chilled drinks or ice cream, and still those long legs of hers climbed steadily up the steep slope to the bridge.

The breeze off the water did little to bring relief, and the view, while spectacular, didn't explain what the hell she was doing. She didn't so much as glance at the grandeur of Prague Castle or the cathedral, never paused to lean on the rail and contemplate the water and the boats that plied it. She certainly didn't stop to haggle with the artists.

She crossed the bridge and kept going.

He was trying to decide if she was heading to the castle, and if so why the hell she hadn't taken a bloody bus, when she veered off and walked breezily downhill to the street of tiny cottages where the king's goldsmiths and alchemists had once lived.

They were shops now, naturally, but that didn't detract from the charm of low doorways, narrow windows and faded colors. She cut through the tourists and tour groups as the uneven stone street climbed again.

She turned again, walked onto the patio of a little restaurant and plopped down at a table.

Before he could decide what to do next, she turned around in her chair and waved at him. "Buy me a beer," she called out.

He ground his teeth as she turned away again, stretched out her long, apparently tireless legs, then signaled to the waiter by holding up two fingers.

When he sat across from her, she offered a wide smile. "Pretty hot today, huh?"

"What the hell was this all about?"

“What? Oh this? I figured if you were going to follow me around, the least I could do was show you a little of the city. I was planning to hike up to the castle, but . . .” She tipped down her glasses and studied his face. It was a little sweaty, a lot pissed off, and down-to-the-ground gorgeous. “I figured you could use a beer about now.”

“If you’d wanted to play tour guide, you could’ve picked a nice cool museum or cathedral.”

“Hot and cranky, are we?” She tipped her sunglasses back in place. “If you felt compelled to follow me, you could’ve asked me to show you around today and bought me lunch.”

“Do you think about anything but eating?”

“I need a lot of protein. I said I’d meet up with you tonight. You tailing me like this makes me think you don’t trust me.”

He said nothing, just stared at her stonily as the beers were served and he downed half of his in one long swallow.

“What do you know about the statue?” he said when he set his glass down.

“Enough to figure you wouldn’t have followed me on a two-mile jaunt in high summer if it wasn’t worth a lot more to you than five hundred pounds. So here’s what I want.” She paused, snagged the waiter again and ordered another round of beer and a strawberry sundae.

“You can’t eat ice cream with beer,” Gideon said.

“Sure you can. That’s the beauty of ice cream; it goes with anything, any time. Anyway, back to business. I want five thousand, USD, and a first-class ticket back to New York.”

He lifted his glass again and polished off the first beer. “You’re not going to get it.”

“Fine. Then you don’t get the girl.”

“I can get you a thousand, once I see the girl. And maybe five hundred more when she’s in my hands. That’s the cap.”

“I don’t think so.” She clucked her tongue when he pulled out his cigarettes. “Sucking on those is why you had trouble with an afternoon stroll.”

“Afternoon stroll, my ass.” He blew out a stream of

smoke while the fresh beers and her ice cream were served. "You eat like that on a regular basis, you're going to be fat as a hog."

"Metabolism," she said with a mouthful of ice cream. "Mine runs like a rabbit. What's the name of your client?"

"You don't need names, and you needn't think they'll deal with you directly. You go through me, Cleo."

"Five thousand," she said again and licked her spoon. "And a first-class flight back home. You come up with that, I'll get you the statue."

"I told you not to hose me."

"She's wearing a robe, right shoulder bared, with her hair in a curly updo. She's wearing sandals, and she's smiling. Just a little. Sort of pensive."

He closed a hand over her wrist. "I don't negotiate till I see her."

"You don't see her till you negotiate." He had good, strong hands. She appreciated that in a man. There were enough calluses on them to tell her he worked with them and didn't make his living hunting up art pieces for sentimental clients.

"You've got to get me home if you want her, don't you?" It was reasonable. She'd spent time working out the reasonable angles. "To go home, I've got to quit my job, so I need enough money to tide me over until I get another one back in New York."

"I imagine there're plenty of titty bars in New York."

"Yeah." Her voice chilled. "I imagine there are."

"It's your choice of profession, Cleo, so spare me the hurt feelings. I need proof she exists, that you know where she is and that you can acquire her. We don't move forward on terms until that time."

"Fine, you'll get your proof. Pay the check, Slick. It's a long walk back."

He waved a hand for the waiter and reached for his wallet. "We'll have a taxi."

SHE BROODED OUT the side window of the taxi on the drive back. Her feelings weren't hurt, she told herself. She

did honest work, didn't she? Hard, honest work. What did she care if some Irish jerk looked down his nose at her?

He didn't know anything about her, who she was, what she was, what she needed. If he thought her feelings got bruised because of one rude comment, he was underestimating her.

She'd spent nearly her entire life as an outcast from her own family. A stranger's opinion didn't matter to her.

She'd get him his proof, and he'd pay her price. She'd sell him the statue. She didn't know why the hell she'd kept the damn thing all these years anyway.

Good luck for her she had, she decided. The little lady was going to get her home and give her some breathing space until she snagged a few auditions.

She'd have to shine the thing up. Then she'd sweet-talk Marcella into letting her use that little digital camera and the computer. She'd take a picture, then send it through, print it out. Sullivan wouldn't know where it came from, and he'd never guess she had what he wanted tucked in her purse for safekeeping.

Figured he was dealing with a loser, did he? Well, he was sure going to find out different.

She shifted as they made the turn toward her building. "Come by the club," she said without looking at him. "Bring cash. We'll do business."

"Cleo." He clamped a hand on her wrist as she pushed open the cab door. "I apologize."

"For what?"

"For making an insulting comment."

"Forget it." She climbed out, headed straight toward her building. Funny, she thought, the apology had gotten under her skin even more than the insult.

She turned on her heel and headed down the block again without going back to her apartment. She'd go to the club a little early, she decided. After a quick stop for some silver polish.

IT WAS STILL shy of seven when she walked in. She skirted the stage and headed down the short hall that led to

Marcella's office. Marcella answered the knock with a quick bark that made Cleo wince.

Asking Marcella for a favor was always problematic, but asking when Marcella was in a snarly mood could be downright dangerous.

Still, Cleo poked her head into the ruthlessly organized office. "Sorry to interrupt."

"If you were sorry, you would not interrupt." Marcella continued to hammer at the computer keyboard on her desk. "I have work. I am a businesswoman."

"Yes, I know."

"What do you know? You dance, you strip. This is not business. Business is papers and figures and brains," she said, tapping a finger on the side of her head. "Anybody can strip."

"Sure, but not everybody can strip so people will pay to watch. Your door's increased since I stepped onstage and took my clothes off in here."

Marcella peered over the straight rims of her half-glasses. "You want raise?"

"Sure."

"Then you're stupid to ask for one when I'm busy and in bad mood."

"But I didn't," Cleo pointed out, and closed the door behind her. "You asked. I just want a favor. A very small favor."

"No extra night off this week."

"I don't want a night off. In fact, I'll trade you an extra hour onstage for the favor."

Now Marcella gave Cleo her full attention. The books could wait. "I thought it was a small favor."

"It is, but it could be important to me. I just want to borrow your digital camera for one picture, and your computer to send it. It'll take, what, ten minutes. You get an hour back. That's a good trade."

"You send a picture out for another job? You want to use my things to get work in another club?"

"No, it's not for a job. Christ." Cleo huffed out a breath. "Look, you gave me a break when I was in trouble. You gave me some professional pointers and helped me

through the first night's queasies. You dealt straight with me. You deal straight with everybody. Going behind your back to a competitor isn't how I pay that back."

Marcella pursed her slick red lips, nodded. "What do you need to take a picture of?"

"It's just a thing. It's a business deal." When Marcella's gaze narrowed, Cleo sighed. "It's not illegal. I've got something someone wants to buy, but I don't trust him enough to let him know I've got it with me." At Marcella's steely stare, Cleo dug into her bag. "Nag, nag, nag," she muttered under her breath.

"There is nothing wrong with my hearing or my English."

"This." Cleo held up the newly polished statue.

"Let me see." Marcella wagged a finger until Cleo walked over and put it in her hand. "Silver. Very nice. Needs polishing."

"I got most of the gunk off."

"You should care better for your things. Sloppy. This is pretty," she mused and tapped at it with a red-slicked fingernail. "Solid silver?"

"Yeah, it's solid."

"Where do you get?"

"It's been in my family for years. I've had it since I was a kid."

"And this man—the Irishman," she assumed. "He wants it."

"Apparently."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. He's got a story that may or may not be true. Doesn't matter to me. I've got it, he'll pay for it. Can I use the equipment?"

"Yes, yes. This is an heirloom?" Marcella frowned as she turned the statue over in her palm. "You would sell your heirloom?"

"Heirlooms only count if family counts."

Marcella set the statue on the desk, where it glinted in the lamplight. "That is a hard heart, Cleo."

"Maybe." Cleo waited while Marcella unlocked a desk drawer, took out the camera. "But it's also a hard truth."

“Get your picture, then put on your costume. You can put in the extra hour now.”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Cleo zipped up the tight black leather skirt that went with the bustier and silver-studded black jacket. The little whip worked well with the outfit, and Cleo gave it a testing flick that made the other girls jump and bitch at her.

“Sorry.” Turning to the mirror, she straightened the dog collar she’d strapped around her neck and ran a hand over the hair she’d sleeked back into a tight bun at the base of her neck.

A couple of good head shakes would free it, so she’d have to be careful it didn’t tumble down off cue. She added a little more black eyeliner, then practiced pivots and pliés in the high-heeled boots.

She was executing a spread-leg squat, shifting her weight from side to side, when Gideon burst in. Several of the girls called out comments or made kissing noises.

“Let’s go.” He snagged her hand and hauled her to her feet.

“Go?”

“Let’s move. I’ll explain later.”

“I’m on in three minutes.”

“Not tonight you’re not.” When he started to drag her to the door, she shifted her body, angled it, and jammed an elbow into his gut.

“Hands off.”

“Goddamn it.” He’d think about the pain later, and how to pay her back for it. But for now he caught his breath as the others in the dressing area cheered and whistled. “They’ve already been to your place. Your landlady’s in the hospital with a concussion. They can’t be more than five minutes behind me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” She took a step back from him. Another. “Who’s been to my place?”

“Somebody who wants a particular item and isn’t as nice as I am about how they get it.” He grabbed her arm

again. "They slapped your landlady around before they bashed her in the head. You want to wait for them to try it with you, or are you coming with me? You've got ten seconds to decide."

Impulse, Cleo thought, had always gotten her in trouble. Why should tonight be any different? She snagged her purse. "Let's go."

He moved fast, heading out into the corridor, then dragging her to the right. "No, not out the front," he said. "They could already be out there. We'll go out the back."

"Back door locks from the inside. We go out that way, and there's trouble, we can't get back in."

He nodded, then opened the back door far enough to look out. The alleyway dead-ended to the left, and didn't that just figure. But he could see nothing and no one at the mouth of it. "How fast can you move in those things?" he asked, gesturing toward the boots.

"I can keep up with you, Slick."

"Then move." He pulled her out, kept a hand like a vise on her arm as he jogged down to where the alley opened onto the street. When they came out on the street, he shot a quick glance in either direction, swore and turned a hard right. He slid an arm around her waist.

"Just keep walking. Two men across the street. One heading toward the club, the other for the alley. Don't look back!"

But she already had, and made out both of them quickly enough. "We could take them."

"Christ. Just walk. If we're lucky, they didn't see us come out that way."

At the corner he glanced back. "So much for luck." He switched his grip to her hand. "Here's your chance to prove you can keep up."

He ran, and when they were halfway down the block, yanked her out in the street and across traffic. Brakes squealed, horns blasted. Cleo felt the wind from a fender that missed her by inches.

"You crazy son-of-a-bitch." But when she looked back she saw a man trying to thread his way between cars. She

didn't slow down. The heels of her boots skidded and slipped over the uneven bricks. If she could have spared ten seconds, she'd have dragged them off and run barefoot.

"There's only one," she called out. "There are two of us."

"The other's somewhere." Following instinct, he pulled her into a restaurant, raced with her past a number of startled diners and through the kitchen and out the back onto the narrow street.

"Oh baby." It was nearly a prayer when he spotted the sleek black motorcycle parked against the back of the building. "Give me a hairpin."

"You start that thing with a hairpin, I'll kiss your ass." But panting a bit, she dragged one out of her hair.

Her hair tumbled free as he used the pin to pry off the ignition box. Within ten seconds, he had it hot-wired and was swinging his leg over.

"Get on. You can kiss my ass at a more private moment."

Her skirt hiked up to crotch level as she climbed on so her black G-string pressed snug against his butt. He ignored that, as best he could, and the way her breasts pressed into his back as he whipped the bike into a tight circle and flew toward the mouth of the alley with the roar of a serious engine.

She strapped her arms around him and let out a whoop when they shot down the street. At the corner, he nearly ran over the toes of the man who'd pursued them. Cleo got a good, close look at his shocked and furious face, and laughed wildly as Gideon leaned into the turn.

"They've got a car!" she called out, straining to see behind her as the wind whipped her hair into her face. "The other guy must've gotten the car, the one you nearly creamed's getting in it."

"That's all right." Gideon swung around another corner, punched it, then bulleted down the first side street. "We'll lose them on this."

Using the map in his head, he maneuvered out of the city. He wanted an open road, the dark, and the quiet. He wanted five damn minutes to think.

"Hey, Slick." Her voice was close to his ear. He could smell her, a pungent and erotic combination of female and

leather. He could be sure now that her breasts, and they were beauties, were the ones God had given her.

“What? I’ve got to concentrate here.”

“You just go right ahead. I wanted you to know I’m not interested in the five thousand anymore.”

“You don’t sell that statue to me, they’ll keep after you.”

“We’ll talk about the why of that when we’re not so busy.” She looked behind her, at the lights and glow of Prague. “But the five thousand’s off the table.” She leaned into him again. “Because I just became your fuck-ing partner.”

To seal the deal she nipped lightly at his ear. And laughed.

Five

“**Y**OU lost track of them.”

Anita Gaye leaned back against the butter-soft leather of her desk chair and examined her manicure. The phone call did not please her.

“Were my instructions unclear?” she asked in a low, silky voice. “Which part of ‘locate the woman and find out what she knows’ didn’t you understand?”

Excuses, she thought as she listened to her employee’s apologetic explanation. Incompetence. It was really very annoying.

“Mr. Jasper?” she interrupted in the most pleasant of tones. “I believe I told you ‘by any means.’ Do you need a definition of that phrase? No? Well then, I suggest you find them, and quickly, or I’ll be forced to think you’re not half as clever as a second-rate Irish tour guide.”

She broke the connection, then to calm herself swiveled in the chair to gaze out at her view of New York. She enjoyed being able to watch the noise and bustle of the city, while being removed from it.

She enjoyed more knowing she could leave her plush corner of the elegant brownstone, stroll directly onto Madison Avenue, wander into any of the tony shops and have whatever her whim dictated.

And be recognized, admired, envied, as she did so.

There had been a time, not so many years before, when she'd been out there on the streets, rushing over the pavement, hounded with worries about rent payments, credit card bills and how to stretch her paycheck into one more good pair of shoes.

Standing with her nose pressed to the window, she thought now, knowing she was better, smarter, worthier than any of the ladies-who-shopped inside that cool, fragrant air, trailing pampered fingers over hand-stitched silks.

She'd never had a doubt she'd be on the other side, the *right* side of the glass. She'd never had a doubt she was meant to be.

She'd had something a great many of the workforce lacked as they'd scrambled to their next hive. A towering ambition and a nearly violent belief in self. She'd never intended to work her life away just to put a roof over her head.

Unless the roof was spectacular.

She'd always had a plan. A woman, Anita thought as she pushed back from the rosewood desk, was a man's toy, his doormat or his punching bag if she didn't have a plan. And most often, a combination of the three.

With a plan, and the brains to implement it, he became hers.

She'd worked hard to get where she was. If marrying a man old enough to be her grandfather wasn't work, she didn't know the meaning of the word. When a twenty-five-year-old woman had sex with a sixty-six-year-old man, the woman—by God—worked.

She'd given Paul Morningside his money's worth. For twelve long, laborious years. Dutiful wife, faithful assistant, elegant hostess and live-in whore. He'd died a happy man. And not a minute, in Anita's estimation, too soon.

Morningside Antiquities was hers now.

Because it always entertained her, she took a turn around her office, letting her heels sink into the faded wool of the Bokara carpet, click lightly on polished wood. She'd selected every piece personally, from the George III settee to the T'ang horse riding on a shelf of the Regency breakfront.

It was a mix of styles and eras that appealed to her, an elegant and distinctly female melding, all in superior taste. She'd learned a great deal from Paul, about value, continuity and perfection.

The colors were soft. She saved the bold and splashy for other areas, but her downtown office was done in quiet female tones. The better to seduce clients and competitors.

Best of all, she thought as she picked up an opal snuff box, everything in the room had once belonged to someone else.

There was such a thrill in possessing what had been another's. It was, to her mind, a kind of theft. A legal one. Even a distinguished one. What could be more exciting?

She was perfectly aware that after fifteen years, three of them as head of Morningside, some continued to consider her little more than a gold digger.

They were wrong.

There had been gossip, there had been snide comments when Paul Morningside had fallen for a woman more than forty years his junior.

Some had passed her off as a bimbo.

They'd been very wrong.

She had been, and was, a beautiful woman who knew exactly how to exploit her attributes. Her hair was flame-red, and at forty, she wore it in a sleek, chin-length sweep to play up smooth, round cheeks and a full, deceptively soft mouth. Her eyes were bright blue and Kewpie-doll wide. Many who'd looked into them found them guileless.

They were wrong, too.

She had pale, flawless skin, a small, streamlined nose. And a body a former lover had described as a walking wet dream.

She presented the package carefully. Tailored suits for business, fashionably elegant gowns for social occasions. Throughout her marriage she'd been meticulous about her behavior, public and private. There might have been some who whispered, but there were no whiffs of scandal, no questionable behavior attached to Anita Gaye.

Some might continue to look askance, but they accepted her invitations, and they issued them to her in re-

turn. They patronized her company, and paid well for the privilege.

Inside the package was the brain of a born operator. Anita Gaye was the dedicated widow, the society hostess, the respected businesswoman. She intended to live the part for the rest of her days.

It was, she mused, the longest con on record.

Gold digger, she thought with a quiet laugh. Oh no, it had never been just about money. It had been about position and power and prestige.

It was no more about dollars and cents than owning something was about filling space on a shelf. It was about status.

She crossed to a Corot landscape, pushed a mechanism hidden in the frame to lever out the painting. With quick fingers she punched in her security code on the keypad behind it, input the combination to the safe.

For her own pleasure, she took out the silver Fate.

And hadn't it been fate, she reflected, that had had her traveling to Dublin, spending those few weeks overseeing the opening of a Morningside branch there? Just as it had been fate that had urged her to take an appointment with one Malachi Sullivan.

She'd known of the Three Fates. Paul had told her the story. He'd had an endless supply of long-winded, tedious stories. But this one had caught her interest. Three silver statues, forged, some said, on Olympus itself. That, of course, was nonsense, but legend added a luster, and a value, to objects. Three sisters, separated by time and circumstances, falling into various hands over the years. And separated, they were no more than pretty bits of art.

But if and when they were brought together . . . She ran her fingertip over the shallow notch in the base, where Clotho had once linked to Lachesis. Together, they were beyond price. And some, a gullible some in Anita's mind, said that together they were beyond power. Wealth beyond imagining, control of one's own destiny unto immortality.

Paul hadn't believed they existed. A pretty story, he'd claimed. A kind of Holy Grail for collectors of antiquities.

She'd passed it off as well. Until Malachi Sullivan had asked for her professional opinion.

It had been child's play to seduce him into seducing her. Then to blind his caution with lust until he trusted her enough to put the statue into her hands. For tests and assessments, she'd told him. For research.

He'd told her enough, more than enough to assure her that she could take the statue from him with impunity. What could he do—some middle-class Irish sailor, descended by his own accounting from a thief—against a woman of her unimpeachable reputation?

Stealing outright, she thought now, had been a glorious rush.

He'd made noise, of course, but her money and position, and the miles of ocean between them, insulated her against any trouble he could stir. As she'd expected, he'd quieted down again in a matter of weeks.

What she hadn't expected was for him to outmaneuver her—even temporarily—for the other two pieces of the prize. She'd wasted time delicately questioning Wyley Antiques's current owners while he had zeroed in on Tia Marsh.

He got nothing from her, Anita knew now. There hadn't been time. There'd been nothing in her hotel room, nothing on her laptop that pertained to the statues, or to her ancestor.

And nothing in the more discreet search of her New York apartment. Still, she believed Tia was a key, one worth turning in any case.

She'd pursue that personally, she decided. Just as she would pursue the New York thread of Simon White-Smythe personally. She'd leave her incompetent employees to track down the black sheep of that family, while she courted the cream of it.

Once she had the second Fate, she'd use all her resources, all her energies, by any means, to find and acquire the third.

TIA SPENT THE first twenty-four hours after the flight home sleeping or shuffling around her apartment in her pajamas. Twice she woke up in the dark without a clue where she was. And, remembering, had hugged herself in sheer joy before snuggling back into her pillow and sleep.

The second day, she indulged in a long bath—lukewarm water and plenty of lavender oil—then changed into fresh pajamas and went back to sleep.

When she was awake and wandering the apartment, she'd stop to touch something—the back of a chair, the side of a table, the round dome of a paperweight. She would think, *Mine. My things, my apartment, my country.*

She could open the drapes and look out on her view of the East River, enjoy the look of the water that always managed to soothe and thrill her. Or close them again and imagine herself in a lovely, cool cave.

There was no one waiting for her, no need to dress, to style her hair, to gear up mentally and emotionally for an appearance.

She could, if she wanted, stay in her pajamas for a week and talk to no one. She could lie in her own, wonderful bed and do nothing but read or watch television.

Of course, that was bad for the back. And, of course, she needed to fix proper meals and reacquaint her system with basic routine. She was running low on echinacea, too, and really needed to go out and buy some fresh bananas if she didn't want her potassium level to dip.

But she could make it one more day. Just one more. Because the prospect of having no conversations whatsoever, even with a clerk at the market, was so wonderful it was worth the risk of a potassium dip.

To relieve her guilt for not phoning her family, not stirring herself to travel the few blocks to see her mother, she sent her parents an e-mail. Then she confirmed her next appointment with Dr. Lowenstein the same way.

She loved e-mail, and offered thanks that she lived in an age in which it was possible to communicate without speaking.

Despite all her travel precautions, she was pretty sure

she was coming down with a cold. Her throat was a bit scratchy, her sinuses a little stuffy. But when she took her temperature—twice—it was dead normal.

Still, she took some extra zinc, more echinacea and made herself a pot of chamomile tea. She was just settling down with it and a book on homeopathic remedies when her doorbell chimed.

She nearly ignored it. It was guilt that had her setting cup and book aside. It could very well be her mother, who tended to drop by unannounced. And who would, certainly, let herself in with her key if Tia didn't answer.

It was guilt as well that had her glancing around and wincing. Her mother would see that she'd been lounging around like a slug for days. She wouldn't criticize—or she would mask her criticism so expertly in indulgence that Tia would, she knew, end up feeling like a self-centered, lazy child.

Worse, if she sniffed out even a hint of the cold Tia was sure she was brewing, she would make a terrible fuss.

Resigned, Tia peered out the peephole. And squeaked. It wasn't her mother.

Flustered, she pushed a hand through her hair and opened the door to a man she'd nearly convinced herself she'd imagined.

"Hello, Tia." If Malachi thought it odd she was answering the door in her pajamas at three in the afternoon, his warm smile didn't show it.

"Um . . ." Something about him seemed to cross-wire the circuits in her brain. She wondered if it was chemical. "How did you . . ."

"Find you?" he finished. She looked a bit pale, he thought, and sleepy. The woman needed some fresh air and sunshine. "You're in the book. I should've called, but I was in the neighborhood. More or less."

"Oh. Well. Ah." Her tongue wouldn't cooperate on more than one syllable. She made a helpless gesture of invitation and had closed the door behind him before she remembered she was wearing pajamas. "Oh," she said again, and clutched the lapels together. "I was just . . ."

“Recuperating from your travels, I expect. It must be lovely, being home.”

“Yes. Yes. I wasn’t expecting company. I’ll just change.”

“No, don’t.” He snagged her hand before she could rush off. “You’re perfectly fine, and I won’t keep you long. I was worried about you. I hated leaving you so abruptly. Did they find who broke into your hotel room?”

“No. No, they didn’t. At least not yet. I never thanked you properly for staying with me through all the questioning and paperwork.”

“I wish I could’ve done more. I hope the rest of your trip went well.”

“It did. I’m glad it’s over.” Should she offer him a drink? she fretted. She couldn’t possibly, not while wearing pajamas. “Did you . . . Have you been in New York long?”

“I’ve just arrived. Business.” She had the drapes pulled over the windows, he noted. The place was dim as a cave but for the reading lamp on the table by the sofa. Still, what he could see was tidy as a church and quietly pretty. As she was, despite the prim cotton pajamas.

He was, he realized, more pleased to see her than he’d expected to be. “I wanted to look you up, Tia, as I’ve been thinking about you the last few weeks.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Would you have dinner with me tonight?”

“Dinner? Tonight?”

“It’s short notice, I know, but if you’re not busy I’d love to have an evening with you. Tonight.” He moved in, just a little. “Tonight. Tomorrow. As soon as you’re free.”

She’d have considered it all a hallucination, but she could smell him. Just a hint of his aftershave. She didn’t think she’d identify men’s aftershave in a hallucination. “I don’t have any plans.”

“Brilliant. Why don’t I pick you up at seven-thirty?” He released her hand, wisely opting to retreat before she could think of an excuse. “I’ll look forward to it.”

While she stood, staring at him, he let himself out.

“IT’S JUST DINNER, Tia. Relax.”

“Carrie, I asked you to come over and help, not advise me to do the impossible. What about this?” Tia turned from her closet, holding up a navy suit.

“No.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Everything.” Carrie Wilson, a streamlined brunette with skin the color of melted caramel and ebony eyes, angled her head. “It’s fine if you’re going to address the board of directors on fiscal responsibility. It’s dead wrong for a romantic dinner for two.”

“I never said it was romantic.”

“You’re going out with a great-looking Irishman you met in Helsinki who stayed by your side during a criminal investigation and who has shown up on your doorstep in New York the minute he hit the States.”

Carrie’s voice had the rapid-fire punch of a machine gun as she lounged on the bed. “The only way it could be more romantic would be if he’d shown up on a white charger with the blood of a dragon on his sword.”

“I just want to look reasonably attractive,” Tia replied.

“Honey, you always look reasonably attractive. Let’s swing the hammer and ring the bell.” She unfolded herself from the bed and plunged into Tia’s closet.

Carrie was a stockbroker. Tia’s stockbroker. Somehow during their six-year association they’d become friends. She was Tia’s image of the modern, independent woman, the type who normally would have intimidated Tia into muscle spasms.

And had until they’d discovered a mutual interest in alternative medicine and Italian shoes.

Thirty, divorced, professionally successful, Carrie dated a string of interesting, eclectic men, could analyze the Dow Jones or Kafka with equal authority and vacationed solo every year, selecting the location by sticking a pin in an atlas.

There was no one Tia trusted more in matters of finance, fashion or men.

“Here, the classic little black number.” Carrie pulled out a simple sleeveless sheath. “We’ll sex it up a bit.”

"I'm not looking for sex."

"That, as I've told you for years, is your core problem." She stepped out of the closet, then studied Tia. "I wish we had more time. I'd call my stylist, get him to squeeze you in."

"You know I don't go to salons. All those chemicals, and the hair flying everywhere. You don't know what you might pick up."

"A decent haircut, for one thing. I'm telling you, you'd really open your face up, accent your bone structure and your eyes if you'd just get that mop whacked off."

Carrie tossed the dress on the bed, then gathered Tia's long hair in her hand. "Let me do it."

"Not as long as I still have a brain wave pattern," she chided. "Just help me get through the evening, Carrie. Then he'll go back to Ireland or wherever, and things'll get back to normal."

Carrie hoped not. As far as she was concerned her friend had entirely too much normal in her life.

MALACHI THOUGHT THE flowers were a nice touch. Pink roses. She struck him as the type for pink roses. He was afraid he was going to have to rush her a bit, and he regretted that. She also struck him as the type for slow, rather sweet seductions. And oddly, he thought he'd enjoy seducing her, slowly.

But he couldn't spare the time. He wasn't at all sure he should have left home, not before Gideon had returned. The fact that Anita had managed to track down the Toliver woman worried him.

Was it another case of her trailing their path, or were their routes just coinciding? Either way, he was absolutely sure that Anita would move on Tia soon. If she hadn't already.

He needed to get his pitch in, to lure Tia over to his side before Anita could confuse matters.

So here he was, toting a dozen pink rosebuds to the door of Wyley's ancestor while his brother was God-knew-where with one of White-Smythe's.

He'd have preferred striding to Anita's door, and leading with his boot there. If he hadn't promised his mother—who had the good sense not to want her oldest son locked in a foreign jail—he'd have done just that.

Still, when it came down to it, spending the evening having dinner with a pretty woman was a better bet than dragging one all over Europe as Gideon was doing.

He knocked, waited, then was caught off balance when she opened the door. "You look fantastic."

Tia struggled not to tug at the hem of the little black dress that Carrie had ruthlessly shortened a full two inches. Carrie had chosen the opera-length pearls, too, and was responsible for the hairstyle that added a few wispy bangs and whisked the rest away in a long fall down the back.

"Thank you. Those are lovely."

"I thought they suited you."

"Would you like to sit down? Have a drink before we go? I have some wine."

"I'd like that, yes."

"Well, I'll just put these in some water." She restrained herself from mentioning she was relatively sure she'd inherited her mother's allergy to roses. Instead, she chose an old Baccarat vase from her display cabinet. She carried them back into the kitchen, setting them aside while she got out the bottle of white she'd opened for Carrie.

"I like your place," Malachi said from behind her.

"So do I." She poured a glass, turned to offer it. As he was closer than she'd anticipated, she nearly plowed the glass into his chest.

"Thanks. I think the hardest aspect of traveling is not having your own things about you. The little things that comfort you."

"Yes." She let out a quiet breath. "Exactly." To keep busy, she filled the vase with water, then began to arrange the flowers in it, one by one. "That's why you caught me in pajamas this afternoon. I was wallowing in being home. In fact, other than the limo driver, you were the first person I'd spoken to since I got back."

“Is that right?” So Anita hadn’t beaten him, after all. “Then I’m very flattered.” He picked up one of the roses, handed it to her. “And I hope you’ll enjoy the evening.”

She did. A great deal.

The restaurant he’d chosen was quiet, with soft lighting and discreet service. Discreet enough that the waiter hadn’t blinked when she’d picked her way through the menu, ordering a salad, without dressing, and requested her fish be broiled without butter and served without the accompanying sauce.

Because he’d ordered a bottle of wine, she accepted a glass. She rarely drank. She’d read several articles on how alcohol destroyed brain cells. Of course, a glass of red wine was supposed to counteract that by being good for your heart.

But the wine was so soft, and he managed to put her so completely at ease, that she never noticed how often her glass was topped off.

“It’s so interesting that you live in Cobh,” she said. “Another tie to the *Lusitania*.”

“And indirectly to you.”

“Well, my great-great-grandparents were brought back here for burial. But I suppose, like so many of the others, they were taken to Cobh, or Queenstown then. It was foolish, really, for those people to make that crossing during wartime. Such an unnecessary risk.”

“We never know what another considers necessary, or a risk, do we? Or why some lived and some died. My ancestor wasn’t from Ireland, you know.”

She nearly missed what he was saying. When he smiled at her, just that way—slow and intimate—his eyes seemed impossibly green. “He wasn’t?”

“No, indeed. He was born in England, but lived most of his life here in New York.”

“Really?”

“After the tragedy, he was nursed back to health by a young woman who was to become his wife. It’s said the experience changed him. Word is, he was a bit of a loose cannon before it happened. In any case, his story’s been

passed down through the family. It seems he was interested in a certain item he'd heard was in England. Seeing as you're an expert on Greek myths, you might have heard of it. The Silver Fates."

Struck, she set down her fork. "Do you mean the statues?"

His pulse jumped, but he nodded easily. "I do, yes."

"Not The Silver Fates. The Three Fates. Three separate statues, not one, though they can be linked by the bases."

"Ah well, stories take on a life of their own, don't they, over generations." He cut another bite of his beef. "Three pieces, then. You know of them?"

"I certainly do. Henry Wyley owned one, and it went down with the *Lusitania*. According to his journal, he was going to England to buy the second of the set and to, hopefully, follow a lead on finding the third. It seemed so interesting to me as a child to think that he'd essentially died for those pieces that I looked up the Fates."

He waited a beat. "What did you find?"

"Oh, about the statues, next to nothing. In fact, it's most commonly believed they don't really exist. For all I know Henry had something else entirely." She moved her shoulders. "But I found out about the Fates of mythology, and kept reading. The more I read, the more fascinated I was by the gods, and the half gods. I had absolutely no talent for the family business, so I turned an interest into a career."

"Then you have Henry to thank for that."

She'd always thought the same. "You're right, I do."

He lifted his glass, tapped it to hers. "To Henry, then, and his pursuit of the Fates."

He let the conversation wind into other areas. Damn it, she was pleasant company when she loosened up. The wine added a sparkle to her eyes, a pretty glow to her cheeks. She had a mind that was quick enough to jump into any area, and a subtle and dry wit when she forgot to be nervous about what came out of her mouth.

He gave himself an hour to simply enjoy her company, and didn't circle back to the Fates until they were in the cab heading back to her apartment.

“Did Henry note down in his journal how he planned to acquire the other statues?” Idly, Malachi toyed with the ends of her hair. “Weren’t you curious if they existed? If they were real?”

“Mmm. I don’t remember.” With the wine spinning gently in her head, she relaxed against him when he slid an arm around her shoulders. “I was thirteen, no, twelve, when I first read it. It was the winter I had bronchitis. I think it was bronchitis,” she said, lazily now. “I always seemed to have something that kept me in bed. Anyway, I was too young to think about heading off to England to find some legendary statue.”

He frowned. It seemed to him that was precisely what a twelve-year-old girl should have thought of doing. The adventure of it, the romance of it would have made a perfect fantasy for a housebound child.

“After that, I was too steeped in gods to worry about artifacts. That’s my father’s area. I’m hopeless at business. I’ve no flare for figures or for people. I’m a crushing disappointment to him.”

“That’s not possible.”

“It is, but it’s nice of you to say it isn’t. Wyley Antiques paid for my education, my lifestyle and my piano lessons, and I’ve given nothing back, preferring to write books on imaginary figures rather than accept the weight and responsibilities of my legacy.”

“Writing books about imaginary figures is an art, and a time-honored profession.”

“Not when you’re my father. He’s given up on me, and as I’ve yet to latch onto a man long enough to produce a grandchild for him, he despairs that on his retirement, Wyley’s will pass out of the family.”

“A woman’s not required to birth a child for the sake of a bloody business.”

She blinked a bit at the temper in his voice. “Wyley’s isn’t just a business, it’s a tradition. Oh my, I shouldn’t have had so much wine. I’m rambling.”

“You’re not.” He paid the driver when they pulled to the curb. “And you shouldn’t worry so much about pleasing

your father if he can't see the value of who you are and what you do."

"Oh, he's not . . ." She was grateful for the firmness of Malachi's hand as she climbed out of the cab. The wine made her limbs feel loose and disconnected. "He's a wonderful man, amazingly kind and patient. It's just that he's so proud of Wyley's. If he'd had a son, or another daughter with more business skills, it wouldn't be so difficult."

"Your thread's been spun, hasn't it?" He led her into the elevator. "You are what you are."

"My father doesn't believe in fate." She shook back her hair, smiled. "But maybe he'd be interested in the Fates. Wouldn't it be something if I research and manage to find one of them? Or two. Of course, they don't have any serious significance unless they're complete."

"Maybe you should read Henry's journal again."

"Maybe I should. I wonder where it is." She laughed up at him as they walked toward her door. "I had the best time. That's twice now I've had the best time with you, and on two continents. I feel very cosmopolitan."

"See me tomorrow." He turned her into him, slid a hand up her back to the nape of her neck.

"Okay." Her eyes fluttered closed as he drew her closer. "Where?"

"Anywhere." He whispered it, then touched his lips to hers.

It was a simple matter for a man to deepen a kiss when a woman was all but melting around him. It was easy to take as much as he wanted when she sighed and wrapped her arms around him.

And when what she gave back was sweet and warm and unbearably soft, it was damn near impossible not to want more.

He could have more, he thought as he changed the angle of the kiss. He had only to open her door, step inside with her. Already there was a purr in her throat and a quiver along her skin.

And he couldn't do it. She was half-drunk and criminally vulnerable. Worse, somehow worse, the want for her was a great deal more personal than he'd bargained for.

He eased her back with the sudden, certain knowledge that his plans had just suffered a major snag. And the snag could become a large and tangled knot.

“Spend the day with me tomorrow.”

She felt as if she were floating. “Don’t you have work?”

“Spend the day with me,” he repeated and tortured himself by leaning her back against the door and taking her mouth again. “Say yes.”

“Yes. What?”

“Eleven. I’ll be here at eleven. Go inside, Tia.”

“Go where?”

“Inside.” God help him. “Inside,” he repeated as he fumbled a bit with her lock. “Damn it, one more.” He yanked her back against him, kissed her until the blood was roaring in his head. “Lock the door,” he ordered and, giving her a little shove inside, shut it smartly in his own face before he could change his mind.

Six

TIA wasn't sure if it was curiosity or lust that drove her to look for the old journal. Whichever it was, it was a powerful force to make her face her mother in the middle of the day.

She loved her mother, sincerely, but any session with Alma Marsh was wearing on the nerves. Rather than risk a germ-crawling taxi, she walked the eight blocks to the lovely old town house where she'd spent her childhood. She was so energized, so full of the delight of the last two days and Malachi, she didn't even think about the pollen count.

The air was thick as a brick, and so miserably hot it wilted her crisp linen blouse before she'd walked cross-town to Park Avenue. But she strolled along, as she headed uptown, humming a tune in her mind.

She *loved* New York. Why hadn't she ever realized how much she loved the city, with its noise and traffic, its crowded streets. Its *life*. There was so much to see if you just looked. The young women pushing baby carriages, the boy walking a group of six little dogs that pranced along like a parade. The sleek, black, hired cars taking ladies to lunch, or home again after a morning's shopping. And look how gorgeous the flowers were along the av-

enue, and how smart the doormen looked in their uniforms as they stood outside the buildings.

How had she missed all this? she wondered as she turned onto her parents' pretty, shady street. Simple. On the rare times she actually walked outside of her own three-block radius, she kept her head down, her purse in a stranglehold and imagined herself being mugged, or run over by a bus that jumped the curb.

But she'd walked yesterday with Malachi. They'd strolled up Madison Avenue, had stopped at a little sidewalk café for cold drinks and careless conversation. He talked to everyone. The waiter, the woman beside them with, of all things, a miniature poodle in her lap.

Which could hardly be sanitary.

He talked to shop clerks in Barneys, to a young woman debating over scarves in one of the terrifying boutiques Tia usually avoided. He struck up conversations with one of the guards at the Met, and the sidewalk vendor where he'd bought hot dogs.

She'd actually eaten a hot dog—right on the street. She could hardly get over it.

For a few hours she'd seen the city through his eyes. The wonder of it, the humor in it, the grit and the grandeur.

And she was going to see it again tonight, with him.

She was nearly skipping by the time she reached her parents' house. There were flowerpots flanking the entrance. Tilly, the housekeeper, would have planted and tended them. She remembered now that she'd wanted to help plant the pots once. She'd been about ten, but her mother had worried so about dirt, allergies and insects that she'd given up the idea.

Maybe she'd buy a geranium on the way home. Just to see.

Though she had a key, Tia used the bell. The key was for emergencies, and using it meant decoding the alarm, then explaining why she'd done so.

Tilly, a sturdy fireplug of a woman with stone-gray hair, answered quickly.

"Why, Miss Tia! What a nice surprise. All settled in,

then, after your trip? I really enjoyed the postcards you sent me. All those wonderful places.”

“A lot of places,” Tia agreed as she stepped into the cool, quiet air. She kissed Tilly’s cheek with the easy comfort she felt for few. “It’s good to be home.”

“One of the best parts of traveling is coming home, isn’t it? Don’t you look pretty today,” Tilly said, surprise in her voice as she studied Tia’s face. “I think traveling agreed with you.”

“You wouldn’t have said that a couple of days ago.” Tia set her purse on a table in the foyer, glanced at the Victorian mirror above it. She *did* look pretty, she realized. Sort of rosy and bright. “Is my mother available?”

“She’s upstairs in her sitting room. You go right up, and I’ll bring you both something cold to drink.”

“Thanks, Tilly.”

Tia turned to the long sweep of stairs. She’d always loved this house, the elegant dignity of it. It was such a combination of her parents—her father’s great love for antiques, her mother’s deep need for organized space. Without that combination, that balance, she supposed, it might have been a hodgepodge, a kind of sub-shop for Wyley’s. As it was, the furnishings were arranged with an eye for style as well as beauty. Everything had its place, and that place rarely changed.

There was something comforting in that continuity, that stability. The colors were pale and cool. Rather than flower arrangements, there were lovely statuary, wonderful old bowls filled with chunks of polished, colored glass.

Ladies’ gloves, jeweled handbags, hat pins, cuff links, watch fobs, snuffboxes were displayed behind ruthlessly clean glass. Temperature and humidity were strictly maintained by a climate-control system. It was always seventy-one degrees, with a ten percent humidity rate, inside the Marsh town house.

Tia paused outside her mother’s sitting room door, knocked.

“Come in, Tilly.”

The moment Tia opened the door, her spirits dropped. She caught the faint scent of rosemary, which signaled her

mother was having one of her difficult mornings. Though the window glass was treated to filter out UV rays, the drapes were drawn. Another bad sign.

Alma Marsh reclined on the silk-cushioned recamier with an eyebag draped over her upper face.

"I think I have one of my headaches coming on, Tilly. I shouldn't have tried to answer all that correspondence at one time, but what can I do? People will write you, won't they, and then you have no choice but to respond. Would you mind getting my feverfew? Perhaps I can ward off the worst of it."

"It's Tia, Mother. I'll get it for you."

"Tia?" Alma slid the eyebag aside. "My baby! Come give me a kiss, dear. There couldn't be any better medicine."

Tia crossed over and gave Alma a light kiss on the cheek. She might have been having one of her spells, Tia thought, but her mother looked, as always, perfect. Her hair, nearly the same delicate shade as her daughter's, was glossy and swept back in gentle waves from a face suitable for a cameo. It was delicate, lovely, unlined. Though she tended to be thin, her body was turned out with casual elegance in a soft pink blouse and tailored trousers.

"There now, I feel better already," Alma said as she shifted to sit up. "I'm so glad you're home, Tia. Why, I didn't get one moment's rest while you were gone. I was so worried about you. You took all your vitamins, didn't you, and didn't drink the tap water? I hope you demanded nonsmoking suites in all your hotels, though God knows they don't enforce that. Just come in and spray after some horrible person's spewed carcinogens into the air. Pull open the drapes, dear, I can barely see you."

"Are you sure?"

"I can't indulge myself," Alma said heroically. "I've a dozen things to do today, and now that you're here . . . Well, we'll make time for a nice visit, and I'll work harder later. And you, you must be exhausted. A delicate system like yours suffers under the demands of travel. I want you to arrange for a complete physical right away."

"I'm fine." Tia moved to the windows.

“When the immune system’s compromised, as yours must be, it can take several days before you recognize the symptoms. You make that appointment, Tia, for my sake.”

“Of course.” Tia drew open the drapes, relieved when light poured into the room. “You don’t have to worry. I took very good care of myself.”

“Be that as it may, you can’t . . .” She trailed off when Tia turned around. “Why, you’re all flushed! Are you feverish?” She leaped off the daybed, clamped a hand over Tia’s brow. “Yes, you feel a little warm. Oh, I knew it! I knew you’d catch some foreign germ.”

“I’m not feverish. I got a bit hot on the walk over, that’s all.”

“You walked? In this heat! I want you to sit down, sit down right here. You’re dehydrated, courting heatstroke.”

“I’m not.” But she thought she might feel just a little dizzy after all. “I’m perfectly fine. I’ve never felt better.”

“A mother knows these things.” Revived, Alma waved Tia to a chair and marched to the door. “Tilly! Bring up a pitcher of lemon water and a cold compress, and call Dr. Realto. I want him to examine Tia right away.”

“I’m not going to the doctor.”

“Don’t be stubborn.”

“I’m not.” But she was beginning to feel a bit queasy. “Mother, please, sit down before you aggravate your headache. Tilly’s bringing up cold drinks. I promise, if I feel the least bit ill, I’ll phone Dr. Realto.”

“Now what’s all this fuss?” Tilly came in, carrying a tray.

“Tia’s ill, you only have to look at her to see it, and she won’t have the doctor.”

“She looks just fine to me, blooming like a rose.”

“It’s fever.”

“Oh, now, Miss Alma, girl’s got some color in her cheeks for a change, that’s all. You sit down and have some nice iced tea. It’s jasmine, your favorite. And I’ve got some lovely green grapes here.”

“You washed them in that anti-toxin solution?”

“Absolutely. I’m going to put your Chopin on,” she added when she set down the tray. “Real low. You know how that always soothes your nerves.”

“Yes, yes, it does. Thank you, Tilly. What would I do without you?”

“Lord only knows,” Tilly said under her breath and added a wink for Tia as she walked out.

Alma sighed and sat. “My nerves haven’t been good,” she admitted to Tia. “I know you felt this trip was important for your career, but you’ve never been so far away for so long.”

And according to Dr. Lowenstein, Tia thought as she poured the tea, that was part of the problem. “I’m back now. And all in all, it was a fascinating trip. The lectures and signings were well attended, and it helped clear out some of the cobwebs I’ve been dealing with about the new book. Mother, I met this man—”

“A man? You met a man?” Alma came to attention. “What kind of man? Where? Tia, you know perfectly well how dangerous it is for a woman alone to travel, much less to hold conversations with strange men.”

“Mother, I’m not an imbecile.”

“You’re trusting and naive.”

“Yes, you’re right, so when he asked me to go back to his hotel room to discuss the modern significance of Homer, I went like a lamb to the slaughter. He ravished me, then passed me to his nefarious partner for sloppy seconds. Now I’m pregnant and I don’t know which one is the father.”

She didn’t know why she’d said it, honestly didn’t know how all that had burst out of her mouth. She felt her own headache coming on as Alma went white and clutched her chest.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. But I wish you’d give me some credit for common sense. I’m seeing a perfectly nice man. We have an interesting connection that goes back to Henry Wyley.”

“You’re not pregnant.”

“No, of course not. I’m simply seeing a man who shares my interest in Greek myths, and who, coincidentally, had an ancestor on the *Lusitania*. A survivor.”

“Is he married?”

“No!” Shocked, insulted, Tia got to her feet to pace. “I wouldn’t date a married man.”

“Not if you *knew* he was married,” Alma said significantly. “Where did you meet him?”

“He attended one of my lectures, and he had business here in New York, so he looked me up.”

“What sort of business?”

Growing more frustrated by the minute, Tia pushed at her hair. It felt suddenly, abominably heavy. As if it were smothering her brain. “He’s in shipping. Mother, the point is that in talking about the Greeks, and the *Lusitania*, we touched on the Three Fates. The statues? You’ve heard Father mention them.”

“No, I can’t say I have, but someone asked me about them just the other day. Who was it?”

“Someone asked you about them? That’s odd.”

“It’s neither here nor there,” Alma said irritably. “It was in passing, at some function your father dragged me to though I was feeling unwell. That Gaye woman,” Alma remembered. “Anita Gaye. She has a hard look about her, if you ask me. And no wonder, marrying a man forty years older, and so blatantly for his money no matter what anyone says. Well, more fool he. She’s fooled your father, of course. Women like that always fool men. A good businesswoman, he says. A credit to the antiquity community. Hah! But where was I? I can’t concentrate. I’m just so out of sorts.”

“What did she ask you?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Tia, I dislike speaking to the woman so can hardly be expected to remember some irritating conversation with her about some silly statues I’ve never heard of. You’re just trying to change the subject. Who is this man? What’s his name?”

“Sullivan. Malachi Sullivan. He’s from Ireland.”

“Ireland? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It’s an island, just northwest of England.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, it’s very unattractive. What do you know about him?”

“That I enjoy his company and he appears to enjoy mine.”

Alma let out a long-suffering sigh. One of her best weapons. “You don’t know who his family is, do you?”

Well, I'm sure he knows who yours is. I'm sure he knows very well who you come from. You're a wealthy woman, Tia, living alone—which worries me to distraction—and a prime target for the unscrupulous. Shipping? We'll see about that."

"Don't." Tia's voice snapped out, surprising Alma into lowering herself back into her chair. "Just don't. You're not going to have him investigated. You are not going to humiliate me again that way."

"Humiliate you? What a thing to say. If you're thinking of that . . . that history teacher, well, he wouldn't have been so angry and upset if he'd had nothing to hide. A mother has a right to look after her only child's welfare."

"Your only child is nearly thirty, Mother. Couldn't it be, just on a wild whim of fate, couldn't it be that an attractive, interesting, intelligent man chooses to go out with me because he finds me an attractive, interesting, intelligent woman? Does he have to have some dark, underlying motive? Am I such a loser that no man could want a normal, natural relationship with me?"

"A loser?" Sincerely shocked, Alma gaped. "I don't know what puts ideas like that in your head."

"No," Tia said wearily and turned toward the windows. "I bet you don't. You needn't worry. He's only in New York a few days. He'll be going back to Ireland soon and it's unlikely we'll see each other again. I can promise if he offers to sell me some bridge over the River Shannon or pops up with a great investment opportunity, I'll turn him down. Meanwhile, I was wondering if you know where Henry Wyley's journal might be. I'd like to study it."

"How should I know? Ask your father. Obviously my concerns and advice are worthless to you. I don't know why you bothered to come by."

"I'm sorry I upset you." She turned back, walked over to kiss Alma's cheek again. "I love you, Mother. I love you very much. You get some rest."

"I want you to call Dr. Realto," Alma ordered as Tia walked away.

"Yes, I will."

She lived dangerously and took a cab downtown to

Wyley's. She knew herself well enough to be certain if she went home in her current mood she would brood, and eventually decide her mother was right—about the state of her health, about Malachi, about her own pitiful appeal to the opposite sex.

Worse, she wanted to go home. To draw the drapes, huddle in her cave with her pills, her aromatherapy and a cool, soothing gel bag over her eyes.

Just, she thought in disgust, like her mother.

She needed to keep busy, to keep focused, and the idea of the journal and the Fates was a puzzle that would keep her mind occupied.

She paid the cabdriver, slid out and stood for a moment on the sidewalk in front of Wyley's. As always, she felt a rush of wonder and pride. The lovely old brownstone with its leaded windows and stained-glass door had stood for a hundred years.

When she'd been young, her father—over Alma's dire predictions and dark warnings—had taken her with him once a week. Into that treasure trove, into that Aladdin's cave. He'd taught her, patiently she thought now, about eras, styles, woods, glass, ceramics. Art, and the bits and pieces people collected that became, in time, an art of its own.

She'd learned, and God, she'd wanted to please him. But she'd never been able to please them both, never been able to stay on her feet in that subtle and constant tug-of-war her parents had played with her.

And she'd been afraid of making a mistake and embarrassing him, had been tongue-tied with clients and customers, baffled by the inventory system. In the end, her father had deemed her hopeless. She could hardly blame him.

Still, when she stepped inside, she felt another wave of pride. It was so beautiful, so perfectly lovely. The air smelled lightly of polish and flowers.

Unlike the house uptown, things changed here all the time. It was a constant surprise to see a familiar piece missing, a new one in its place, and a kind of thrill when she recognized the changes, identified the new. She

moved through the foyer, admiring the curves of the settee—Empire period, she decided, 1810–1830. The pair of gilt-gesso side tables were new stock, but she remembered the rococo candlesticks from her visit before she'd left for Europe.

She stepped into the first showroom and saw her father.

Seeing him always struck her with pride, and wonder, too. He was so robust and handsome. His hair was silver, and thick as mink pelt, his eyebrows black as midnight. He wore small, square-framed glasses, and behind them she knew his eyes would be dark and clever.

His suit was Italian, a navy pinstripe that was tailored for his strong frame.

He turned, glanced her way. After an almost imperceptible hesitation, he smiled. He passed an invoice to the clerk he'd been speaking to and crossed to her.

"So, the wanderer returns." He bent to kiss her cheek, his lips barely meeting her skin. She had a rush of memory of being tossed high in the air, of squealing with terrified pleasure, of being caught again by those big, wide hands.

"I don't mean to interrupt you."

"It doesn't matter. How was your trip?"

"It was good. It was very good."

"Have you been by to see your mother?"

"Yes." She shifted her gaze, stared hard at a display cabinet-on-chest. "I've just come from there. I'm sorry, we had a disagreement. I'm afraid she's upset with me."

"You had a disagreement with your mother?" He took his glasses off and polished the lenses with a snowy white handkerchief. "I believe the last time that happened was sometime in the early nineties. What did you argue about?"

"We didn't really argue. But she may be upset when you get home tonight."

"If your mother isn't upset every other evening, I think I've walked into the wrong house."

He gave her an absent pat on the shoulder that told her his mind was already moving away from her.

"I wonder if I could talk to you a minute about something else? The Three Fates?"

His gaze and his attention snapped back to her. "What about them?"

"I had a conversation the other day that reminded me of them. And of Henry Wyley's journal. It sparked my interest when I was a child, and I'd like to read it again. In fact, I've been thinking I may be able to work a section on the mythology of those pieces into my new book."

"The interest may be timely. Anita Gaye brought them up in a conversation a few weeks ago."

"So Mother told me. Do you think she has a line on one of the other two that still exist?"

"If she does, I couldn't get it out of her." He slid his glasses back on and gave her a wolfish smile. "And I tried. If she locates one of the others, it would be of some interest in the community. Two, and she'll make a reasonable splash. But without all three, it's no major find."

"And the third, according to the journal, must be lost in the North Atlantic. Still, I'm interested. Would you mind if I borrowed the book?"

"The journal is of considerable personal value to the family," he began, "as well as its historic and monetary value given its age and author."

Another time, she would have backed off. "You let me read it when I was twelve," she reminded him.

"I had some hope you'd show an interest in the family history and the family business when you were twelve."

"And I disappointed you. I'm sorry. I'd very much appreciate seeing the book. I can study it here if you'd prefer I didn't take it home."

He made a little hiss of impatience. "I'll get it for you. It's up in the vault."

She sighed when he strode off, then retreated back into the foyer to sit on the edge of the settee and wait for him.

When he came back down the stairs, she rose. "Thank you." She pressed the soft, faded leather to her breast. "I'll be very careful with it."

"You're very careful with everything, Tia." He walked to the door, opened it for her. "And that's why, I think, you disappoint yourself."

* * *

“WHERE DID YOU go?” Malachi danced his fingers over the back of Tia’s hand and watched her attention shift back to him.

“Nowhere important. Sorry. I’m not very good company tonight.”

“That’s for me to decide.” What she’d been, all evening, was broody. So far she’d barely touched her polenta, though he was sure it had been prepared following her specific instructions. It was clear to him that her mind kept drifting, and when it did, a sadness came over her face that made his heart ache.

“Tell me what’s troubling you, darling.”

“It’s nothing.” It warmed her when he called her darling. “Really. Just a family . . .” She couldn’t call it an argument. No voices had been raised, no angry words tossed. “Disagreement. I managed to upset my mother and irritate my father, all in the space of a couple of hours.”

“How did you do that?”

She poked at her polenta. She hadn’t told him of the journal yet. As it was, by the time she’d gotten back to her apartment, she’d been too tired, too depressed, to open it. She’d wrapped it carefully in an unbleached cloth and had tucked it in her desk drawer. In any case, she thought, it wasn’t the journal that had caused the problem. It was, as usual, herself.

“My mother wasn’t feeling well, and I spoke out of turn.”

“I’m forever speaking out of turn to mine,” Malachi said easily. “She just gives me a cuff, or that terrifying look mothers develop while you’re still in the womb, I imagine, and goes about her business.”

“It doesn’t work that way with mine. She’s worried about me.”

Worried I’m endangering my health, worried I’m letting myself care about a man I know little to nothing about. “I had a lot of health problems as a child.”

“You seem pretty healthy to me now.” He kissed her fin-

gers, hoping to tease her out of her mood. "I certainly feel . . . healthy when I get close to you."

"Are you married?"

The absolute shock on his face gave her the answer, and made her furious with herself for asking the question.

"What? Married? No, Tia."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. I mentioned to my mother that I was seeing someone, and before I knew it you were married and after my money, and I'm having some wild, illicit affair that will leave me penniless and heartbroken, and probably suicidal."

He let out a breath. "I'm not married, and I'm not interested in your money. As to the affair, I've been giving that considerable thought, but I'll have to rearrange my plans for the rest of this evening if getting you into bed could result in leaving you broke, heartbroken and suicidal."

"Jesus." She wrung her hands. "Why don't we skip all of that and you can just shoot me now and put me out of my misery."

"Why don't we skip dinner instead and go back to your flat so I can get my hands on you. I give you my word that when we're done, you won't be after jumping out the window."

She had to clear her throat. She had an urge, an outrageous one, to lean over and slide her tongue over the long, strong line of his cheekbone. "Maybe I should get that in writing."

"Happy to."

"Why, it's Tia Marsh, isn't it? Stewart Marsh's daughter."

It was a voice Malachi would never forget. His fingers tightened convulsively on Tia's as he shifted, looked up and met Anita Gaye's glittering smile.

Seven

MALACHI'S grip on her hand was enough to make Tia jolt. But she got over that quickly enough, as the fact that she couldn't put a name to the face of the woman smiling sharply enough to drill holes in her brought on a quick spurt of social panic.

"Yes. Hello." Tia struggled furiously for the connection. "How are you?"

"I'm wonderful, thanks. You won't remember me. I'm Anita Gaye, one of your father's competitors."

"Of course." Conflicting emotions trickled through the wash of relief. Malachi's grip on her fingers had eased slightly, but still held firm. Anita's eyes glittered like suns, and her companion looked politely bored.

Tia began to wonder if the strangling tension she felt came from a source other than her own social clumsiness. "It's nice to see you. This is Malachi Sullivan. Ms. Gaye," she began, shifting to Malachi, "is in antiques. As a matter of fact—" She had to bite back a yelp when his hand vised on hers again. "Ah, she's one of the top dealers in the country," she finished weakly.

"You flatter me. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Sullivan." There was a laugh in her voice, but the tone of it made

Tia want to shiver. It was so predatory. "Are you in the business . . . of antiques?"

"No." The single syllable was clipped and as rude as a slap. Anita only purred and touched a hand lightly to Tia's shoulder.

"Our table's ready, so I won't keep you. We must have lunch sometime soon, Tia. I read your last book and was just fascinated. I'd love to discuss it with you."

"Of course."

"Give your parents my best," she added, and sent one last, laughing look at Malachi as she glided away.

Deliberately, Tia drew her hand from his, then reached for her water glass to soothe her throat. "You know each other."

"What?"

"Don't." She set her glass down again, then folded her hands together in her lap. "You must think me the perfect fool, both of you. She's never said two words to me in my life. Women like her don't notice women like me. I'm not her competition."

His blood was up, which made it difficult to think clearly. "That's a ridiculous thing to say."

"Stop it." She gathered herself, let out a breath. "You knew each other, and you were surprised, you were angry when she came over. And you were afraid I was about to mention the Fates."

"That's a great deal of conclusions for such a short interlude."

"People who stay in the background tend to develop good observation skills." She couldn't look at him, not yet. "I'm not wrong, am I?"

"No. Tia—"

"This isn't the place to discuss it." Her voice was dismissive, as was her slight shift away from him when he touched her arm. "I'd like you to take me home."

"All right." He signaled for the check. "I'm sorry, Tia, it's—"

"I don't want an apology. I want an explanation." She rose and, because her legs were unsteady, kept moving. "I'll wait outside."

She didn't speak in the cab, which was just as well. He needed time to figure out how and where to begin. He should have anticipated Anita would muck up the works; he should have anticipated her making a move. And he'd wasted valuable time. Wasted it, he admitted, because he enjoyed being with Tia and hadn't been able to make himself push her too hard and fast toward the goal.

And, he thought, because the longer he knew her, the more he wished he'd approached the whole matter differently. Instead he'd tangled himself up in lies.

Still, she was a reasonable woman. All he had to do was make her understand.

She ignored the hand he offered to help her out of the cab. He began to feel a little sick. When they reached the door to her apartment, he braced for her to try to slam it in his face, but she walked inside, left it open, and walked straight across the room to the windows. As if, he thought, she still needed air.

"It's a complicated business, Tia."

"Yes, deceit and underhanded behavior often are." She'd had time to think. Concentrating on the puzzle of it helped distance her from the hurt. "It all deals with the Fates. You and Ms. Gaye want them. I'm a link. She'd work on my parents, and you . . ." She turned back now, her face cool and set. "You'd work on me."

"It's not like that. Anita and I are in no way partners."

"Oh." She nodded. "Competitors, then, working against each other. That does make more sense. Did you have a lovers' spat?"

"Christ." He rubbed his hands over his face. "No. Listen to me, Tia, she's a dangerous woman. Ruthless, completely unscrupulous."

"And you're just loaded with scruples? I suppose you misplaced all those scruples when you lured me away from my hotel in Helsinki, spent all that time charming me, making me believe you were interested in me so someone could break into my hotel, search it. Did you really think I carried clues to the Fates around on a book tour?"

"I didn't have anything to do with the break-in. That was Anita. I'm not a fucking criminal."

“Oh pardon me. Just a fucking liar, then?”

He reined in his fury. What right did he have to be pissed off? “I can’t deny I lied to you. I’m sorry for it.”

“Oh, you’re sorry? Well, that’s different, then. All is forgiven.”

Malachi slid his hands into his pockets, balled them there. The woman facing him wasn’t the soft, sweet, slightly neurotic one who’d snuck under his skin. This woman was coldly furious and tougher than he’d believed. “Do you want an explanation, or would you rather just pound on me?”

“I’ll have the first, and reserve my right to the second.”

“Fair enough. Can we sit?”

“No.”

“Be easier if you pounded on me first and got it out of your system,” he responded. “I told you some of the truth.”

“You’ll have a long wait for your medal of honor, Malachi. Is that your name, or did you make it up?”

“It’s my name, goddamn it. You want to see my bloody passport?” He began to pace now as she stood cool and still. “I did have an ancestor on the *Lusitania*. Felix Greenfield, who survived and married Meg O’Reiley and settled in Cobh. The experience changed his life, turned it around and made something out of him. He worked the fishing boats with his wife’s family, had his children, converted to Catholicism and by all accounts was quite devout about it.”

He paused, ran his fingers—as she’d allowed herself to imagine doing herself—through his thick chestnut hair. “Before that time, before the ship sank under him, he wasn’t such an admirable man. He’d booked passage on that particular vessel as he was on the run from the police. He was a thief.”

“Blood tells.”

“Oh, stop it. I’ve never stolen a flaming thing.” The insult grated and had him whirling on her.

He didn’t look so much the cultured gentleman now, Tia thought dispassionately. Despite the handsome suit,

he looked more the brawler. "I don't think you're in a position to be so touchy."

"I come from a good family. We may not be as fancy and fine as yours, but we're not thieves and bandits. Felix was, and I can't be blamed for it. In any case, he turned a corner. It just happened he turned it after he'd taken a few items from the stateroom of the Henry W. Wyleys."

"The Fate." She had to wait until her mind could absorb it. "He took the Fate. It was never lost."

"It would've been if he hadn't pinched it, so you might want to consider that in the grand scheme of things. He didn't know what it was, only that it was pretty and shiny and it, well, it called to him, so to speak. It was passed down through the family, along with the story, and kept as kind of a good-luck charm."

Fascinating. Fantastic. Beneath the hurt and fury, she felt interest stirring. "And it came to you."

"It came to my mother, and through her to myself and my brother and sister at this point."

He was calmer now. He was Catholic enough himself to feel some of the weight of the lies lift by the confessing of them. "I had some curiosity about it, and there's where I made my fatal mistake. I took it to Dublin. I thought to have it identified, if possible, appraised certainly. My sister, who has a knack for such things, said that she'd see what she could find out through researching books and on the Internet. But I took it with me, impatient, and walked like a sheep into Morningside Antiquities."

"You showed it to Anita."

"Not at first, no. I told her about it. Why shouldn't I?" he asked, frustrated all over again. "She was supposed to be an expert on such things, and a reputable businesswoman. I didn't burst out with the history of it right off, but over the next few days . . ."

He trailed off as impotent embarrassment shimmered around him.

"Yes. I can fill in the blanks." Because it made it worse, it somehow, perversely, made it better. She wasn't the

only one who could be blinded stupid by her own hormones. "She's very beautiful."

"So's a mako shark to some points of view." There was bitterness there, for the woman who'd duped him, and for the one who stood placidly with the dark river at her back.

"Well, she got enough of it out of me before I noticed the teeth. She came by my hotel so she could see it privately. She thought that would be best. Naturally I agreed because she'd already demonstrated a keen personal interest in me. She uses sex the way other women use lipstick," he declared. "Putting it on and taking it off on a whim. I handed it right over to her."

She thought of Anita Gaye. Sharp, sexy, confident. Predatory. Yes, she could understand why even a clever man might be a fool around her. "No receipt?"

"I might have thought to ask for one if she hadn't been undoing my trousers at the time. We had sex, and we had wine. Or I had wine. The bitch must've put something in it because I didn't wake up until past noon the next day. She was gone, and so was the Fate."

"She drugged you?"

He caught the edge of disbelief, set his teeth. "I don't pass out near to twelve hours on a bounce and two glasses of wine. I didn't believe it myself at first. I went to Morningside and was told she was in meetings and unavailable. I left messages there and at her hotel. She never returned them. When finally I managed to contact her after she'd come back to New York, she told me she had no idea who I was or what I was talking about, and not to bother her again."

It wasn't easy hazing the image of him and Anita romping in a hotel bed, but she worked at it so she could think clearly. "You're telling me that Anita Gaye, of Morningside Antiquities, drugged you unconscious after sleeping with you, then stole from you, then denied ever meeting you?"

"I've just said so, haven't I? Made a fool of me in the bargain, using sex, pretending to care—" He broke off when he caught Tia's arch look.

"Yes, it's mortifying, isn't it?"

“This wasn’t the same.” But his stomach pitched nearly to his knees. “Not at all the same.”

“Just because we didn’t get to the . . . ‘bounce’ doesn’t change the intent, or the result. You could’ve approached me directly, honestly. You chose not to.”

“I did. As far as I knew you might’ve been as calculating as she was. Or, failing that, how could I know if you wouldn’t get it into your head to push some claim on the Fate?”

He lifted his hands. What had seemed perfectly reasonable, certainly necessary at the time, now looked very cold, and very ugly.

“It may not have come to me by a tidy route, Tia, but it’s been ours for almost ninety years. And when we found out about there being three of them, and what that meant, it changed things considerably. Part of it’s just wanting back what’s ours, and the other, well, damn it, we’re talking a lot of money. Great pots of money. We can use it. Ireland’s booming at the present, and if we had more to work with, we could expand our business.”

“Your shipping business?” she asked dryly and saw he had the grace to look embarrassed.

“It’s boats anyway. We run tours out of Cobh and around the Head of Kinsale. Still have a hand in fishing as well. I thought you’d be more comfortable with me if you believed I was in your circle of things.”

“So, you considered me shallow.”

He let out a breath, met her eyes directly. “I expected you to be. I was wrong.”

“You were going to come back here with me tonight, go to bed with me. That’s cold. That’s despicable. You used me, right from the beginning, a means to an end, as if I had no feelings. I never mattered to you at all.”

“That’s not true.” He crossed to her then, and though she held her arms rigidly at her sides, gripped her hands. “I won’t have you think that.”

“When you came up to me the first time, when you smiled at me, asked me to go for a walk, it meant nothing to you. I meant nothing. All you wanted was to see if I could be of any use, nothing more or less.”

"I didn't know you. At first, you were just a name, just a possibility. But—"

"Please. Is this the part where you tell me everything changed once you got to know me, to care about me? Spare us both that particular cliché."

"I got tangled up being with you, Tia. That wasn't part of my plan."

"Your plan's a mess. Let go of my hands."

"I'm sorry I hurt you." It was pitiful, but he could think of nothing else. "I swear to God I never meant to."

"Let go of my hands," she repeated. When he did, she stepped back. "I can't help you, and wouldn't now if I could. But you can comfort yourself that I'll be no help to Anita Gaye, either. I'm useless to both of you."

"You're not useless, Tia. Not to anyone. And I'm not speaking of the Fates."

She only shook her head. "It's all we have to speak of. Now I'm tired. I'd like you to go."

"I don't want to leave it like this."

"I'm afraid you'll have to. I really have no more to say to you, at least nothing more that would be the least bit constructive."

"Throw something, then," he suggested. "Punch me, yell at me."

"That would make it easier for you." She needed her cave, her solitude. And some scrap of pride. "I asked you to go. If you have any conscience about what you've done, you'll respect that."

Without a choice, he went to the door. He turned, studying her as she stood framed by the window. "The first time I looked at you," he said quietly, "really looked at you, Tia, all I could think was you had the loveliest and saddest eyes. I haven't been able to get them out of my head since. This isn't over, none of it's over."

She let out a long breath when the door shut behind him. "That's for me to say."

THE STREETS WERE steep in Cobh. Like San Francisco, they speared up from a bay at a leg-aching angle. At

the top of one was a pretty house painted a pale water-green with a colorful dooryard garden behind a low, stone wall.

There were three bedrooms, two baths, a living room with a TV that needed upgrading and a comfortably sprung couch covered with blue-and-white checks. There was a small parlor and a dining room as well, both used only for company. There, the furniture was ruthlessly polished and the lace curtains were soft with age.

On the wall of the parlor were pictures of John F. Kennedy, the current pope and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. That particular trio had always made Malachi so uneasy, he rarely sat in the room unless given no choice.

Until he'd turned twenty-four and had moved into the set of rooms over the boathouse, he'd lived in that same house, shared one of the bedrooms with his brother and fought with his sister over her time in the upstairs bath.

As long as he could remember, the kitchen was the gathering place. It was the kitchen he paced now, while his mother peeled potatoes for dinner.

He'd been back only two days, and on the first he'd been buried in work. He'd taken out one of their two tour boats himself, as Rebecca had pointed out he hadn't pulled his weight in that area for a good chunk of the summer. Then he'd hacked through paperwork until he couldn't see straight.

He'd put in a full twelve-hour day, and another ten on his second day home. But he hadn't been able to work off the anger, or the guilt.

"Wash these potatoes off," Eileen ordered. "It'll give you something to do besides brood."

"I'm not brooding. I'm thinking."

"I know brooding when I see it." She opened the oven, checked the roast. It was Malachi's favorite, and she'd made the Sunday meal in the middle of the week in hopes of cheering him up. "The girl had a perfect right to toss you out on your ear, and you'll just have to live with it."

"I know it, but you'd think she'd see the logic of it all after sleeping on it. At least give me the chance to make it up to her. She wouldn't answer the damn phone or the

door. Probably tossed out the flowers I sent. Who knew she had such a hard side to her?"

"Hard side, my aunt Minnie. Bruised feelings is what she has. You made it personal when you should've kept it businesslike."

"It got personal."

Eileen turned back and softened. "Yes, I see it did. That's the wonder of living, isn't it, never knowing when something or someone's going to turn you down a different road." She started peeling the carrots that would go around the roast with the potatoes. "Flowers never worked on me either when your father was in the doghouse."

Malachi smiled a little. "What did?"

"Time, for one thing. A woman's got to sulk a bit and know a man's suffering for his sins. And after that a good crawling's in order. I like a man who knows how to grovel."

"I never saw Da grovel."

"You didn't see everything, did you?" Eileen chided.

"I hurt her, Ma." He set the potatoes aside to drain. "I didn't have the right to hurt her that way."

"You didn't, no, but you didn't start it all with that in mind." She wiped her hands on a dish towel, hung it back over a hook. "You were thinking of the family, and your own pride. Now you've got her to think of as well. You'll know what to do next time you see her."

"She won't see me again."

"If I thought a son of mine gave up so easily, I'd cosh you over the head with this skillet. Haven't I worries enough with Gideon off with that dancer?"

"Gideon's fine. At least he's made contact with a connection in all this who's still speaking to him."

"YOU SON-OF-a-bitch!"

She was speaking to him, all right, in a low growl as she planted her fist squarely on his jaw. The sucker punch shot Gideon hard on his ass on the grimy rug outside the door of the dingy room in the last of the fleabag hotels they'd booked.

He tasted blood, saw stars and heard what sounded like the “Hallelujah Chorus” ring in his ears.

He swiped at his lip and eyed her maliciously as she stood, in a black bra and panties, with her hair still dripping from what the hotel laughingly called a shower.

“That’s it.” He got slowly to his feet. “For the good of mankind, I have to kill you now. You’re a bloody menace to society.”

“Come on then.” She rocked on the balls of her feet, lifted her fists. “Take your best shot.”

He wanted to. Oh, how he wanted to. For five hideous days he’d crisscrossed Europe with her in tow. He’d slept in beds that made the cots in the youth hostels of his short, carefree holiday after passing his A levels seem like celestial clouds. He’d tolerated her demands, her questions, her complaints.

He’d ignored the fact that he shared very close, even intimate quarters with a woman who got paid to dance naked, and whose body ensured she’d be well paid for the task. He’d behaved like a perfect gentleman even when she’d been deliberately provocative.

He’d fed her—and Christ could she eat—and made certain she had the best shelter his dwindling budget would allow.

What did she do? She punched her fist in his face.

He took a step toward her, his hands bunched at his sides. “I can’t hit a woman. It pains me more than I can say, but I can’t do it. Now move aside.”

“Can’t hit a woman.” She lifted her chin, daring him. “But you don’t have any trouble stealing from one. You took my earrings.”

“That’s right.” He couldn’t hit her, but he did give her a good shove so he could step in and slam the door. “And I got twenty-five pounds for them. You eat like a horse, and I’m not made of money.”

“Twenty-five?” Her outrage doubled. “I paid three hundred and sixty-eight dollars for those, after an hour’s hard bargaining in the jewelry exchange on Fifth. You’re not only a thief, you’re a sucker.”

“And you’ve vast experience hocking earrings, have you?”

She didn’t, but she was sure she could have done better. “Those were eighteen-carat, Italian gold.”

“Now they’re going to be fish and chips at the pub, and a night’s lodging in this hellhole. You keep hammering at me about being partners, but you don’t contribute anything.”

“You could have asked.”

“Sure, you’d’ve handed them over if I’d asked. You, who takes her handbag into the flaming shower with her.”

Her full, taunting mouth curled. “You’ve just proven I was smart to do so.”

Disgusted, he grabbed a shirt, tossed it to her. “Put something on, for Christ’s sake. Have some respect for yourself.”

“I’ve plenty of respect for myself.” She’d forgotten she was in her underwear. She tended to miss fine details when the red haze of temper came over her. But now, the contempt in his tone had her heaving the shirt across the room. “I want that twenty-five pounds.”

“You’re not getting it. You want to eat, get some clothes on. You’ve got five minutes.” He started toward the bath. He should’ve known better than to turn his back on her.

She leaped on him, wrapping those long legs like steel bands around his waist, yanking his head back by the hair until lights exploded in front of his eyes.

He spun, tried to buck her off. She clung like a burr and managed to hook an arm around his throat. With his wind-pipe in danger of being crushed, he reached up, got a good hank of her hair himself. Her howl when he pulled it was pure satisfaction.

“Let go! Let go of my hair!”

“You let go of mine,” he choked out. “Now.”

They circled, her heaped on his back, both of them cursing, both of them yanking. He rammed into the side of the bed, lost his balance. When he hit, he landed on top of her, hard enough to knock the wind out of her and loosen her grip. Before she could recover both, he flipped and pinned her.

“You’ve got a screw loose,” he muttered, struggling to

hold her arms when she started to fight back. “Dozens of screws loose. It’s twenty-five pounds, for God’s sake. I’ll give you twelve and five if you’re so crazed for it.”

“My earrings,” she panted. “My money.”

“For all you know I’m a desperate man. For all you know I could bash you on the head and take a hell of a lot more than a pair of earrings.”

She sniffed, derisively, then, inspired, tried a new strategy. Tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. That wide, lush mouth trembled. “Don’t hurt me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you. What do you take me for? Don’t cry, come on now, darling.” He released her arm to brush a tear away.

She attacked like a wildcat. Teeth, nails, flying limbs. She caught a glancing blow off his temple, shot an elbow into his ribs. In his struggle to defend himself, he rolled off the bed, with her on top of him.

Grunting, sweating, stunned with pain, he managed to pin her a second time before he realized she was breathless with laughter.

“What is it about a few tears that makes guys all gooey?” She grinned up at him. Christ, he was cute. All pissed off and poetical. “Your mouth’s bleeding, champ.”

“I know it.”

“I guess that was worth twenty-five pounds. But I’m not settling for fish and chips. I want red meat,” she demanded.

Then she saw that focused, narrowed look that meant one thing from a man. Her belly muscles quivered in response.

“Uh-oh,” she murmured.

“Damn it, Cleo.” He crushed his throbbing, bleeding mouth to hers. She tasted of sin and smelled like a rain-washed garden. Beneath his, her mouth opened, and it took every bit as greedily. Her limbs wrapped around him again, but silkily this time. She arched, center to center in a slow, sinuous invitation.

He lifted his head and looked down at her. Her hair, all that warm, damp sable, was spread over the thin, burn-scarred carpet. Her lashes were still set with those mock tears. He wanted to devour her, one quick gulp, no matter

how it might make his belly ache afterward. He was rock hard and randy.

And he found himself blocked by the same set of values that had prevented him from striking her.

“Damn it,” he said again and pushed off her to sit with his back braced against the bed.

Baffled, she levered onto her elbows. “What’s the matter?”

“Get dressed, Cleo. I said I wouldn’t hurt you. I won’t use you, either.”

She sat back up on her heels as she studied him. His eyes were closed, his breath ragged. She had good reason to know he was aroused. But he’d stopped. Stopped, she realized, because despite the toughness, the cool calculation she’d recognized in him, he was decent. Right down to the marrow.

“You’re the genuine article, aren’t you?”

He opened his eyes to see her smiling thoughtfully. “What?”

“Just one question. Did you back off because I’m a currently unemployed stripper?”

“I backed off because whatever you say about partnerships, I’m responsible for you being here. For you having to run out of Prague and across the continent to England with the clothes on your back. I made the choice to go after these statues, and to take the consequences knowing someone was going to try to stop me, however they could. You didn’t have the choice.”

“That’s what I thought,” she replied. “That means I’ll just have to take you down again.”

“Cut it out,” he warned when she slithered like a snake into his lap.

“You can just lie back and take it.” She ran her tongue over his jaw. “Or you can participate. Up to you, Slick. But either way, I’m having you. Umm, you’re all hot and sweaty.” When he clamped his hands on her wrists, she just continued to use her mouth. “I like it. This’ll go easier on you if you cooperate.”

She rocked on him, then covered his mouth with hers when he moaned.

“Touch me.” It had been so long since she’d had a man’s hands on her. Since she’d wanted them on her. “Touch me.”

In one rough move, he had her on her back again, and his hands were everywhere. The floor was hard as rock, smelled of stale smoke, but they rolled over it as she tugged at his shirt, as she dug her nails into his back.

She’d wanted this. Even knowing it was stupid, it was pointless, she’d wanted him. Every time she’d felt his gaze linger on her, every night she’d lain awake knowing he was lying awake an arm’s length away, she’d wanted him.

The good, solid weight of him pressed her into the unyielding floor, those strong, hard hands streaked over her. She bowed up when he dragged her bra down to her waist, moaned in pleasure when his mouth ravaged her breast.

Her body was a banquet. Sleek and curvy with generous breasts, endless legs. He’d wanted to feast since he’d first seen her strut onstage in her man’s clothes with that knowing smirk on her fabulous face.

He couldn’t think about how it was a mistake. He could only think how much he needed to feed.

He found her mouth again, and pain and pleasure warred through him. She was dragging his jeans down, raking her nails over his hips. And his blood was a raging hammer blasting against his heart, in his head.

Then he was inside her, rammed deep, and she was already coming around him on a wild, wet burst.

“Jesus!” Her eyes flew open and were nearly black with shock. “Jesus, what was that?”

“I don’t know, but let’s try it again.” Even as she shuddered, he drove himself into her in fast, nearly violent strokes. He heard her gasp for air, saw the fresh flush of heat flood her cheeks. Then she was matching him, beat for frantic beat.

And on the instant when he lost himself in her, she dragged his mouth back to hers.

Eight

CLEO lay facedown and crossways on a mattress that had all the yield of concrete. Her lungs had stopped wheezing, and the roar of blood in her ears had subsided to a pleasant hum.

She'd had her first sexual experience at sixteen when, after a fight with her mother, she'd let Jimmy Moffet do what he'd been begging her to let him do for three months.

The earth hadn't moved, but as initiators went, Jimmy had been all right.

In the eleven years since, she'd had better, and she'd had worse, and she'd learned to be selective. She'd learned what pleased her own body and how to guide a man to satisfy her needs.

She'd made some mistakes, of course, Sidney Walter being the most recent and the most costly. But by and large she thought she had a good, healthy sex drive and a reasonably discriminating taste in bed partners.

It was true that drive had diminished radically during her stint as a performer at Down Under, but strip clubs tended to show men and sex at their most basic and ordinary. In the same way, she imagined that experience had only honed her discrimination.

It certainly seemed to have worked this time around.

Gideon Sullivan not only knew how to make the earth move, he had it doing the merengue. And the tango. And the rumba. The man was a regular Fred Astaire in the sheets.

It was, she decided, going to add a nice dimension to this odd business partnership of theirs.

Not that he considered it a partnership, but she did. And that's what counted. Plus, she had an ace in the hole. She opened her eyes and looked at the purse that sat on the pockmarked dresser.

Make that a queen in the hole, she mused. A silver queen.

She intended to deal squarely with him when the time came. Probably. But experience had taught her it was wise to keep something in reserve. For all she knew, if she told Gideon about the statue, he'd take off with it just as he had her earrings.

Damn it, she'd really liked those earrings.

Of course, he didn't seem to be a total prick. The man had ethics when it came to sex, and she respected that. But money was a whole different ball game. It was one thing to heat the sheets with a man she'd known less than a week, and another to trust him with a potential gold mine.

Smarter, much smarter to keep her own counsel and pump him for information.

She rolled over, scraped her teeth along his hip since it was handy. "I didn't realize you Irish guys had such stamina."

"Guinness for strength." His voice was rough with sleep. "Christ Jesus, and I do need a beer."

"You've got a nice build here, Slick." To please herself she walked her finger up his thigh. "You work out?"

"Like at a gymnasium? No. Bunch of sweaty guys and terrifying machinery."

"You run?"

"If I'm in a hurry."

She laughed and slithered up to his chest. "So what do you do back in Ireland?"

"We have boats." He stirred himself to trail fingers into her hair. He really liked all that dense, dark hair of hers. "Tour boats, fishing boats. Sometimes I run tourists

around, sometimes I fish, and half the time I'm hammering one of the bloody boats into proper repair."

"That explains these." She pinched his biceps. "Tell me more about the Fates."

"I told you already."

"You told me some of the history stuff. But that doesn't tell me how you're so sure they're worth a lot of money. Why it's worth our time to try to track them down. I've got an investment here, too, and I don't even know for certain who the hell chased me out of Prague."

"I know they're worth a lot of money, first, because my sister, Rebecca, researched them. Becca's a demon with research and facts and data."

"No offense, Slick, but I don't know your sister."

"She's brilliant. Has so much information in her brain I'm always expecting it to start spilling out of her ears. It was she who pushed the whole idea of the touring business on the family. She was only about fifteen and here she comes up to Ma and Da with all these figures and projections and systems she'd put together. The economy was going to boom, she was sure of it. And with Cobh already of interest to tourists because of the *Titanic* and the *Lusitania*, and the fine scenery and harbor, we'd only have the more of them as time went on."

She forgot for a moment that she was luring him into giving her more information. "They listened to her?" The idea of parents paying any attention to the ideas of a child seemed both fascinating and ridiculous.

"Sure they listened to her. Why wouldn't they? 'Twasn't as if they jumped up shouting, 'Well, of course, if Bec says to do it, then we must.' But it was discussed and picked over and hammered at until the conclusion was reached that she had a fine notion there, one worth exploring."

"My parents wouldn't have listened." She settled her head on his chest. "Of course, by the time I was fifteen, we'd stopped having what you could define as conversations."

"Why would that be?"

"Ah, let's see. Oh right, I remember. We don't like each other."

Curious, and struck by the sheer bitterness in her tone, he rolled them over so he could see her face. “Why do you think they don’t like you?”

“Because I’m wild, argumentative, nasty and wasted the many opportunities they offered me. Why are you smiling?”

“I was just thinking the first three seem to be why I’m starting to like you. What opportunities did you waste?”

“Education, social advancements, all of which I squandered or threw back in their faces, depending on my mood.”

“Hmm. And why don’t you like them?”

“Because they never saw me.” The minute she said it, she was embarrassed. Where in hell had that come from? To counter it, she wiggled under him and danced her fingers over his ass. “Hey, as long as we’re here . . .”

“What did you want them to see?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She rubbed her foot over his calf in long strokes, lifted her head enough to take a quick nip at his mouth. “We washed our hands of each other some time ago. They pretty much washed hands of each other, too. Stopped pretending to be married when I was sixteen. My mother’s been married twice since. My father just whores around—discreetly.”

“It’s rough on you.”

“Nothing to do with me.” She jerked a shoulder. “Anyway, I’m more interested in now, and whether you’ve got one more round in you before we go get that beer.”

He wasn’t so easily distracted once he’d pinned to a point. But he lowered his head to nibble at her throat. “How’d you end up in Prague, working at that club?”

“Stupidity.”

He lifted his head. “That’s a wide area in my experience. What specific form?”

She huffed out a breath. “If I’m not going to get laid again, I want to take a shower.”

“I like to know more about the woman I’m making love with than her name.”

“Too late, Slick. You already fucked me.”

“The first time I fucked you,” he said in a cool, steady

voice that made her feel ashamed. "The second time it was more. If we go on this way, there'll be more yet. That's how it works."

It sounded, quite a bit, like a threat. "Do you complicate everything?"

"I do, yes. It's a talent of mine. You said they didn't see you. Well, I'm looking at you, Cleo, and I'm going to keep looking until I see clearly. Let's see how you deal with that."

"I don't like being pushed."

"That's a problem, then, as I'm pushy." He rolled off her. "You can have the shower first, but make it snappy. I'm half starved to death and dying for a beer."

He folded his hands on his belly, shut his eyes.

Frowning, Cleo climbed off the bed. On her way to the bath, she shot him one last curious look, then grabbed her purse and shut herself in the bathroom.

Confused her, Gideon thought. That was fine as she sure confused the hell out of him.

HE WAITED UNTIL they were settled at one of the low tables in the pub, she with her tough little steak, he with the better choice of fish and chips.

"Being as your family's of New York society, would you know Anita Gaye?"

"Never heard of her." The steak required a great deal of work, but she wasn't going to complain about it. "Who is she?"

"You know Morningside Antiquities?"

"Sure. It's one of those old, snooty places where rich people pay too much for things that used to belong to other rich people." She tossed back her mass of hair. "Me, I like bright, shiny and new."

He grinned. "That's a damning description, particularly by a rich person."

"I'm not rich. My family is."

Privately, he thought anyone who paid more than three hundred American dollars for something that dangled from

the earlobes was either rich or foolish. Possibly both. “No inheritance?”

She shrugged, sawed at the beef. “I’ve got a nice pile due when I hit thirty-five. That won’t keep me in beer and pretzels for the next eight years.”

“Where’d you learn to dance?”

“What does Morningside have to do with our current situation?”

“All right then. Anita Gaye is, at the moment, in charge of Morningside, being the widow of the former proprietor.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.” She wagged her fork. “I remember something about that. Old dude marries sharp young chick. Worked for him or something. My mother got all righteous about it, lunched on the horror for weeks. Then when he kicked off, there was a whole second round. I was still speaking, on rare occasions, to my mother then. She was back in New York between husbands. And I said something like, if the bimbo saw to it the old goat died happy, what’s the diff? She, my mother, got all pissed off about it. I guess that was one of our last bouts before we did the Pontius Pilate routine.”

“Washed your hands of each other?”

“Bingo.”

“Over someone else’s dead husband?”

“Actually, the hand-washing came when her latest husband got a little grabby with my tits and I was annoyed enough to tell her about it.”

“Your stepfather touched you?” His tone was filled with moral outrage.

“He wasn’t my stepfather right at that point. And it was more of a grab boobs, squeeze boobs, resulting in my knee rammed into his groin sort of event rather than touching. I said he’d come on to me, and he, in a rare use of gray matter, countered that I’d come on to him. She bought his side, foul language issued from all interested parties. I left, she married him, and they moved to his turf. L.A.”

She shrugged, lifted her beer. “End of sentimental family saga.”

He touched the back of her hand. "I suppose she deserves him, then."

"I suppose she does." She shook it off, drank down beer. "So Anita Gaye applies to us because . . . She's the one who backed the muscle who went after us in Prague?" Cleo pursed her lips. "Maybe not such a bimbo."

"She's a calculating, devious woman. And a thief. She has one of the Fates because she stole it from us. From my brother, specifically. She wants all three and won't quibble about the method of acquiring them. That's something we'll use against her. We get to the other two first, then we negotiate."

"So, there's no client. It's your brother."

"My family," he corrected. "Malachi, my brother, is working on another angle, and my sister's researching a third. The trouble we're having is, whatever route we take, Anita Gaye's right there. A step ahead, a step behind, but always close. She's anticipated us, or she has another source of information. Or, more troubling, she's got a way of keeping tabs on us."

"Which is why you and I have been staying at crappy hotels, paying cash, and you've been using a bogus name."

"Which can't go on much longer." He sipped his own beer while scanning the crowded, noisy pub. "I'm reasonably sure we've lost her, for now. It's time you got to work." His lips twitched, then curved. "Partner."

"Doing what?"

"You said you recalled seeing the Fate, which means it's still in your family. So I think the best approach is to start off with a phone call, a nice daughterly call, I think, with just a hint of contrition and apology."

She stabbed one of his chips with her fork. "That's not even funny."

"Wasn't meant to be."

"I'm not calling home like some repentant prodigal."

He only smiled at her.

"I'm not."

"After your story, I'm no fonder of your mother than you are. But you'll call her if you want a fifth of the take."

"A fifth? Check your math, Slick."

"Nothing wrong with my figures. There are four of us, and one of you."

"I want half."

"Well, you can want the world on a string, but you won't get it. A fifth of potentially millions of pounds should be enough to hold you until you reach the ripe age of thirty-five. Are things so strained between you she'd refuse a collect call? Or perhaps you'd do better with your father."

"Neither of them would accept charges if I were calling from the third level of hell. But I'm not making the call anyway."

"You are. We'll just have to put the call on a credit card. How's yours holding up?" When she folded her arms over her chest, stared stonily, he shrugged. "We'll put it on mine, then."

"I'm not doing it."

"Best to find a phone box," he decided. "If Anita has some way of tracking my card, I'd as soon not put a target on my back. Hopefully, we'll be out of London by tomorrow in any case. You need to work in the statue, so I'm thinking a bit of sentiment there. Missing the familiar things of home, that kind of thing. You play it right, maybe one of them'll wire you some money."

"Listen to me. I'll speak very slowly and in short syllables. They wouldn't give me a dime, and I'd slit my own throat before I asked them to."

"Don't know till you try, do you?" He tossed some money on the table. "Let's find a phone box."

How did you argue with someone who didn't argue back but simply kept moving forward like a big, shiny steamroller?

Now she was in a real fix and had very little time to wheedle her way out of it.

She didn't waste her time talking to him as they walked through the light rain that turned the streets glossy black. She had to use her head, calculate her choices.

She could hardly tell him, Gee, no point in calling Mom or Dad because—ha ha—I happen to have the statue right here in my purse!

And if she called—and she'd rather be staked to an anthill than do so—her parents would probably speak to her. Coldly, dutifully, which would only piss her off. If she maintained her temper and asked about the statue, they'd ask her if she was doing drugs. A common inquiry. And she'd be reminded, stiffly, that the little silver statue had stood in her room at home for years. A fact they would know, as her room had been searched weekly for those drugs, which she'd never done, or any sign of immoral, illegal or socially unacceptable behavior.

Since neither of those choices appealed to her, she had to come up with a third.

She was still calculating when he pulled her out of the rain and into a shiny red phone booth. "Take a minute to think about what you're going to say," he advised. "Which one do you think might be best? Mum in Los Angeles? Da in New York?"

"I don't have to decide because I'm not going to call either of them or say anything."

"Cleo." He tucked her wet hair behind her ear. "They really hurt you, didn't they?"

He said it so quietly, so sweetly, she had to elbow her way around and stare out into the rain. "I don't need to call them. I know where it is."

He leaned down, brushed his lips over her hair. "I'm sorry this is hard for you, but we can't keep knocking around from place to place this way."

"I said I know where it is. Get me to New York."

"Cleo—"

"Damn it, stop patting me on the head like I'm a puppy. Give me some goddamn room in here." She used her elbow again to shove him back, then dug into her purse. "Here." She pushed the scanned photograph into his hands.

He stared at it, then lifted his gaze and stared at her. "What the hell is this?"

"The wonders of technology. I made a call from Down Under after our little sight-seeing jaunt. Had a picture taken of it and sent to me on Marcella's computer. I figured you'd cough up the money I wanted, and the ticket,

once you had proof I could get my hands on it. The chase scene changed things. Having a couple of goons come after me upped the stakes.”

“You didn’t bother to show it to me until now.”

“A girl needs an edge, Slick.” She could hear the temper—the cold fire of it—licking at the edges of his voice. She didn’t mind it. “I didn’t know you from Jack the Ripper when we drove out of Prague. I’d have to be pretty stupid to toss all my cards on the table until I had a handle on you.”

“Got one now?” he said softly.

“Enough of one to know you’re supremely pissed, but you’ll choke it back. First, because your mother raised you not to hit girls. Second, because you need me if you want to hold that thing in three dimensions instead of in a picture.”

“Where is it?”

She shook her head. “Get me to New York.”

“How much money do you have?”

“I’m not paying—”

He simply grabbed her purse. She dug her fingers into it like talons and yanked back.

“All right, all right. I’ve got about a thousand.”

“Koruna?”

“Dollars, once they’re exchanged.”

“You’ve got a thousand fucking dollars in here, and you haven’t parted with a single flipping cent since we started?”

“Twenty-five pounds,” she corrected. “Earrings.”

He shoved out of the phone booth. “You’ve just upped your investment, Cleo. You’re paying to get us to New York.”

WHEN ANITA GAYE wined and dined a client, she did so superbly. In general, she considered such matters a business investment. When the client was an attractive, desirable man she’d yet to lure into bed, she considered it a challenge.

Jack Burdett intrigued her on a number of levels. He

wasn't as polished, as smooth, nor was his pedigree as sterling as the men she normally chose for her escorts.

But he was, precisely, the type she often preferred as a lover.

Dark blond hair fell as it chose around a strong, roughly hewn face that was more compelling than handsome. There was a faint scar running along the side of his mouth, a kind of crescent rumor said he'd gotten from flying glass during a bar fight in Cairo. The mouth itself had a sensual, almost hedonistic curve that told her he'd be demanding in bed once she got him there.

He had a tough build to go with that tough face. Broad shoulders and long arms. She knew he boxed as a hobby, and thought he would strip down to his trunks very nicely.

His family had had money once—a few generations back, on his mother's side. Lost, Anita knew, in the stock market crash of '29. Jack hadn't been raised in luxury, and had built his own tidy fortune with his electronics and security firm.

A self-made man, she thought, sipping her wine. Who at the age of thirty-four earned a sturdy seven figures a year. Enough to indulge his other hobby. Collecting.

He'd been married once, and divorced. He owned, among other things, a rehabbed warehouse in SoHo, and lived alone in one of the lofts when he was in the city. He traveled extensively, for both business and pleasure.

He collected, most particularly, antique art pieces with a clearly documented history.

With the first Fate tucked in her safe, Anita hoped Jack Burdett could offer her a path to the others.

"So, tell me all about Madrid." Her voice purred out just over the quiet strains of Mozart. She'd had her staff set up the table for two on the little garden terrace off the third-floor drawing room of her town house. "I've never been, and always wanted to go."

"It was hot." He sampled another bite of the Chateaubriand. It was perfect, of course, as was the wine, the level of the music, the light scent of verbena and roses. And the face and form of the woman across from him.

Jack never trusted perfection.

"I didn't have much time for recreation. The client kept me busy. A few more that paranoid and I can retire."

"Who was it?" When he only smiled and continued to eat, she pouted. "You're so frustratingly discreet, Jack. I'm hardly going to race off to Spain and try to get through your security and rob the man."

"My clients pay me for discretion. They get what they pay for," he added. "You should know."

"It's just that I find your work so fascinating. All those complicated alarm systems, infrared this and motion-detecting that. Come to think of it, with your expertise, you'd make a hell of a burglar, wouldn't you?"

"Crime pays, but not nearly well enough." She wanted something from him, he decided. The intimate meal at home was the first tip-off. Anita liked to go out, where she could see and be seen.

If he'd let ego rule him, he might have convinced himself what she had on her mind was sex. Though he had no doubt she'd enjoy sex, nearly as much as she'd enjoy using it, he imagined there was more here.

The woman was a ruthless operator. It wasn't something he held against her. But neither did he intend to become another trophy on her very crowded shelf, or another tool in her formidable arsenal.

He let her guide the conversation. He was in no hurry for her to get to whatever point she had. She was an attractive companion, and an interesting one who was knowledgeable about art, literature, music. Though he didn't share a great many of her tastes, he appreciated them.

In any case, he liked the house. He'd liked it more when Paul Morningside had been alive, but a house was a house. And this one was a jewel.

A jewel that maintained its dignity and its style decade after decade. And could, he assumed, continue to maintain that dignity regardless of its mistress. The Adam fireplaces would always be stunning frames for simmering fires. The Waterford chandeliers would continue to drip sparkling light on gleaming wood, glinting glass and hand-painted china no matter who warmed themselves by the flame or turned the switch for the lamp.

The Venetian side chairs would be just as lovely no matter who sat in them.

It was one of the aspects he most appreciated about the continuity of the old and the rare.

Not that he could fault Anita's taste. The rooms were still elegantly furnished with the art, the antiques, the flowers placed just so.

No one would ever call it homey, he supposed, but as livable galleries went, it was one of the finest in the city.

As he'd designed and installed the security, he knew every inch of it. As a collector, he approved of how that space was used to display the beautiful and the precious, and rarely refused an invitation.

Still, by the time they'd reached the dessert and coffee stage, his mind was beginning to drift toward home. He wanted to plop down in his underwear and catch a little ESPN.

"I had an inquiry from a client a few weeks ago that might interest you."

"Yeah?"

She knew she was losing him. It was frustrating, infuriating and strangely arousing to have to work so hard to keep a man's attention. "It was about the Three Fates. Do you know the story?"

He stirred his coffee, slow, circular motions. "The Three Fates?"

"I thought you might have heard of them, since your collection runs to that type of art. Legendary, so to speak. Three small silver statues, depicting the Three Fates of Greek mythology." When he only watched her politely, Anita told him the story, carefully picking her way through fact and fantasy in the hope of whetting his appetite.

Jack ate his lemon torte, made appropriate noises, asked the occasional question. But his mind had jumped very far ahead.

She wanted him to help her find the Fates, he mused. He knew of them, of course. Tales of them had been among his bedtime stories as a child.

If Anita was interested enough to hunt them down, it meant she believed all three were still accessible.

He finished off his coffee. She was going to be very disappointed.

“Naturally,” she continued, “I explained to my client that if they ever existed, one was lost with Henry Wyley, which negates the possibility of a complete set. The other two seem to be lost in the maze of history, so even the satisfaction of locating two-thirds of the set would take considerable effort. It’s a pity when you think what a find they would be. Not just in financial worth, but artistically, historically.”

“Yeah, it’s a shame all right. No line on the other two?”

“Oh, hints now and then.” She moved her bare shoulders, swirled her after-dinner brandy. “As I said, they’re legendary, at least among high-end dealers and serious collectors, so rumors about their whereabouts pop up occasionally. The way you travel, and the contacts you’ve made around the world, I thought you might have heard about them.”

“Maybe I haven’t asked the right people the right questions.”

She leaned forward. Some men might have thought the candlelight flickering in her eyes made them dreamy, romantic. To Jack they were avaricious.

“Maybe you haven’t,” she agreed. “If you do, I’d love to hear the answers.”

“You’ll be the first,” he assured her.

WHEN HE GOT back to his loft, he stripped off his shirt, turned on the TV and caught the last ten minutes of the Braves crushing the Mets. It was a keen disappointment, as he’d had twenty on the Mets, which just went to show you what happens when you bet on sentiment.

He muted the screen, then picked up the phone and made a call. He asked the right person the right questions, and had no intention of sharing the answers.

Nine

HENRY W. Wyley, Tia discovered, had been a man of diverse interests with a great lust for life. He had, she supposed, due to his working-class background, put a great deal of stock in status and appearances.

He hadn't been a man to pinch pennies, and though by his own admission had enjoyed the attributes of young, comely females, had remained faithful to his wife throughout their more than three decades of marriage.

That, too, she imagined, stemmed from his working-class roots and mores.

As a writer, however, he could have used a good editor.

He would ramble on about some dinner party, describing the food—of which he seemed inordinately fond—in such detail she could almost begin to taste the lobster bisque or rare roast beef. He talked of other guests until she could begin to imagine the music, the fashions, the conversations. And just when she'd lose herself in the moment, he'd shift into business mode and list, painstakingly, his current investments and interest rates, along with his own pedantic views on the politics that drove them.

He was a man, Tia learned, who loved his money and loved spending it, who doted on his children and grand-

children and considered good food one of life's greatest pleasures.

His pride in Wyley Antiques was paramount, and his ambition to make it the most prestigious dealer a steady drive. Out of that ambition had come his interest, and his desire, for the Three Fates.

Here, he had done his research. He'd tracked Clotho to Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1914. A large section of the journal was devoted to his delighted boasting of wheeling and dealing, and his ultimate purchase of the silver Fate for four hundred twenty-five dollars.

Highway robbery, he'd called it, and Tia could only agree.

He had, by his own account, all but stolen the statue that would be, in less than a year, stolen from him in turn.

But old Henry, unaware of his own fate, kept his ear to the ground. He seemed to delight in the hunt every bit as much as he did in the anticipation of a seven-course meal.

In the spring of that next year, he had linked Lachesis to a wealthy barrister named Simon White-Smythe, Mansfield Court, London.

He booked passage for himself and his wife, Edith, on the doomed ship, believing he would finagle the second Fate for himself, for Wyley's, then follow his next lead, toward Atropus, to Bath.

Uniting the Three Fates was his great ambition. For the sake of art, yes, but more for the sheen it would layer over Wyleys and his family. And, Tia thought, even more than that, for the sheer fun of it all.

As she read, Tia made her own notes. She'd check his facts, use his detailing to find more.

She had an ambition and an anticipation of her own now. Though they had sprung out of injured pride and anger, they were no less formidable than her ancestor's.

She would track down the Fates, and would—in a manner she'd yet to completely pin down—reclaim Henry's property.

She would find them with meticulous research, consistent logic, careful cross-referencing, just as he had done.

When she had them, she would astonish her father, one-up the oh-so-clever Anita Gaye and skewer the detestable Malachi Sullivan.

When her phone rang, she was sitting at the desk in her office, her glasses perched on her nose as she sipped a protein supplement. As usual when she was working, she told herself to let the machine pick up. And as usual, she worried it might be some sort of emergency only she could handle.

She fretted over that for two rings, then gave in.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Marsh?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to speak to you about your work. Specific areas of your work.”

She frowned at the phone, at the unrecognizable male voice. “My work? Who is this?”

“I think we have a mutual interest. So . . . what are you wearing?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I bet you’ve got on silk panties. Red silk—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” She slammed down the phone. Embarrassed, shaken, she hugged herself and rocked. “Pervert. That’s it. I’m getting an unlisted number.”

She picked up the journal again. Set it down. You’d think being listed as T. J. Marsh would be enough to protect a woman from rude, disgusting calls by sick people.

She brooded over it and pulled out the white pages to look up the phone company’s business office when her doorbell chimed.

Her first reaction was annoyance at the interruption, and on its heels rushed a paralyzing fear. It was the man on the phone. He would break into her apartment, attack her. Rape her. Then slit her throat from ear to ear with the large, jagged-edge knife he carried.

“Don’t be stupid, don’t be stupid.” She rubbed a hand over her mouth as she got to her feet. “Obscene phone callers are idiots, nuisances who hide behind technology. It’s just your mother, or Mrs. Lockley from downstairs. It’s nothing.”

But she inched her way out of the office, staring at the front door as she crossed the room. With her heart hammering, she eased up on her toes and looked through the peep.

The sight of the big, tough-faced man in a black leather jacket had her gasping, spinning around with her hand to her throat, which she imagined was about to be cut. She looked around wildly and grabbed the closest weapon. Armed with a bronze figure of Circe, she squeezed her eyes tight.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“Dr. Marsh? Dr. Tia Marsh?”

“I’m calling the police.”

“I am the police. Detective Burdett, ma’am, NYPD. I’m holding my shield up to the judas hole.”

She’d read a book once in which the homicidal maniac had shot one of his victims through the peephole. A bullet in the eye and straight into the brain. Shaking now, she jerked toward the peep and away again, trying to get a look without risking a violent death.

It looked like proper identification.

“What’s this about, Detective Burdett?”

“I’d just like to ask you a few questions, Dr. Marsh. If I could come in? You can leave the door open if you’d be more comfortable.”

She bit her lip. If you couldn’t trust the police, she told herself, where were you? She set the bronze aside and unlocked the door. “Is there a problem, Detective?”

He smiled now, a friendly, reassuring gesture. “That’s what I’d like to talk to you about.” He stepped inside, pleased that she felt safe enough to shut the door behind him.

“Has there been some trouble in the building?”

“No, ma’am. Could we sit down?”

“Yes, of course.” She gestured to a chair, then perched on the edge of another when he sat.

“Nice place.”

“Thank you.”

“I guess you get your taste for antiques and such from your father.”

The blood drained out of her face. “Is something wrong with my father?”

"No. But this has something to do with your father's line of work, and yours. What do you know about a set of silver statues known as the Three Fates?"

He saw her pupils dilate. That quick jolt of shock. And knew his instincts here were on target. "What is this about?" she demanded. "Is this about Malachi Sullivan?"

"Does he have something to do with the Fates?"

"I hope you've arrested him," she said bitterly. "I hope you have him in jail this minute. And if he gave you my name thinking I'd help him wheedle out, you're wasting your time."

"Dr. Marsh—"

He saw the instant she made him, heard the quick gasp an instant before she tried to leap up. He was faster, and pinned her back in the chair.

"Take it easy now."

"You're the one who called on the phone. You're not a cop at all. He sent you, didn't he?"

Jack had expected tears, screams, and was impressed when she stared holes through him instead.

"I don't know your Malachi Sullivan, Tia. My name's Jack Burdett, Burdett Securities."

"You're just another liar, and a pervert on top of it." Fury was shrinking back, and she could feel her throat closing. "I need my inhaler."

"You need to stay calm," he corrected when she started to wheeze. "I've done business with your father. You can check with him."

"My father doesn't do business with perverts."

"Listen, I'm sorry about that. Your phone's tapped; when I realized it, I said the first thing that came to mind."

"My phone is not tapped."

"Honey, I make my living knowing this stuff. Now, I want you to relax. I'm going to give you my phone; it's secure. I want you to call the Sixty-first Precinct and ask for Detective Robbins, Bob Robbins. You ask him if he knows me, if he'll vouch for me. If he doesn't, you tell him to send a radio car to this address. Okay with that?"

She pressed her lips together. He had hands like rock,

she thought, and a cold expression on his face that warned her she wasn't going to get away. "Give me the phone."

He eased back, reached one hand into his jacket and took out both a small phone and a business card.

"That's my company. I'd let you call your father for another reference, but I don't know if his phones are secure."

She kept her attention on Jack as she contacted information. "I want the number for the Sixty-first Precinct in Manhattan. I want you to connect me."

Jack nodded. "Ask for the Detectives Division, Bob Robbins."

She did, and worked on her breathing. "Detective Robbins? Yes, this is Tia Marsh." She spoke clearly, gave her address down to the apartment number.

Good, Jack thought. She wasn't an idiot.

"There's a man in my apartment. He gained entrance by impersonating a police officer. He says his name is Jack Burdett and that you'll reassure me as to his character." She lifted her brows. "About six-two, two hundred thirty. Dark blond hair, gray eyes. Yes, a small scar, right side of the mouth. I see. Yes, I see. I couldn't agree more, thank you."

She tilted her ear away from the phone for a moment. "Detective Robbins confirms that he knows you, that you're not a psychopath, and assures me he'll be happy to kick your butt for impersonating an officer, as well as issue a warrant for your arrest should I want to pursue that option. He also says you owe him twenty dollars. He'd like to speak with you."

"Thanks." Jack took the phone, and a step back. "Yeah, yeah. I'll fill you in first chance I get. What fake ID? I don't know what you're talking about. Later." He broke the connection, pocketing the phone. "Okay?" he asked Tia.

"No, it's not okay. It's certainly not okay. Excuse me."

She popped out of the chair and marched out of the room. Because he wasn't entirely sure she wasn't going for a weapon, Jack followed her.

She opened a cupboard in the kitchen, and his brows shot up at the rows of pill bottles. She snagged aspirin,

wrenched open the refrigerator. "I have a tension headache, thank you very much."

"I apologize. I couldn't risk the phone. Look." He lifted the kitchen portable off its stand, opened the mouthpiece. "See this? It's a tap—decent quality."

"Since I wouldn't know a listening device from a horned toad, I'll just have to take your word, won't I?"

His research hadn't indicated she was quick. "Guess you will. I'd be careful what I said on this line."

"Why should I take your word, Mr. Burdett?"

"Jack, make it Jack. Got any coffee?" Her withering look made him shrug. "Okay. Anita Gaye." He smiled when she slowly lowered the water bottle. "Thought that would ring a bell. Odds are she's the one who got your phone tapped. She wants the Fates, and you and your family have a connection to them. Henry Wyley's statue of Clotho wasn't lost on the *Lusitania*, was it, Tia?"

"If you and Anita are friends, ask her."

"I didn't say we were friends. I'm a collector. That's something you can confirm with your father, but I'd appreciate it if you'd do it face-to-face so Anita isn't tracking my moves. I've bought some nice pieces from Wyley's. The latest was a Laliqve vase, molded. Six nude maidens pouring water from urns. I like naked women," he said with a chuckle. "Sue me."

"I thought you liked red silk panties."

"I haven't got anything against them."

"I can't help you, Mr. Burdett. You might as well go back and tell Ms. Gaye she's wasting her time with me."

"I don't work with or for Anita. I work for myself, and I have a personal interest in the Fates. Anita dropped some bait on me, gotta figure she's hoping I'll do some of her legwork and lead her to them. She miscalculated. She's covering bases with you, too," he added, gesturing toward the phone. "I'm betting you know something she doesn't. I think we can help each other out."

"Why should I help you, even if I could?"

"Because I'm really good at what I do. You tell me what you know and I'll find them. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"I haven't decided what I know."

"Who's Malachi Sullivan?"

"That's one thing I'm sure of." Sure because the mere mention of his name made her chest tight. "He's a liar and a cheat. He claimed that Anita duped him, but for all I know they're thick as . . . thieves," she decided.

"Where would I find him?"

"I assume he's back in Ireland. Cobh. But I'd prefer he was roasting in hell."

"What's his connection?"

She hesitated, then could find no reason not to elaborate. "He claims that Anita stole one of the Fates from him, but as his tongue would probably turn black if it tasted truth, I've reason to doubt that. Now, this has been very interesting, but you've interrupted my work."

"You've got my card. You think about it, get in touch." He started out, then turned and looked back at her. "If you know anything, be careful where you step. Anita's a snake, Tia, the kind that likes to gulp down soft, pretty things."

"And what are you, Mr. Burdett?"

"I'm a man who respects and appreciates the whims of fate."

Malachi Sullivan, he thought as he walked out.

It looked as if Jack was going to take a trip to Ireland.

IT WAS A long trip from London to New York. Longer when you were wedged into a center seat the size of a postage stamp between a woman whose legs were nearly as long as your own and a man who used his elbows like switchblades.

Gideon tried to bury himself in his book, but even Steinbeck's brilliant prose couldn't compete. So he spent the hours thinking, winding his way through the morass of the situation he, and his family, had gotten themselves into.

He survived the flight, then shuffled brainlessly through the agony of customs and baggage retrieval.

"You're sure about this friend of yours," he asked Cleo.

"Look, you asked me to come up with a friend in the

city who'd put us up for a few days, no questions, no hassles because you're too cheap to spring for a hotel. That's Mikey."

"I can't afford a bloody hotel at this point, and I don't know how you can trust a grown man named Mikey."

"You're just cranky." Cleo took deep gulps of air as they walked through the terminal. It was airport air, but it was New York. "You should've slept on the plane. I slept like a log."

"I know it, and for that single act, I'll hate you till my dying day."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch. It won't bother me a bit." She stepped outside, into the choking exhaust and helacious noise. "Oh baby, I am back!"

He'd hoped to doze in the cab, but the driver had some sort of eye-twitching Indian music on the radio.

"How long have you known this Mikey?"

"I don't know. Six, seven years, I guess. We've done some gigs together."

"He's a stripper?"

"No, he's not a stripper," Cleo retorted. "He's a dancer, and so am I. Look, I've done Broadway." Briefly, but she'd done it. "We were partnered up in the revival of *Grease*. Did the road tour."

"The two of you have a thing going?"

"No." She tucked her tongue in her cheek. "Mikey's a lot more likely to hit on you than on me."

"Oh. Wonderful."

"You're not homophobic, are you?"

"I don't think so." He was too tired to search his social conscience. "Just remember the cover story and stick to it."

"Shut up, Slick. You're spoiling my homecoming."

"Been a week with the woman," he grumbled as he shut his eyes. "Not once does she use my name."

Cleo glanced over at him and found herself smiling. He was all rumped and tapped out and so damn cute with it. He'd be feeling a whole lot better in a day or two, after she implemented her plan.

He wasn't the only one who'd spent time thinking on the flight.

The first order of business was getting the statue to a nice, secure place. Say a bank box. Then she'd contact Anita Gaye and get down to serious negotiations. She figured she could settle for a cool million. And being a stand-up gal, she intended to split it with Gideon.

Sixty-forty.

Oh, he'd bitch about it, but she'd bring him around. A bird in the hand, after all. He was never going to finesse the first Fate from a woman like Gaye. Not in this lifetime. And if he wanted to go chasing off after the third, well, he'd have financial backing.

She was doing him a favor. Payback, to her way of thinking, for getting her to New York, and for finding her a way to plump up her bank account. Six hundred thousand would tide her over very nicely.

After he'd calmed down, maybe he'd hang in New York for a few weeks. She'd like to show him around. Show him off, too.

Despite the heat, Cleo rolled down the window so New York could slap her in the face. The blast of horns was music as the cab inched its way in jerks through crosstown traffic.

By the time they pulled to the curb in front of Mikey's building off Ninth, she was riding on such a high she didn't think to complain when Gideon told her to pay the driver.

"So what do you think?" she demanded.

"About what?" he asked groggily.

"New York. You said you hadn't been here before."

He looked around numbly. "It's crowded. It's noisy, and everybody looks annoyed about something."

"Yeah." Cleo felt sentimental tears clog her throat. "It's the best." She danced up to the call box at the entrance to the building and pressed Mikey's button.

Moments later there was a long, vaguely obscene sucking sound that made Cleo laugh. "Mikey, you perv. Buzz me in. It's Cleo."

"Cleo? Damn! Get your fine, firm ass in here."

The buzzer sounded, locks clicked, and Cleo dragged open the door. There was a tiny closet of a lobby and a

dull gray elevator that made suspicious grinding noises as the doors opened. But Cleo, apparently unconcerned, stepped right on and pushed a button for the third floor.

“Mikey’s from Georgia,” Cleo told Gideon. “From a fine upstanding family full of doctors and lawyers. Since we both ended up being an embarrassment to our parents, we bonded fast.”

At the moment, Gideon didn’t care if Mikey came from Georgia or the moon, whether he was gay or had three heads. As long as he had a shower with hot running water and an available bed.

When the doors ground open again, Gideon got a glimpse of a tall, dark-skinned man wearing a red muscle shirt, tight black pants and an explosion of glossy dreadlocks. He let out a ululant howl that had Gideon bracing for attack, then moved like lightning.

Cleo was plucked off her feet and swung around. Before Gideon could react, she was plunked down again, then whipped into some sort of dance—he thought it was a kind of jitterbug—that spun her and her partner down the narrow hallway.

She didn’t miss a beat and ended the impromptu number with her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs around his waist.

“Baby doll, where have you *been*?”

“Everywhere. Jesus, Mikey, you look great.”

“Damn right I do.” He kissed her, one cheek, the other, then with a humming smack on the lips. “You look like you’ve been dragged through the street and dumped on the curb.”

“Could use a shower.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “So could my friend.”

Mikey angled his head, his body and gave Gideon a long, piercing look. “Mmm, what *have* you brought me, Cleopatra?”

“His name’s Gideon.” Enjoying herself, Cleo ran her tongue over her top lip. “He’s Irish. I picked him up in Prague. I’m keeping him for a while.”

“He’s fucking gorgeous.”

“Yeah. He’s got some personality flaws, but in the looks department, he’s aces. Come on, Slick, don’t be shy.”

“Does that mean the show’s over for now?”

“Moves well,” Mikey commented when Gideon came down the hall. “Lovely accent.”

“So’s yours.”

At Gideon’s response, Mikey’s lips spread in a huge, toothy grin. “Come inside. I want to hear everything.” And though in Gideon’s opinion the man was built like a toothpick, he carried Cleo’s not unsubstantial weight into the apartment.

“It’s humble,” he added, setting Cleo down, patting her ass. “But it’s home.”

Gideon didn’t see humble. What he saw was color, from the navy blue walls and white trim, the dozens of theater posters, the wildly geometric pattern in the rug. The couch was white leather, big as a boat and piled with plump, multicolored pillows.

He imagined falling facedown on it and sleeping for the rest of his life.

“Cocktails,” Mikey announced. “Tall, frosty cocktails.”

“I think Slick here could use a tall, frosty shower first,” Cleo said. “Go ahead, back through the bedroom there, on the right.”

He glanced at Mikey, got a friendly wave of invitation. “Help yourself, handsome.”

“Thanks.” Gideon hauled his duffel with him and left them alone.

“Gin and tonics, I think.” Mikey crossed to the glossy white bar. “Lots of ice, lots of gin and a whiff of tonic for form. Then you can tell Daddy all.”

“Sounds perfect. Mikey, can we bunk here a couple days?”

“*Mi casa*, and all that, sugarplum.”

“It’s a hell of a story.” She crossed over to the bedroom door, angled her head in until she heard the shower start. Then, easing the door shut, she walked back to the bar and told him the whole of it.

Gideon was wet and naked when she stepped into the

bathroom with a gin and tonic. "Thought this might come in handy."

"Thanks." He took the glass, downed the contents in one grateful gulp. "Do we stay?"

"We stay," she confirmed. "In fact, he's generously offered you his bed."

Gideon remembered it from his pass through to the shower. Big, soft, red. And so appealing at that point he'd barely blinked at the mirrors on the ceiling over it. "Do I have to sleep with him?"

She laughed. "No, you get me. Go ahead, tune out for a few hours."

"I will. In the morning, we're going to work out how to get our hands on the Fate. I'm too punchy to think straight now."

"Then get some sleep. Mikey and I can spend some time catching up before he leaves for the theater. He's in the chorus of *Kiss Me, Kate*."

"Good for him. Tell him I appreciate the hospitality."

Still naked, still damp, Gideon went to the bed, crawled in and conked out.

HE WOKE TO the sounds of horns and the rumble of garbage trucks. While his brain caught up he stared in mild fascination at the reflection in the overhead mirror. The red sheets hit him at the waist so that he looked as if he'd been cut in two during the night.

No, he corrected. Like they had.

Cleo was sprawled over him, her hair swept back, black against red, so that it seemed to melt into the sheets. Her skin was shades darker than his own so that the arm she'd flung over his chest, the long curve of her shoulder, the long line of her back lay like gold dust against the white of him and the glossy scarlet sheets.

He remembered the dreamy sensation of her sliding into bed sometime in the night. Of her sliding over him in the dark. And him sliding into her.

She hadn't spoken, not a word. He hadn't been able to see her. But he'd known the shape of her, and the taste.

Even the scent. What did it mean, he wondered, when he knew her so instantly, so intimately in the dark?

He'd have to think about it, eventually. Just as he'd have to analyze why, with a bed as big as a lake, they'd tangled together in sleep, and held on.

But for now there were other things to think about. A man couldn't trust his brain until it had been primed with coffee.

He started to ease away and was surprised and oddly touched when Cleo shifted closer and snuggled in. It made him want to cuddle right back, and perhaps wake her so he could make proper use of the mirror on the ceiling.

Won't do, he thought and, giving her a careless kiss on the top of her head, untangled himself.

He tugged on jeans and, leaving her sleeping, went out to find the kitchen.

His first jolt of the day didn't come from caffeine, but from seeing Mikey stretched out on the white leather couch all but buried in the colorful pillows, his own dreadlocks and a sheet of bright emerald green.

Though it felt awkward, the desire for coffee was stronger than his sense of propriety. Gideon skirted the couch and moved as quietly as possible into the kitchen.

It was like a page from a catalogue, all glossy and spotless with a number of canny-looking devices tidily arranged on the counter. He opened cupboards, found dishes of navy and white, in perfectly alternating stacks. Glasses, arranged according to type and size. And finally, when he was on the point of whimpering, a bag of coffee. He opened it, swore under his breath when he stared into a bag of fragrant beans.

"What the hell do I do with these? Chew them?"

"You could, but it's easier to grind them."

Gideon jolted, spun and stared.

Mikey was wearing a pair of gold briefs that barely covered his balls.

"Ah . . . sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

"I sleep like a cat." Mikey plucked the bag from Gideon's hand and poured some of the beans into a

grinder. "Nothing like the smell of freshly ground beans," he said over the noise of it. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did, yes, thanks. We shouldn't have kicked you out of your own bed."

"Two of you, one of me." He sent Gideon a sidelong look as he measured out water. "You must be starving. How about some breakfast to go with this? I'm in the mood for French toast."

"That'd be brilliant. It's kind of you to let us drop in on you this way."

"Oh, Cleo and me, we go back." With a careless wave, Mikey started the coffee, then turned to get eggs and milk from the refrigerator. "That girl's my honey. I'm so glad to see her back, and hooked up with someone with style. I warned her about that Sidney character. He looked tasty, no argument there, but he was all flash, no substance. And what does he do but steal her money and leave her high and dry." He made disapproving sounds while he cracked eggs into a bowl. "And in Prague, of all places. But she told you all about that."

"Not really." And Gideon was fascinated. "You know Cleo. She tends to skim over the details."

"Wouldn't have run off with that rat bastard, excuse my French, if her daddy hadn't told her, again, how she was wasting her time, how she was embarrassing herself and the family."

"How?"

"Dancing. Theater." He said it with a deliberately dramatic air, doing a fluid leg extension as he got down coffee mugs. "Fraternalizing with people like me. Not only a black man, but a *gay* black man. A gay, black, dancing man. I mean, *really*. Cream, sugar?"

"No, thanks. Just straight." He winced. "That is—"

Mikey let out a rollicking laugh. "Me, I like a whole *lot* of sugar. He wouldn't like you, either," Mikey added as he handed Gideon a mug. "Our Cleopatra's daddy."

"No? Well, fuck him." Gideon lifted his mug in toast, then drank. "Ah, God be praised."

"Drink up, honey." Mikey dipped thick slices of sour-

dough bread in the egg batter. “You and me, we’re going to get along just fine.”

And they did. Plowing through half a loaf of bread, a pot of coffee and nearly a quart of the orange juice Mikey squeezed fresh.

By the time Cleo staggered out of the bedroom, Gideon no longer found anything odd about the gold briefs, the tattoo of a dragon on Mikey’s left shoulder blade or being called honey by another man.

PART TWO

Measuring

*I have measured out my life
with coffee spoons.*

T. S. ELIOT

“SUGARPLUM, I’m not sure you’re doing the right thing here.”

“I’m doing the smart thing,” Cleo insisted. “The smart thing’s always the right thing.”

“Whatever’s going on between you and Gideon is going to get screwed up.” Mikey shook his head as they hit the bustle of Broadway and squeezed through the eastbound crosswalk traffic. “I’ve got a good feeling about you two, and you’re going to fuck it over before you get it started.”

“You’re too romantic for your own good.”

“Can’t be,” he disagreed. “Romance turns sex into art. Without it, it’s just a messy, sweaty business.”

“That’s why you get your heart broken, Mikey, and I don’t.”

“A little heartbreak would do you good.”

“Don’t sulk.” Because she knew he would, she slid an arm around his waist as they turned on the corner of Seventh and Fifty-second and headed north. “Besides, I’m doing this for him as well as myself. Once Anita’s got the Fate, she’ll leave him alone, and he’ll have a big fat pile of money out of it. The statue *is* mine, after all. I don’t have to share, but I’m going to.”

She gave him a quick squeeze as she swung into the

bank. "Let's make this as fast as we can. If I don't meet him by one, he's going to ask questions, and," she added, dropping her voice as they stepped into the quiet lobby, "he's got something going himself right this minute, or he'd never have agreed so easily to me heading out to run some errands without him."

"Your trouble, Cleopatra, is you're a cynic."

"You try working a few months in a strip club in the Czech Republic," she chided. "We'll see if you come out of it with a Pollyanna complex."

"You didn't go into this with one," he pointed out, and she gave him a smirk as she stepped up to a teller.

"I need to get a safe-deposit box."

WHEN SHE WALKED back out on Seventh, the Fate was safely locked in the vault. Both she and Mikey had keys. That, she'd calculated, was the smartest move. If there was any trouble, which she didn't anticipate, he could retrieve the statue in her stead.

"Okay, now I make the call, set up the meet. Someplace public," she added as she held out a hand for Mikey's cell phone. "But where it's unlikely anyone we know will come by and recognize us."

"It's like a spy thriller." And because he loved a good melodrama, Mikey grinned as he handed her his phone.

"It's business. And I've got the perfect spot for it." She pulled out the scrap of paper on which she'd written the number for Morningside, and dialed as they walked toward Sixth. "Anita Gaye, please. It's Cleo Toliver. I think she'll recognize the name and speak with me. Now. If she doesn't, just tell her I'm calling to discuss the price of fate. Yes, that's right."

With her destination already in mind, she turned south on Fifth. And lost Mikey briefly when he glued himself to a jewelry store window.

"Stay with me, and don't be such a girl." She gave one of his dreads a tug. "This is serious business."

"Ooh, you sound all cold and tough," Mikey com-

mented. "Like Joan Crawford or—no, no Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*. A woman with balls."

"Shut up, Mikey," she ordered and bit back a snicker as Anita Gaye came on the line.

"Cleo." The voice didn't sound cold or tough, but soft and warm as velvet. "I can't tell you how delighted I am to hear from you."

Cleo considered it a good sign Anita had agreed to the terms of the meeting without hesitation. She thought of the wild race across Europe and shook her head. Men, she decided. They had to flex their muscles, turn a simple business deal into an altercation.

No wonder the world was so screwed up.

SHE FELT A little foolish with her choice of arenas. But Mikey was getting such a kick out of it all now, she deemed it worth it.

"*An Affair to Remember*. Cary Grant, Deborah Kerr." He stood on the observation level of the Empire State Building, arms spread, dreads flying. "That's romance, baby."

And the difference between them, Cleo mused, was that the spot reminded her not of poignant romance but of King Kong's fatal obsession with Faye Wray.

She considered Faye Wray's character a moron. Cringing and screaming on the ledge—waiting for the big, strong man to rescue her, Cleo thought, instead of getting her ass moving when the idiot ape set her down.

Well, it took all kinds.

"You go stand over there, keep me in sight. When she shows, I'll give you a sign if she gives me any grief. Then you can hulk over and help me out." She checked the Wonder Woman watch Mikey had lent her. "She'll be here any minute. If she's on time, we'll stay on schedule. I've got a good half hour before I'm supposed to meet Gideon."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"Same old, same old, until I have the cash in hand. I can

stall him for another twenty-four hours, and that's the deadline I'll give Anita."

"A million smackeroos is a lot to put together in a day, Cleo."

"We're talking Morningside here, and that spells beaucoup *dinero*. She wants the Fate, she'll find a way. I'm going to stand over there and practice looking bored."

She wandered to the safety rail, leaned back on it and watched the elevator through the glass. Tourists swarmed the souvenir shop inside or stood outside snapping pictures, shoving coins into the telescopes.

She wondered if anyone who lived in the city ever came here unless they were dragged along by out-of-towners. And she wondered why anyone felt compelled to come all the way up here when all the action, all the life, all the meaning was down on the streets.

Her belly tightened when she saw the spiffy-looking woman step out of the elevator. Anita had said she'd be wearing a blue suit. The number was blue all right—smoke blue with a long, sleek jacket, a tube of a skirt cut at a conservative length.

Valentino, Cleo decided. All richly understated and whispering of class.

She waited while Anita slipped on dark glasses and stepped out into the wind. Watched while the woman scanned the area, the faces, and honed in on her.

She shifted the slim leather portfolio bag on her shoulder and crossed over. "Cleo Toliver?"

"Anita Gaye." Cleo accepted the handshake while the two women measured each other.

"I almost expected to have to exchange passwords." There was a trace of humor in the tone as Anita glanced around. "You know, this is the first time I've been up here. What *is* the point?"

Since it so clearly mirrored her own sentiments, Cleo nodded. "You got that right. But it seemed like a good place to do a little private business in a public place. A place where we'd both feel comfortable."

"We'd both feel more comfortable at a table at Raphael's, but I imagine Gideon's filled you with trepida-

tion about dealing with me.” Anita spread her arms, looking chic, attractively windblown and amused. “As you can see, I’m no threat.”

“The muscle you had chase us down in Prague didn’t seem very friendly.”

“An unfortunate miscommunication, which often happens when you’re dealing with men, doesn’t it?” Anita tucked her hair behind her ear. “My representatives were instructed to stop by your place of employment and speak to you. No more, no less. Apparently Gideon, and they, became a little overexcited. In point of fact, Cleo, my representatives thought you were being abducted, and pursued.”

“Is that right?”

“A miscue, as I said. In any case, I’m happy you’re back in New York safe and sound. I’m sure you and I can discuss the matter without the histrionics.” She glanced around again. “Gideon’s not with you?”

“I brought someone else, in case of histrionics.” She could see Mikey over Anita’s shoulder. He stood several feet away elaborately flexing his biceps. “First, what made you track me down and instruct your representatives to speak with me?”

“A hunch, after considerable research. Both are vital in my business. This meeting today makes me assume both were accurate. Do you have the Fate, Cleo?”

If there’d been more time, Cleo would’ve made her work harder, for form’s sake. “I’ve got it in a safe place. I’m willing to sell it. One million dollars, cash.”

Anita let out a laughing breath. “A million dollars? Gideon certainly told you some fairy tales.”

“Don’t try to hose me, Anita. You want the statue, that’s the price. Nonnegotiable. That gives you two of three since you’ve already stolen one from Gideon’s brother.”

“Stolen?” Annoyance flashed through her as she turned to pace. As she paced, she scanned the others on the deck, trying to pick out Cleo’s backup. “Those Sullivans. I should sue them for slander. Morningside’s reputation is above reproach. And so is mine,” she added tightly as she stopped to face Cleo again. “I *purchased* that statue from

Malachi Sullivan and will be happy to produce the signed receipt. For all I know he may very well have told his brother some trumped-up story and kept the money for himself. But I will not have them spreading vicious lies about my company.”

“How much did you pay him?”

“Less.” She seemed to draw herself in. “Considerably less than your asking price.”

“Then you got a bargain first time out. You get number two, you pay. You can have her in your hands tomorrow, three o’clock, right here in this spot. You bring the cash, I bring the girl.”

“Cleo.” Anita’s lips curved thinly. “I’ve dealt with the Sullivans. How do I know you’re not as underhanded as they? I have no assurance you actually have the Fate.”

Saying nothing, Cleo reached in her bag and took out the photograph.

“Lachesis,” Anita murmured as she studied the photo. “How do I know this is authentic?”

“I guess you play your hunch. Look, my grandmother gave it to me when I was a kid. She had a couple of loose screws and thought about it like a doll. Up until about a week ago, I considered it a sort of good-luck charm. A million buys me a hell of a lot of luck.”

Anita continued to study the picture as she considered her options. The rundown confirmed what Cleo’s father had told Anita during a long evening of perfectly prepared coq au vin, a superior Pinot Noir and mediocre sex. Interestingly, the man hadn’t known that his daughter was in New York, or had been in Prague. In fact, he couldn’t have been less informed or concerned about his only child’s whereabouts or well-being.

Which meant, handily, no one was likely to look if Cleo Toliver suddenly disappeared.

“I assume the Fate is yours, legally.”

Cleo arched her eyebrows. “Possession and all that.”

“Yes.” Anita smiled and couldn’t have agreed more. “Of course.”

She took the picture back, tucked it in her bag. “Your call, Anita.”

“That’s a lot of money in a short amount of time. We can meet tomorrow—that table at Raphael’s. You bring the statue so I can examine it, I’ll bring a quarter million as deposit.”

“All, straight exchange, right here at three. Or I put it on the open market.”

“I’m a professional dealer—”

“I’m not,” Cleo interrupted. “And I’ve got another appointment. Fish or cut bait.”

“All right. But I’m not carrying that kind of cash into this place.” She looked around, a faint line of annoyance between her perfect eyebrows. “A restaurant, Cleo. Let’s be civilized. You pick the spot if you don’t trust me.”

“That’s reasonable. Teresa’s in the East Village. I’ve got a yen for some goulash. Make it one o’clock.”

“One o’clock.” Anita offered her hand again. “And if you decide to give up the theater, I could use someone like you at Morningside.”

“Thanks, but I’ll stick with what I know. See you tomorrow.”

She waited until Anita was back in the elevator. Then she counted to ten, slowly. When she turned to where Mikey was waiting, she broke out in a grin.

She did a quick tap-shuffle in his direction. “Kiss me, baby, I’m rich!”

“She went for it?”

“All the way. Put up a struggle, but not much of one. Overreacted to some stuff, underreacted to others.” She hooked her arm through Mikey’s. “She’s not as good as she thinks she is. She’ll cough up the dough because I’ve got what she wants.”

“I never got the chance to hulk and look mean.”

“Sorry, you’d’ve been great.” She walked with him through the souvenir shop to the elevators. “You know the first thing I’m going to do when I get the money? I’m throwing a big, kick-ass party. No, first I’m buying a place, then I’m throwing a big, kick-ass party.”

“Guess you won’t be heading out to the cattle calls anymore.”

“You kidding?” She squeezed in the elevator car with

him. "Let me wallow in it for a week, maybe two. Then I'm going to every audition my agent can push me into. You know how it is, Mikey. Gotta dance."

"I can get you a shot at the chorus of *Kiss Me, Kate*."

"No shit? That'd be great! When?"

"Let me put the word in with the director tonight."

"Told you my luck was changing." She rode on it all the way down to ground level.

"I've got to split," she said on the street. "Go meet Slick."

"Why don't you come to the show tonight? I'll get you a couple house seats and introduce you to the director."

"Cool. I love you, Mikey." She gave him a long, noisy kiss. "Look, I'll meet you back at your place in a few hours. I'm going to buy a big bottle of champagne."

"Buy two. We'll get toasted after the show."

"That's a deal. I love you, Mikey."

"I love you, Cleopatra."

He headed west, she headed east. As she crossed the street, she glanced back, laughing like a loon when he threw her a kiss. With a spring in her step she started uptown. Right on schedule, she thought. She'd meet Gideon on the east corner of Fifty-first and Fifth, maybe grab some pizza. She'd tell him she needed another day or two to get the statue.

He wouldn't like it, but she'd smooth it out. And when she handed him four hundred thousand dollars the next day, he'd have no room to bitch.

She'd talk him into staying in New York for a while. Maybe Mikey was right about the thing between them. Not the romance part, that wasn't in the cards. But she had a good feeling when she was with him. She liked the steady side of him as much as she liked the reckless one. What was wrong with wanting a little more time with both?

The glint from a jewelry display caught her eye, had her moving toward the window. She'd buy Mikey something to thank him for the help. Something extravagant.

She brooded over the gold neck chains—too ordinary—and the flash of stones—too gaudy. Slowing her pace, she browsed from window to window, then let out a little *ah ha!* at the wink of a thin gold anklet with ruby cabochons.

Tailor-made for Mikey, she decided and tilted her head in hopes of seeing the price tag tucked discreetly under the chain.

She froze that way, her nose all but pressed to the window, her body in a slight dip as she caught a reflection in the glass.

She knew that face. Though he was turned away from her in profile, as if studying the traffic, she recognized him. They'd all but run over him on the street in Prague.

Shit, shit, shit! She straightened, then moved casually on, as if to study the offerings in the next display. He didn't follow, but angled his body a little more toward her.

Anita fucking Gaye, she thought. So businesslike, the professional dealer. And she'd sent out one of her goons. Well, that was fine, that was great, because this was New York. This was *her* turf.

She sauntered as if she had all the time in the world. He was following now, she noted, and careful to keep pace. She kept sauntering right into the International Jewelry Exchange, meandering into the babble of voices, down the crowded aisles between booths. He kept half the store between them, shaking his head, scowling when the merchants began their pitch.

And she sprinted. Her long legs ate up the distance to the side door. She was through it and loping across the street and muscling aside a man who was about to climb into a cab.

While he stumbled back, shouted at her, she slammed the cab door. "Step on it! Get me five blocks down in under a minute, I got twenty dollars." She pulled a bill out of her pocket, waved it even as she glanced over and saw her tail running across the street. For added incentive, she shoved the twenty into the security slot. "Move!"

He moved.

"Cut over to Park," she ordered, swiveling around on her knees to watch out the rear window. "Go up to Fifty-first and cut back to Fifth. Yeah, baby." She waved as he charged down the cross street. "Already huffing and puffing."

Still she watched until they hit Madison. When they turned onto Park, she dropped back down on the seat.

“Fifty-first and Fifth,” she repeated coolly. “Drop me on the east corner.”

“That’s a hell of a ride, lady, for a couple blocks.”

“You get what you pay for.”

She popped out on the corner, grabbed Gideon’s hand.

“You’re late,” he began, but she was already running.

“What’s going on?”

“Taking a subway ride, Slick. You haven’t been to New York until you do.”

Summer tourists were thronged around Rockefeller Center. All the better for cover, she decided—if they needed it. Then she whipped him down the stairs of the subway stop at 50 Rock.

“My treat,” she added and dug out the fare for both of them. When they were through the turnstiles on the platform, she caught her breath. “We’ll get off at Washington Square. Bop around the Village. Give you a real tour, grab some lunch.”

“Why?”

“Because a girl’s gotta eat.”

“Why did we run like maniacs into the tube to ride a train to a village?”

“*The Village*, you alien. And we’re taking a ride to make sure I’ve thrown off the shadow. I was doing a little window-shopping on Fifth, and who should I see but one of our friends from Prague.”

He grabbed her as the rumble of the approaching train shook the air. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. He’s got a face like a pie plate. Flat, round and shiny. I ditched him, but maybe he circled around, so better safe than sorry.”

She pushed through into the car, dropped down on a seat. She patted the place beside her.

“What have you done, Cleo?”

“What do you mean, what’ve I done? I just told you. Imagine that asshole thinking he could tag me in my city.”

“And he just happened to be walking down the same street at the same time as you? I don’t think so.”

“Actually, Fifth is an avenue as opposed to a—”

His hand tightened on her arm, a hard warning. "What have you done? Where's Mikey?"

"Hey, ease up, pal. We ran some errands, hung out a little. It's a free country. I did some window-shopping on the way to meet you, and he headed home to catch a nap. Mikey's not a morning person and you had him up at dawn."

"How did she know where to find you?"

"Look—"

"You said you ditched him. Just one? What about the other guy?"

He was really bumming out her triumphant mood. "How the hell do I know? Are they joined at the hip?"

"How long after you and Mikey split up did you see him?"

"Jesus, a few minutes. A couple of blocks. What's the big . . ." But she trailed off as it struck her. "You think the other one moved on Mikey? That's crazy. He's not part of this."

But she'd made him part of it, she realized, and the arm Gideon gripped began to tremble.

"Okay, so maybe they'll follow him, maybe they will. We'll just get off at the next stop and I'll call him on his cell phone, clue him in. He'll lose a tail as easy as I did. He'll get a kick out of it."

But her hands were like ice by the time she pushed her way out at the Thirty-fourth Street stop, got to a phone. And her fingers shook as she punched in the numbers. "You've got me spooked," she grumbled. "Wait till I tell Mikey. He'll laugh his bony ass off. Answer, damn it. Answer the phone."

But in two rings his cheerful and recorded voice came on.

"I'm busy, honey, hopefully making sweet love. Leave a message and Mikey will get back to you." He made his signature kissing sound that ran right into the beep.

"He's turned it off." She took a calming breath, then another. "He's home, taking a nap, and he turned off his pocket phone, that's all."

“Ring him on the land line, Cleo.”

“I’m just going to wake him up.” She dialed. “He hates it when you wake him up from a nap.”

The phone rang four times. She was braced for another recording when he answered. The instant she heard his voice, she knew he was in trouble.

“Mikey—”

“Don’t come back here, Cleo!” There was a shout, a crash, and she heard him call her name again. “Run.”

“Mikey.” A second crash and the short scream had her hand going wet on the receiver. Even when the phone went dead in her ear, she kept shouting his name.

“Stop. Stop it.” Gideon pried the phone out of her fingers.

“They’re hurting him. We have to get there. We have to help him.”

“Call the police, Cleo.” He clamped his hands on her shoulders before she could run. “Call them now. Give them his name, his address. We’re too far away to help.”

“The police.”

“Don’t give your name,” he added as she fumbled to hit 911. “Just his. Make sure they hurry.”

“I need the police. I need help.” She ignored the calm voice of the emergency operator. “Mikey—Michael Hicks, four-forty-five West Fifty-third, apartment three-oh-two. Just—just off Ninth Avenue. You have to hurry. You have to help. They’re hurting him. They’re hurting him.”

Gideon depressed the receiver as she began to cry. “Hold it together. Just hold it together. We’re going. Which train do we take? What’s the fastest way to get there?”

Nothing could be fast enough, not with that scream of pain and terror echoing in her head. She all but flew the blocks from the subway stop, but it wasn’t fast enough.

Relief spurted through her when she spotted the two radio cars outside Mikey’s building. “They got here,” she managed. “New York’s finest.”

Uniforms were already setting up barricades, and a small crowd was gathering.

“Don’t say anything,” Gideon warned with his lips against her temple. “Let me ask.”

“There should be an ambulance. He needs to get to the hospital. I know they hurt him.”

“Just stay quiet, and I’ll find out.” Gideon kept his arm tight around her as they stepped up to the barricade.

“What’s going on?” He glanced toward a bike messenger who was straddling his ride and snapping a wad of gum.

“Dude got killed in there.”

“No.” Cleo shook her head slowly from side to side. “No.”

“Hey, I should know. I was heading in to make my delivery when the cops came back out. Said I had to hang out and be interviewed and shit ’cause they had a homicide on the third floor. Suit cops are coming, you know, like on *NYPD Blue*? One of the uniform dudes told me this black guy got his face and head all bashed to shit.”

“No. No. No,” she said again, her voice rising as Gideon pulled her away.

“Keep moving, Cleo. We’re just going to keep moving for a little while.”

“He’s not dead. That’s a lie, a stupid, fucking lie. We’re going to his show tonight. He’s getting us house seats. We’re going to get shit-faced on champagne. He is *not* dead. We were just . . . it was only an hour ago. I’m going back. I’ve got to go back.”

He needed to get her some place quiet, some place private. Gideon wrapped both arms around her to hold her still. Where the hell did you find quiet in a city like this? “Cleo, you listen to me, just listen to me. We can’t stay here. It isn’t safe.”

When she let out a low moan, when her knees buckled, he took her weight. He half dragged, half carried her down the street. “We need to get inside somewhere. You need to sit down.”

He scanned the street, the shops, and spotted a bar. There was nothing, he decided, like an urban dive for a little privacy.

He pulled her inside, keeping his arm banded around

her. There were only three patrons, all hunched at the bar. None of them even bothered to glance over as he poured Cleo into a dim corner booth.

“Two whiskeys,” he ordered. “Doubles.” He dragged out bills, slapped them on the bar.

He carried the glasses back to where she was curled in a ball in the corner of the booth. He slid in beside her, took her chin firmly in his hand and poured half the shot down her throat.

She choked, sputtered, then simply laid her head down on the table and sobbed like a baby.

“It’s my fault. It’s my fault.”

“I need you to tell me what happened.” He lifted her head again, held the glass to her lips. “Take another drink and tell me what you did.”

“I killed him. Oh God, oh God, Mikey’s dead.”

“I know it.” He picked up his own untouched glass of whiskey and urged it on her. Better drunk, he thought, and half passed out than hysterical. “What did you and Mikey do, Cleo?”

“I asked him. He’d have done anything for me. I loved him. Gideon, I loved him.”

Now, he thought, in grief, she finally used his name. “I know you did. I know he loved you.”

“I thought I was so smart.” Her tears plopped on his hand as he made her take another swallow. “I had it all figured out. I’d sell that bitch the Fate, skin her for a million dollars, give you a nice cut to keep you happy and dance in the goddamn street.”

“Christ. You contacted her?”

“I called her, set up a meet. My turf. Top of the fucking Empire State,” she continued with her voice slurring now with liquor. “Like King goddamn Kong. Mikey went with me, just in case she got testy. But she didn’t. Butter wouldn’t melt. Didn’t have a good word to say about you or your brother, but that’s beside the point. Gonna give me a million dollars tomorrow, cash money. I give her the little lady. Sensible deal, no harm, no foul. Mikey and I got a good laugh out of it. I told him the whole story, you know.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“Gonna split it with you, Slick, sixty-forty.” She swiped at tears and smeared mascara over her cheek, over the back of her hand. “You got a four-hundred-thousand-dollar bird in the hand, why beat around the fucking bush, right?”

He couldn't work up any anger. Not when she was shattered. He pushed her hair back from her damp cheeks. “No, I guess you don't.”

“But she was never gonna give me the money. She played me. Mikey's dead because I was too stupid to know it. I'll never forgive myself, never, not for as long as I live. He was harmless. Gideon, he was harmless and sweet, and they hurt him. They hurt him.”

“I know it, darling.” He drew her head down on his shoulder, stroking her hair as she cried. He thought of the man who'd fixed French toast that morning, had given up his bed to a stranger because a friend had asked.

Anita Gaye would pay for it, he promised himself. It was no longer just about money, about principle, it was about justice.

So he stroked Cleo's hair, drank the last swallow of the whiskey.

He could think of only one place to go.

Eleven

DR. Lowenstein had his own problems. They included an ex-wife who had successfully skinned him in the divorce, two children in college who were under the delusion he owned a grove of money trees and an administrative assistant who'd just demanded a raise.

Sheila had divorced him because he'd spent more time working on his practice than his marriage. Then she had sucked the financial benefits of that practice up like a Hoover.

The irony of it had been lost on her. Which, Lowenstein decided, only proved he was well rid of the humorless bitch.

But that was neither here nor there. As his son, who changed majors as often as he changed his socks, was given to say, it was only money.

Tia Marsh had money. A steady stream of interest and dividends and mutual funds. As well as, he supposed, a reasonably substantial trickle of royalties from her books.

And God knew the woman had problems.

He listened to her now as she sat tidily in the chair facing him and told a convoluted tale of sneaky Irishmen, Greek myths, historic disasters and thievery. When she ended with a police impersonator and tapped phones, he

rubbed his steepled fingers on his thin blade of a mouth and cleared his throat.

“Well, Tia, you’ve certainly been busy. Tell me, what do you think fate represents in this context?”

“Represents?” Finding the courage to tell the tale, and telling it, had used up most of her steam. For a moment, Tia could only stare. “Dr. Lowenstein, it’s not a metaphor, it’s statues.”

“Determining your own fate has always been one of your core dilemmas,” he began.

“You think I’m making this up? You think this is all some complicated delusion?” The insult of it kicked her energy level back up again. Certainly she had delusions, or else why would she be here. But they were much more simplistic, much more ordinary.

And he, at two hundred fifty dollars for a fifty-minute hour, should know it.

“I’m not *that* crazy. There was a man in Helsinki.”

“An Irishman,” Lowenstein said patiently.

“Yes, yes, an Irishman, but he could have been a one-legged Scotsman, for all that matters.”

He smiled, gently. “Your month of travel was a big step for you, Tia. I believe it opened you up to yourself. To the imagination you often stifle. The challenge now will be to channel and refine that imagination. Perhaps, as a writer—”

“There was a man in Helsinki,” she said again, between her teeth. “He came to New York to see me, pretended a personal interest in me when, in fact, he was only interested in my connection to the Three Fates. Those Fates are real, they exist. I’ve documented it. My ancestor owned one and was traveling to England on the *Lusitania* to acquire the second. That’s fact, documented fact.”

“And this Irishman claims his ancestor, also aboard the ship, stole the statue.”

“Exactly.” She huffed out a breath. “And that Anita Gaye stole the statue from him—the Irishman. I can’t substantiate that. In fact, I had strong doubts about it until Jack Burdett came to see me.”

“The one who pretended to be a police detective.”

“Yes. See, it’s not that complicated if you just follow the steps in a linear fashion. My problem is I’m not sure what to do about it, what step to take next. If my phones are tapped, it seems to me I should report it. But then there’ll be all sorts of awkward questions, won’t there, and if the phones are, subsequently, untapped, Ms. Gaye will know that I know she had them tapped, then I lose the advantage of working behind the scenes, so to speak, to find the other two Fates.”

She took a long breath. “And I don’t actually talk on the phone that much anyway, so maybe I should leave it alone for now.”

“Tia, have you considered that your reluctance to report this stems from your subconscious knowledge that there is nothing wrong with your phones?”

“No.” But his calm, patient question planted the seed of doubt in her mind. “This isn’t paranoia.”

“Tia, do you remember calling me from your hotel in London at the beginning of your tour and telling me you were afraid the man staying down the hall was stalking you because twice he rode in the elevator with you?”

“Yes.” Mortified, she dropped her gaze to her hands. “But that was different. That *was* paranoia.”

Except for all she knew, for all anyone knew, she thought, she’d been right and had had a lucky escape from a crazed British stalker.

“You’ve made great strides,” he continued. “Important ones. You faced down your travel phobia. You confronted your fear of dealing with the public. You spent four consecutive weeks exploring yourself and your own capabilities, and expanded your safety zone. You should be proud of yourself.”

To show he was proud of her, he leaned over, patted her arm lightly. “Change, Tia, change creates new challenges. You have a tendency, as we’ve discussed before, to manufacture scenarios within your mind—exotic, complicated scenarios wherein you’re surrounded or beset by some sort of danger or threat. A fatal illness, an international plot. And so beset, you retreat, constrict that safety zone to your apartment. I’m not surprised that finding yourself in

familiar surroundings again, dealing with the natural physical and mental fatigue of a long, demanding trip, you'd need to revert to pattern."

"I'm not doing that," she said under her breath. "I can't even see the pattern anymore."

"We'll work on that during our next session." He leaned over to pat her arm again. "It might be best if we go back to our twice-weekly sessions for the time being. Don't think of that as a step back, but as a new beginning. Angela will schedule you."

She looked at him, the kindly face, the trim beard, the dash of gray at the temples. It was like, she realized, being indulged and dismissed by an affectionate parent.

If there was a pattern in her life, she thought as she got to her feet, this was it.

"Thank you, Doctor."

"I want you to continue your relaxation and imagery exercises."

"Of course." She picked up her purse, walked to the door. And there, turned. "Everything I just told you is a hallucination?"

"No, Tia, of course not. I believe it's all very real to you, and a combination of actual events and your very creative imagination. We'll explore it. In the meantime, I'd like you to consider why you find living inside your head more comfortable than living outside it. We'll talk about it during our next session."

"It's not comfortable inside my head," she said quietly. She stepped into his outer office. And kept on going.

He hadn't believed a word she'd said. And worse, she discovered as she rode the elevator down to the lobby, he'd stirred up doubts so she wasn't sure she believed herself.

It had happened. She was *not* crazy, damn it. She wasn't some sort of loony who wore aluminum foil on her head to keep out the alien voices, for God's sake. She was a mythologist, a successful author, a functioning adult. And, she added as temper began to rise, she was sane. Felt saner, steadier, stronger than she'd ever felt in her life.

She wasn't hiding in her apartment. She was working there. She had a goal, a fascinating one. She would prove

she wasn't delusional. She'd prove she could stand on her own two feet, that she was a healthy—well, moderately healthy—woman with a good brain and a strong will.

As she strode out on the street, she whipped out her cell phone, punched in a number. "Carrie? It's Tia. Get me an emergency appointment at your salon. When? Now. Right now. It's coming off."

"ARE YOU SURE about this?" Carrie was still winded from her six-block dash from her Wall Street offices to Bella Donna.

"Yes. No."

Tia clutched Carrie's hand as they sat in two of the streamlined leather chairs in the salon's waiting area. There was loud techno-rock blaring, and one of the stylists, a rail-thin woman dressed all in black, had her hair arranged in a terrifying magenta cloud.

Already she could feel her air passages shutting down as they were assaulted with the beauty shop scents of peroxide and polish remover and overheated perfume.

The sound of hair dryers blowing was like plane engines. She was going to get a migraine, hives, respiratory arrest. What was she doing here?

"I'd better go. I'd better go right now." She fumbled in her bag for her inhaler.

"I'm going to stay with you, Tia. I'm going to see you through this every step of the way." Carrie had canceled two meetings to see to it. "Julian's a genius. I swear it." She squeezed Tia's free hand as Tia sucked on the inhaler. "You're going to feel like a new woman. What?" she asked when Tia mumbled.

Removing the inhaler, Tia tried again. "I said, I'm just getting used to the old one. This is a mistake. I only did it because I was so upset with Dr. Lowenstein. Look, I'll pay for the appointment, but I—"

"Julian's ready for you, Dr. Marsh." Another wand-slim, black-clad female came out.

Didn't anyone here weigh over a hundred pounds? Tia thought frantically. Wasn't anyone over twenty-three?

"I'll take her back, Miranda." In the bright, cheerful voice mothers use when they drag their children to the dentist chair, Carrie hauled Tia to her feet. "You're going to thank me for this. Trust me."

Tia's vision blurred as they walked past operators, customers, past gleaming black shampoo bowls and sparkling glass displays holding dozens and dozens of sleekly packaged products. Dimly she heard overlapping chatter and a cackle of laughter that sounded just a bit insane.

"Carrie."

"Be brave. Be strong." She steered Tia toward a large cubical done in dazzling black and silver. The man who stood by the big leather chair was short, sleek as a greyhound, with white-blond hair cut like a skullcap.

For some reason, he made her think of a very hip Eros and that didn't comfort her a bit.

"So," he began in a voice that bit down on vowels with the teeth of a native New Yorker, "this is Tia, at last." He took one look at her pale face and judged his quarry. "Louise! Some wine here. Sit."

"I was just thinking that maybe—"

"Sit," he interrupted Tia, then leaned over to kiss Carrie's cheek. "Moral support?"

"You bet."

"Carrie and I have been plotting endlessly on how to get you in my chair." He got her there, finally, by simply nudging her backward. "And from the looks of this . . ." He fingered a lock of hair that had come loose from its knot. "It's not a moment too soon."

"I really don't think I need—"

"Let me be the judge of what you need." He took one of the wineglasses Louise brought in, handed it to her. "When you go to the doctor, do you tell him what you need?"

"Actually, ha, yeah, I do. But—"

"You have lovely eyes."

She blinked them. "I do?"

"Excellent brow line. Very nice bones," he added and began to touch her face with smooth, very cool fingertips. "Sexy mouth. The lipstick's wrong, but we'll fix that. Yes,

it's a fine face we've got here. Dull, outdated hair." With a couple of tugs, he had the pins out and the heavy weight of it tumbling free.

"It doesn't suit you at all. You're hiding behind your hair, my Tia." He swiveled the chair around so she was facing the mirror, and his head was close to hers. All but cheek to cheek. "And I'm going to expose you."

"You are? But don't you think . . . What if there's nothing particularly interesting to expose?"

"I think you underestimate yourself," he chided. "And expect everyone else to do the same."

While she was blinking over that she found herself being shampooed by one of the slender shop girls in one of the glossy black sinks. By the time she thought to ask if they used hypo-allergenic products, it was too late.

Then she was back in the chair, facing away from the mirror with a glass of very nice white wine in her hand. He talked to her. Asked her what she did, who she dated, what she liked. Every time she gave a noncommittal answer or asked what he was doing with her hair, he asked another question.

When at one point she made the mistake of looking down and seeing the piles of shorn hair littering the floor, her breath began to hitch. Little white dots danced in front of her eyes, and from a distance she heard Carrie's alarmed voice.

The next thing she knew Julian pushed her head between her knees, holding it there until the roar of her heartbeat slowed. "Steady, honey. Louise! I need a cold cloth here."

"Tia, Tia, snap out of it."

She opened her eyes to find Carrie crouched on the floor in front of her. "What? What?"

"It's a haircut, okay? Not brain surgery."

"A traumatic event's a traumatic event." Julian laid a cool, damp cloth on the back of Tia's neck. "Now, I want you to sit up slowly. Deep breath now. That's the way. Now another. There now, tell me about this Irish guy Carrie mentioned."

"He's a bastard," Tia said weakly.

“We all are.” The scissors began to snip again, frighteningly close to her face. “Tell me all about it.”

So she did, and when his reaction was shock, fascination, delight—so very different from Lowenstein’s—she forgot about her hair.

“Incredible. You know what you have to do, don’t you?”

She stared up at him as he clicked her chair back. “What?”

“You have to go to Ireland, find this Malachi and seduce him.”

“I do?”

“It’s perfect. You track him down, seduce all pertinent information on the statues out of him, then you add that to what you’ve dug up, and you’re ahead of everyone. We’re going to put in a few highlights, jazz it up a bit, especially around her face.”

“But I can’t just . . . go. Besides, he isn’t really interested in me that way. And more to the point, it’s not right to use sex as a weapon.”

“Sweetie, when a woman uses it on me, I’m usually grateful. You have wonderful skin. What are you using on it?”

“Oh, well, right now I’m using this new line I read about. All natural ingredients. But you have to keep the products refrigerated, which is a little inconvenient.”

“I have something better. Louise! BioDerm, full skin care treatment. Normal.”

“Oh well, I always do a patch test before I use another new—”

“Not to worry.” He dipped a flat brush in a small bowl and came up with a dab of pale purple goo. “You just lie back and relax.”

It wasn’t easy to relax when a strange woman was rubbing creams on your face, and your hair—what was left of it—was full of goop and aluminum foil. And no one would let you look in the mirror.

But he gave her another glass of wine, and Carrie stayed loyally within arm’s reach.

Somehow she was talked into having her eyebrows waxed and dyed to give them more definition, then after

her hair was rinsed, into a full makeup treatment. By the time Julian was wielding the blow dryer on her she was so tired, so tipsy, she nearly nodded off in the chair.

Whoever claimed an afternoon at the salon was a luxury had a sick sense of humor.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Julian ordered, and the wine sloshed around in her head a little as her chair revolved. “Now, open up and take a look at Tia Marsh.”

She opened her eyes, looked in the mirror and felt a fast slam of pure panic.

Where did she go?

The woman who stared back at her had a sunny cap of hair, with a snazzy fringe down to dramatically arched eyebrows. Her eyes were enormously and richly blue, her mouth wide and boldly red. And when Tia’s jaw dropped, so did hers.

“I look . . . I look like Tinkerbell.”

Once again Julian lowered his head so that his was close to hers. “You’re not far wrong. Fairies are fascinating, aren’t they? Clever and bright and unpredictable. That’s how you look.”

Carrie’s face joined theirs in the mirror so that for a dizzy second, Tia imagined herself with three heads, none of which was actually hers. “You look fabulous.” A tear trickled down Carrie’s cheek. “I’m so happy. Tia, look! Really look at yourself.”

“Okay.” She took a huge breath. “Okay,” and reached up gingerly to touch the nape of her neck. “It feels so strange.” She shook her head a little, laughed a little. “Light. But, it doesn’t look like me.”

“Yes, it does. The you that was hiding. Give me some photo ID,” Julian demanded.

Baffled, she dug in her purse, in her wallet, and took out her bank card.

“Which,” he asked, “do you want to be?”

Tia stared at the photo, stared at the mirror. “I’ll take everything you used on me today, and another appointment in four weeks.”

SHE'D SPENT FIFTEEN hundred dollars. Fifteen hundred on nothing more than vanity. And, Tia thought as she sat in the cab with her shopping bag brimming with beauty products, she didn't feel guilty about it.

She felt exhilarated.

She couldn't wait to get home and look at herself in the mirror again. And again. Because she couldn't, she slid her hand into her purse, clicked open her compact. Holding the mirror inside the bag to shield her foolishness from the cabdriver, she tilted it up. And grinned at herself.

She wasn't ordinary at all. Not beautiful, certainly, but not by any means ordinary. She was even pretty in an odd sort of way.

Caught up with herself, she didn't register that they'd stopped in front of her building until Rosie O'Donnell's recorded voice reminded her to take all her belongings. Flustered, Tia dropped her compact back into her purse, fumbled with the fare she would normally have had ready, then, juggling her bag and her purse, climbed out.

As a result, she dropped her purse on the sidewalk, had to scoop the contents hurriedly back in. When she straightened, took a step toward her building, she nearly plowed into the couple who'd stepped into her path.

"Dr. Marsh?"

"Yes?" She answered without thinking, as she was looking at the beautiful, tall brunette who'd obviously been crying.

"We need to speak with you," he began, and the Irish in his voice finally got through. As did, when she shifted her gaze to his face and homed in on the family resemblance, the name.

"You're a Sullivan." She said the name as some might an oath, with bitter passion.

"I am, yes. Gideon. This is Cleo. If we could come up to your flat for a minute?"

"I don't have anything to say to you."

"Dr. Marsh." He put a hand on her arm as she turned.

She whipped back, surprising them both with the speed and the fury. "Take your hand off me or I'll start screaming. I can scream very loud, and very long."

As he was a man who understood and respected a woman's temper, he lifted his free hand, palm out, in a gesture of truce. "I know you're angry with Mal, and I don't blame you for it. But the fact is, we've got nowhere else to go right at the moment, not that's safe. We're in trouble here."

"That doesn't concern me, and neither do you."

"Let her alone, Slick." Cleo said it wearily, weaving a little from the whiskey. "It's all fucked anyway."

"You've been drinking." Outraged—and conveniently forgetting two glasses of afternoon wine—Tia sniffed. "You've got some nerve, coming around here drunk, accosting me on the street. You want to get out of the way, Mr. Sullivan, before I call the police."

"Yeah, she's been drinking." With his own temper rising, Gideon took Tia's arm again. "Because I saw to it as it was the only way I knew to numb her enough for her to deal with having her closest friend murdered. Murdered because of the Three Fates, murdered because of Anita Gaye. You can walk away from that, Dr. Marsh, but it doesn't stop you being part of it."

"He's dead." Cleo's voice was flat and dull, and in it Tia heard the ravages of grief. "Mikey's dead, and hassling her won't bring him back. Let's just go."

"She's sick, and she's tired," Gideon said to Tia. "I'm asking for her, let us come in. She needs a place until I can think what to do."

"I don't need anything."

"Come in. Damn it." Tia dragged a hand through her newly styled hair. "Come on." She streamed in ahead of them, jammed the button for the elevator.

Didn't it just figure that Malachi Sullivan would find some way to ruin her triumphant day?

"I'm grateful to you, Dr. Marsh."

"Tia." Inside, she jammed the button for her floor. "Since your friend's very likely to pass out on my floor, why be formal? I hate your brother, by the way."

"I understand. I'll let him know next time I see him. I almost didn't come up to you outside. Mal said you had long hair."

"I used to." She led the way down the hall to her apartment. "How did you recognize me?"

"Well, he said, too, that you were blond and delicate and pretty."

With an unladylike snort, she opened the door. "You can stay until she feels better," Tia began and set aside her purse and shopping bag. "Meanwhile you can tell me what you're doing here and why you expect me to believe Anita Gaye murdered anyone."

His face hardened, and in it Tia saw the resemblance again. Malachi's had taken on that same look of barely restrained violence in her trashed hotel room in Helsinki.

They might be very attractive, musically voiced men, she thought. But that didn't mean they weren't dangerous.

"She didn't do it personally, but she's responsible. Is there a place Cleo can lie down?"

"I don't need to lie down. I don't want to lie down."

"All right, then, you'll sit down."

Tia frowned as Gideon dragged Cleo to the sofa. His voice was rough, she noted, not particularly kind despite the lovely lilt of it. But he handled the brunette gently, as a man might some fragile antique glass.

And he was right to get her off her feet, Tia decided. The woman was sheet-white and shaky.

"You're cold," she heard him say. "Now do what you're told for once. Put your feet up." He hauled them up himself, pulled the throw off the back of the sofa and tucked it around her.

"I'm sorry for this," he said to Tia. "I couldn't risk a hotel, even if I had enough of the wherewithal for one just now. I haven't had time to think since everything happened. It was a quest, you see. An adventure, with some annoyances and expenses, to be sure, and a risk of a fist in the face or ass-kicking. But it's different now. Now there's murder."

"I'm sick." Cleo pushed off the couch, swayed. "I'm sorry. I'm sick."

"There." Tia pointed to a door on the left and felt a twist of sympathetic nausea in her own belly as Cleo lurched for it. Gideon was two steps behind her and got the door slammed in his face.

He stood, staring helplessly at it, then lowered his brow to the door.

"I guess it's the whiskey. I poured it into her because it was all I could think of."

He was grieving, too. She could see that now. "I'm going to make tea."

He nodded. "We'd be grateful."

"Come in the kitchen where I can see you, and start explaining."

"My brother said you were a fragile kind of thing," Gideon commented as he followed her into the kitchen. "He's not usually so wrong."

"He's the same one who claimed one of New York's most respected dealers is a thief. Now you add murder."

"It's not a claim, it's a fact."

With restless movements, he paced back to the doorway, looked toward the powder room door, paced back.

His brother, Tia noted, was more contained. At least, she amended, as far as she knew.

"She took what wasn't hers," Gideon continued. "And because she wants more, she's upped the stakes beyond anything that can be justified. A man's dead. A man I met only yesterday, one who gave me his bed because his friend asked him. A man who fixed me breakfast just this morning. A man who's dead only because he was loyal to a friend."

"How did you meet Cleo?"

"I tracked her down in Europe."

"Who is she in this?"

"She's connected to the second Fate."

"How?" she demanded.

"Through ancestry. She comes down from the White-Smythes. One was a collector in London."

All right, Tia mused. All right. Another piece of the puzzle in place.

"You recognize the name." Gideon's statement proved to Tia she'd have to work on her acting skills. "You've looked into it, then."

"I think, under the circumstances, I should be the one asking the questions."

“And I’ll answer them. If I could use your phone first off. I need to call my family.”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll call collect.”

“You can’t use the phone. It’s tapped. Or maybe it’s tapped. Or maybe I’m just having a big, complicated hallucination after all.”

“I’m sorry? Bugged? Your phone’s bugged?”

“According to another surprise visitor.” She turned around. “I think, all in all, I’m really taking this very well, don’t you? I mean, here I am, with a couple of strangers in my apartment—one who is currently being sick in my powder room and the other telling me fantastic stories in the kitchen. And I’m making tea. I think even Dr. Lowenstein would agree that’s progress.”

“I’m not following you.”

“Why should you? Tell me why you believe Anita’s responsible for this man’s death.”

“I’m responsible.” Cleo stood, braced against the doorway. She was still very pale, but her eyes were clear again. “He’d be alive if it wasn’t for me. I got him involved.”

“I’m the one who got you involved,” Gideon reminded her. “So you might as well hang it on me.”

“I’d like to, but it won’t wash. I was double-crossing you. I’d justified it, and you were going to get your share, but I was doing a shuffle on you, and I pulled Mikey into it. She must’ve had them watching the street, so when we came down after I made the deal with her, Mikey goes his way, I go mine. They split up and tail us, only I make my shadow and, being so goddamn clever, lose him. Only Mikey’s clueless, so he just bops on home, and that bastard takes him down there. If he hadn’t been with me, they wouldn’t have known he existed.”

“None of us knew she’d resort to murder,” Gideon told her.

“Well, we know now.” She looked at Tia.

“If this is true, why haven’t you gone to the police?”

“And tell them what?” Gideon jammed his hands in his pockets. “That we believe a respected businesswoman is directly responsible for the murder of a young black

dancer? A murder that very likely took place while she was at some public place or in some meeting? And we tell them we know this because she's stolen a statue while in Dublin and agreed to buy another? I suppose we can tell the police they'll just have to take our word on it when they ask for proof of any sort. No doubt they'll clap the cuffs on her."

"Regardless, you expect me to believe you." Tia lifted the sputtering kettle off the burner.

"Do you?" Gideon asked.

She looked at him, then at Cleo. "Yes, I guess I do, but I intend to research if insanity runs in my family. There's a pull-out sofa in my office here. You can use that tonight."

"Thanks."

"It isn't free," she told Gideon and lifted the tea tray. "From this point on, I stop being a tool and become an active participant in this little . . . quest."

Cleo smiled as Tia carted the tray into the living room. "Translated, Slick, the doc just informed you she's your fucking partner."

"Yes, I did. Lemon or sugar?"

Twelve

“AN accident.” Anita studied the two men who had come to the private entrance of her office. It served her right, she supposed, for selecting brawn over brains. But really, she’d given them such a simple task, with such specific, follow-the-dots instructions.

“The guy went nuts on me.” Carl Dubrowsky, the shorter, stockier of the two, had a belligerent expression on his pockmarked face. He’d been a bouncer at a club before Anita had enlisted him to handle a few pesky chores.

She’d had reason to know he’d needed a job and wouldn’t quibble about a few minor legalities, as he’d been arrested twice for assault and had barely beaten a charge of manslaughter.

Such activities didn’t look well on a résumé.

She studied him now as he stood in one of the dark, Savile Row suits she’d paid for. You can dress them up, she thought. But you can’t take them out.

“Your instructions, Mr. Dubrowsky, were to follow Ms. Toliver, and/or any companions she might have brought with her to our meeting. To detain her and/or those companions only if it should become necessary. And to, most important, retrieve my property, using persuasion of a physical nature if such action was warranted. I don’t be-

lieve there were any instructions in there to fracture anyone's skull."

"It was an accident," he repeated stubbornly. "I tailed the black guy and Jasper took the girl. Black guy went to the apartment, like I said. I went in behind him, like I said. Had to soften him up a little so he'd pay attention while I was asking him about the statue. Went through the place looking for it, didn't find it, so I softened him up some more."

"And you let him answer the phone."

"Figured maybe it was the girl, and I'm thinking I put the arm on him while she's on the hook, maybe she'll talk—or with Jasper on her, she could maybe take off for the piece you're after. Guy starts screaming, warns her off, so I gave him a good jab. Fell wrong, is all. Guy fell wrong and fucked himself."

"I've warned you about your language, Mr. Dubrowsky," she said coolly. "I see the problem here is that you attempted something in an area where you have no skill. You attempted to think. Don't do so again. And you, Mr. Jasper." She paused for a long-suffering sigh. "I'm very disappointed. I had more faith in you. This is the second time you haven't been able to keep up with a second-rate stripper."

"She's got fast feet. And she ain't as dumb as you think."

Marvin Jasper was flat-faced and kept his hair in the same needle-sharp buzz cut he'd worn as an MP during his stint in the army. He'd hoped to turn that into a stint with the police force but had washed out during the psych test. He was still bitter about it.

"Apparently she has brains enough to outmaneuver both of you. Now she could be anywhere, and so could the Fate."

Moreover, she thought, the police were involved. She had no doubt Dubrowsky had been foolish enough to leave some sort of evidence behind. Fingerprints, a stray hair, something that would, eventually, tie him to the murder. Something that could, potentially, tie her.

That would never do.

“Mr. Jasper, I want you to go back, keep a surveillance on this apartment where Mr. Dubrowsky had his accident. Perhaps she’ll go back there. If you see her, I want her taken. Quickly and quietly. Then contact me. I have a place where we can discuss business in private. Mr. Dubrowsky, you’ll come with me. We’ll go prepare for that business.”

ONE OF THE advantages of marrying a wealthy, older man was that wealthy, older men so often had myriad holdings. And clever businessmen often kept those holdings buried under a morass of corporations and twisting red tape.

The warehouse in New Jersey was just one of the many. Anita had sold it only the day before to a developer who planned to open one of those cavernous discount stores.

One-stop shopping, she mused as she drove across the cracked concrete. She wasn’t planning on shopping, but she was going to take care of her task with one, final stop.

“Sure is out in bumfuck,” Dubrowsky muttered, and in the dimming light pulled back his lips in a sneer at her prissy order to watch his language.

“We can keep her here for several days, if necessary.” Anita crossed to the loading bay doors, careful not to catch the heels of her Pradas in the cracks. “I want you to go over the security, to make certain once we have her in, she won’t get out.”

“No problem.”

“These loading doors operate electrically and require a code. I’m more concerned with the side doors, the windows.”

He pursed his lips, studied the sooty block of the building. “She’d have to be a monkey to get to the windows, and you got riot bars on them.”

She studied them as if weighing his opinion. Paul might have left her a number of properties, but Anita had taken the time to tour them all. Inside and out. “What about around the sides?”

He trudged around, turning the corner. Weeds sprung up

through the broken stone, and though he could hear the sound of traffic from the turnpike, it was a distant whoosh. Bumfuck, he thought again, shaking his head.

“Broken lock on this side door,” he called out.

“Is there?” She knew it. She’d had a complete and extensive report from the appraisal. “That’s a problem. I wonder if it’s locked from the inside.”

He gave it a hard shove, shrugged. “Might be. Or it’s jammed or something.”

“Well, we won’t . . . No,” she said after a moment’s thought. “Best to see if we can get in through it so we know what has to be done. Can you push or kick it in?”

He was built like a bull and proud of it. Proud enough that he didn’t think to ask why she didn’t just unlock the damn door.

Slamming his bulk against the thick wood soothed the ego she’d scraped raw in her office. He hated the bitch, but she paid well. That didn’t mean he was going to tolerate getting sniped at by a woman.

He imagined she was the door, gave it one good kick and snapped the thin bolt lock on the inside.

“Like paper,” he claimed. “Gonna want to put a steel door on here, a police lock if you want to keep out vandals and shit.”

“You’re quite right. It’s dark inside. I have a flashlight in my bag.”

“Light switch right here.”

“No! We don’t want to advertise we’re here, do we?” She aimed the thin beam inside, scanned the room. It was another concrete box, dark, dusty and smelling of rodents.

It was, she thought, perfect.

“What’s that?”

“What?”

“Over there in the corner,” she said, gesturing with her light.

He walked over, kicked listlessly. “Just an old tarp. You want us to keep her out here for any time, you gotta think about how we’re going to get food out here.”

“You won’t have to worry about it.”

“Ain’t no Chinese carry-out on the corner,” he began as he turned. He saw the gun in her hand, held as steady as the pencil light. “What the fuck?”

“Language, Mr. Dubrowsky,” she said with a *tsk*. And shot him.

The gun kicked, the sound echoed, and both sent a thrill through her. He took a lurching step toward her, so she shot him again, then a third time. When he was down, she stepped very carefully around the blood spilling into a slow river on the concrete floor. Tilting her head like a woman considering a new bauble in a shop window, she sent one more bullet into the back of his head.

It was a first for her, a killing. Now that it was done, very well done, her hand shook lightly and her breath came fast and shallow. She shined the light in his pupils, just to be sure, to be absolutely sure. The beam bobbed a bit, but she bore down and saw that his eyes were open and staring. And empty.

Paul had been like that after she’d waited out his final heart attack with his medication tight in her fist. She didn’t consider that killing. That, she thought now as she steadied herself, had been patience.

She stepped back, took the old broom from the corner and meticulously brushed at the dust, smearing any footprints on her backward trip to the door. Taking out a lace-trimmed handkerchief, she wiped the broom handle before tossing it aside, then covered her hand with the silk and lace to pull the door closed.

It was a bad fit now, she mused, as Dubrowsky had conveniently jarred the jamb. An obvious break-in, an obvious murder.

Finally, she wiped off her dead husband’s unregistered Beretta and heaved it as far as she could into the scrubby brush bordering the lot. The police would find it, of course. She wanted them to find it.

There was nothing to tie her here but the fact that her husband had once owned the building. There was nothing to tie her to some nasty little man who’d made his living breaking arms. There were no records of employment, no

tax forms, no witnesses to their dealings. Except for Jasper. She didn't think he'd run to the police when he heard his associate had been shot.

No, she had a feeling Marvin Jasper would become a sterling employee. Nothing like a little incentive to inspire loyalty and hard work.

She walked back to her car, and inside smoothed her hair, freshened her lipstick.

She drove away thinking that it was absolutely true if you wanted something done right, you did it yourself.

JACK AWOKE TO church bells. The pretty peal of them brought him out of a sound sleep on top of the bedspread and made him aware of the steady flow of the breeze through the window he'd left wide open.

He liked the smell of it, the hint of sea it carried. He lay as he was a moment, letting it wash over him until the bells faded to echoes.

He'd arrived in Cobh too early to do anything more productive than admire the harbor and get the general lay of the land.

What had once been a port that had given so many of the country's immigrants their last look at their homeland was now more of a resort town. And pretty as a postcard. He had a strong view of the low street, the square and the water from his windows. On another trip he would have taken his time absorbing the place, acquainting himself with the rhythms of it, with the locals. He enjoyed that aspect of traveling, and traveling alone.

But in this case there was only one local he had any interest in. Malachi Sullivan.

He intended to find out what he needed to know, make his second stop, and be back in New York within three days. Anita Gaye needed watching, and he'd do a better job of it in New York.

When he was finished here, he intended to contact Tia Marsh again as well. The woman might know more than she realized or more than she'd let on.

Business aside, he'd make time for a pilgrimage before

he left Cobh. He checked his watch and decided to order up coffee and a light breakfast before he showered.

The room service waiter had a face full of freckles.

“And isn’t it a fine, fresh day?” he said as he set up the meal. “You can’t do better for sightseeing. If you’d be needing any arrangements made for touring, Mr. Burdett sir, the hotel’s happy to see to it for you. We might have rain tomorrow, so you’ll want to take advantage of the weather while you have it. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

Jack took the little folder holding the bill. “Do you know a Malachi Sullivan?”

“Ah, it’s a boat tour you’re wanting, then.”

“Sorry?”

“You want to tour around to the head of Kinsale, where the *Lusitania* was sunk. Fine views, even if it’s a sad place all in all. Tours run three times daily this time of year. You’ve missed the first boat, but the second leaves at noon, so you’ve plenty of time for that. Would you like us to book that for you?”

“Thanks.” Jack added a generous tip. “Does Sullivan run the tour himself?”

“One Sullivan or the other,” the boy said cheerfully. “Gideon’s away just now—that’s the second son—so it’s likely to be Mal or Becca, or one of the Curry crew, who are in the way of being cousins to the Sullivans. It’s a family enterprise, and a fine value for the money. We’ll see to the booking for you, and you’ve only to be down the dock by a quarter to noon.”

SO HE HAD time to wander a bit after all.

He picked up his tour voucher at the front desk, pocketed it while he headed out. He walked down the steeply sloped street to the square, where the angel of peace stood over the statues of the weeping fishermen who mourned the *Lusitania*’s dead.

It was a powerful choice in memorials, he thought, the rough-clad men, the shattered faces. Men who’d made their living from the sea and had cried for strangers taken by it.

He supposed it was very Irish, and he found it very apt.

A block over was a monument to the doomed *Titanic*, and her Irish dead. Around them were shops, and the shops were decked with barrels and baskets of flourishing flowers that turned the sad into the picturesque. That, he thought, was probably Irish as well.

Along the streets, in and out of shops, people strolled or moved briskly about their business.

The side streets climbed up very impressive hills and were lined with painted houses whose doors opened straight onto the narrow sidewalks or into tiny, tidy front gardens.

Overhead the sky was a deep and pure blue with the waters of Cork Harbor mirroring it.

Boats were being serviced at the quay, the same quay, his pamphlet told him, as had been in service during the era that White Star and Cunard ran their grand ships.

He walked down to the dock and took his first study of Sullivan's tour boat.

It looked to seat about twenty, and resembled a party boat, with its bold red canopy stretched over the deck to protect passengers from the sun. Or around here, he assumed, the rain. The seats were red as well, and a cheerful contrast to the shiny white of the hull. The red script on the side identified it as *The Maid of Cobh*.

There was a woman already on board, and Jack watched as she checked the number of life jackets, seat cushions, ticking items off on a clipboard as she worked.

She wore jeans faded to nearly white at the stress points, and a bright blue sweater with the sleeves shoved up to her elbows. In them she appeared slim and slight. There was a shoulder-length tumble of curls spilling out of her blue cap. The hair color his mother would have called strawberry blond.

A pair of dark glasses and the cap's brim shielded most of her face, but what he could see—a full, unpainted mouth, a strong curve of jawline—was a nice addition to the view.

She moved forward, her steps quick and confident as

the boat swayed in its slip, and continued her checklist on the bridge.

She sure as hell wasn't Malachi Sullivan, Jack surmised, but she had to be a link to him.

"Ahoy, *The Maid*," he called out and waited on the dock while she turned, head cocked, and spotted him.

"Ahoy, the dock. Can I help you with something?"

"I'm going out." He took the voucher out of his pocket, held it up where the frisky wind whipped at it. "Is it okay to come aboard now?"

"You can, sure if you like. We won't be leaving for about twenty minutes."

She tucked the clipboard under her arm and walked over, prepared to offer him a hand on the long step from dock to deck. She realized he wouldn't need it. He moved well, and was fit enough, she concluded. Quite fit enough, she thought as she admired the strong build.

She admired the leather bomber jacket he wore as well, the fact that it was soft and battered. She had a weakness for good texture.

"Do I give this to you?" he asked.

"You do indeed." She accepted the voucher, then turned over her clipboard, flipping a page to the passenger list. "Mr. Burdett, is it?"

"It is. And you're . . ."

She glanced up, then shifted the clipboard again to take the hand he offered. "I'm Rebecca. I'll be your captain and tour guide today. I've yet to start the tea, but I'll have it going shortly. Just make yourself comfortable. It's a fine day for a sail, and I'll see you have a good ride."

I'll bet you will, he thought. Rebecca, Becca for short, Sullivan. She'd had a tough little hand and a good firm grip. And a voice like a siren.

After she tucked the clipboard in a bracket, she headed back to stern, turned into a tiny galley. When he followed, she sent him a friendly smile over her shoulder.

"Would this be your first visit to Cobh, then?"

"Yes. It's beautiful."

"It is, yes." She set a kettle on the single burner, then

got out the makings for tea. "One of the jewels of Ireland, we like to think. You'll get some of the history during the tour. There's but twelve passengers on this trip, so I'll have plenty of time to answer any questions you might have. You're from America, then?"

"Yes. New York."

Her mouth turned down in a sulk. "Seems everybody's going or coming from New York these days."

"Sorry?"

"Oh, it's nothing." She gave a little shrug. "My brother just left for New York this morning."

Well, hell, Jack thought but kept his expression neutral. "He's having a holiday?"

"It's business. But he'll see it all, won't he? Again. And I've never." She pulled off her sunglasses, hooked them on her sweater while she measured the tea.

Now he got a good, close look at her face. It was better, he decided, even better than he'd anticipated. Her eyes were a cool and misty green against skin as white and pure as marble. And she smelled, since he was close enough to catch her scent, like peaches and honey.

"It's very exciting, isn't it, New York City? All the people and the buildings. Shops and restaurants and theaters, and just everything and more all jammed into one place. I'd like a look at it myself. Excuse me, the others are starting to queue up on the dock. I need to check them in."

He stayed back at the stern, but he turned, slowly, to watch her.

She felt him watching her as she checked in the passengers, made them welcome. When they were settled, she introduced herself, made the standard safety announcements. Just as the cathedral bells began to ring the noon hour, she cast off.

"Thanks, Jimmy!" She waved to the dockhand who secured her line, then eased the boat out of the slip and into Cork Harbor. Piloting one-handed, she took up a microphone.

"It's my mother, Eileen, who's going to be entertaining you for the next little while. She was born here in Cobh,

though we're forbidden to discuss the year of that happy event. Her parents were born here as well, as theirs before them. So she's in the way of knowing the area and the history. It happens I know a bit about it all myself, so if you've any questions when she's finished talking to you, just shout them out. We've a good, clear day, so your trip should be smooth and pleasant. I hope you enjoy it."

She reached up, flipped on the lecture her mother had recorded, then settled in to enjoy the trip herself. With her mother's voice speaking of Cobh's fine natural harbor, or its long vitality as a port that had once been the assembly point for ships during the Napoleonic Wars, as well as a major departure point in the country for its emigrants, she piloted the boat so its passengers could have the pleasure of seeing the town from the water, and appreciate the charm of it, the way it was held in its cup of land, its streets rising sharply to the great neo-Gothic cathedral that cast its shadow over all.

It was a clever, even a slick operation, Jack decided. All the while with the charm of simplicity. The daughter knew how to handle the boat, and the mother knew how to deliver a lecture and make it seem like storytelling.

He wasn't learning anything he didn't already know. He'd studied the area carefully. But the friendly voice over the mike made it all seem more intimate. That was a gift.

The ride was smooth, as promised, and there was no faulting the scenery. As Eileen Sullivan began to speak of May seventh, he could almost see it. A shimmering spring day, the great liner plowing majestically through the sea with many of its passengers standing at the rail, looking—as he was—at the Irish coast.

Then that thin stream of white foam from the torpedo streaking toward the starboard bow. The first explosion under the bridge. The shock, the confusion. The terror. And fast on its heels, the second explosion in the forward.

The wreckage that had rained down on the innocent; the tumble of the helpless as the ship listed. And, in the twenty horrible minutes that followed, the cowardice and heroism, the miracles and the tragedies.

Some of his fellow passengers snapped cameras or ran video recorders. He noted that a few of the women blinked at tears. Jack studied the smooth plate of the sea.

Out of death and tragedy, Eileen continued, came life and hope. My own great-grandfather was on the Lusitania and by grace of God survived. He was taken to Cobh and nursed back to health by a pretty young girl who became his wife. He never returned to America, or went on to England, as he had planned. Instead he settled in Cobh, which was then Queenstown. Because of that terrible day I'm here to tell you of it. While we grieve for the dead, we learn to celebrate the living, and to respect the hand of fate.

Interesting, Jack thought, and gave his attention to Rebecca for the rest of the tour.

She answered questions, joked with the passengers, invited the children to come up and help steer the boat. It had to be routine for her, Jack reflected. Even monotonous. But she made it all seem fresh and fun.

Another gift, he decided. It seemed the Sullivans were full of them.

He asked a question or two himself because he wanted to keep her aware of him. When she maneuvered the boat into its slip again, he calculated he'd gotten his money's worth.

He waited while she talked to disembarking passengers, posed for pictures with them.

He made sure he was the last off.

"That was a great tour," he told her.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Your mother has a way of bringing it all into focus."

"She does." Pleased, Rebecca tipped back the brim of her cap. "Ma writes the copy for the brochures, and the ads and such. She's a gift with words."

"Are you going out again today?"

"No, I'm done with it till tomorrow."

"I was planning to head up to the cemetery. It seems the way to round out the tour. I could use a guide."

Her brows went up. "You don't need a guide for that, Mr. Burdett. It's signposted, and there are markers giving the history as well."

“You’d know more than the markers. I’d like the company.”

She pursed her lips as she studied him. “Tell me, do you want a guide or do you want a girl?”

“If I get you, I get both.”

She laughed and went with impulse. “All right, then, I’ll go with you. But I’ll need to make a stop first.”

She bought flowers, enough that he felt obliged to offer to carry at least some of them. As they walked, she’d call out a greeting, or answer one.

She might have looked slight in the oversized sweater, but she strode up the steep hills effortlessly and, during the two-mile hike, kept up a running conversation without any hitches in breath.

“Since you’re flirting with me, Mr. Burdett—”

“Jack.”

“Since you’re flirting with me, Jack, I’m going to assume you’re not a married man.”

“I’m not married. Since you ask, I’m going to assume that matters to you.”

“It does, of course. I don’t have flirtations with married men.” She cocked her head as she studied his face. “I don’t generally have them with strange men, either, but I’m making an exception because I liked the look of you.”

“I liked the look of you, too.”

“I thought you must, as you stared at me more than the scenery during the tour. I can’t say I minded. How’d you happen by the scar here?” she asked and tapped a finger to the side of her own mouth.

“A disagreement.”

“And do you have many?”

“Scars or disagreements?”

She laughed up at him. “Disagreements that lead to scars.”

“Not so far.”

“What is it you do back in America?”

“I run my own security company.”

“Do you? Like, bodyguards?”

“That’s an aspect. We’re primarily electronic security.”

“I love electronics.” She narrowed her eyes when he

glanced down at her. “Don’t give me that indulgent look. Being a woman doesn’t mean I don’t understand gadgetry. Do you do private homes or places like banks and museums?”

“Both. All. We’re worldwide.” He didn’t brag about his company as a rule. But he wanted to tell her. The way, he realized with some chagrin, a high-school quarterback wanted to impress the head cheerleader. “And we’re the best. In twelve years, we’ve expanded from one branch in New York to twenty internationally. Give me another five and when people think security, they’ll think Burdett, the way they think Kleenex for tissues.”

She didn’t consider it bragging, she considered it pride. And she was one to appreciate and respect a person’s pride for his own accomplishments. “It’s a good feeling, to make your own. We’ve done that as well, on a smaller scale, of course. But it suits us.”

“Your family?” he asked, reminding himself to stick to the point.

“Yes. We’ve always made our living from the water, but it was fishing only. Then we tinkered our way into a tour boat. One, to start. We lost my da a few years back, and that was hard. But as my mother’s fond of saying, you have to find the right in the wrong. So I started thinking. We had the insurance money. We had strong backs and good brains. Tourism helped turn Ireland around, economically speaking. So what could we do to cash in on that.”

“Harbor tours.”

“Exactly. The one boat we ran was doing a reasonable business. But if we used the money and bought two more, well then. I ran the figures and calculated the potential outlay and income and such. So now Sullivan Tours runs the three for touring, and the fishing boat as well. And I’m thinking it’s time to add another package that would include just what we’re doing now. A guided walk along the funeral route and to the cemetery where the *Lusitania* dead are buried.”

“You run the business end of it?”

“Well, Mal, he does the people part—the promotion

and glad-handing, as he's best at it. Gideon keeps the books because we make him, but he prefers overseeing the maintenance and repairs, as he's the organized sort and can't stand anything not perfectly shipshape, so to speak. My mother handles the copy and correspondence and keeps us all from killing each other. As for me, I have the ideas."

She paused, nodded toward the stones and high grass of the graveyard. "Do you want to wander a bit on your own? Most do. The mass graves are up ahead with those yew trees. There were elms there first, but the yews replaced them. The graves are marked with three limestone rocks and bronze plaques, and there are others—twenty-eight others—individual graves for those who died. Some are empty as they never recovered the bodies."

"Are these for them?"

"These," she said and took the flowers from him, "are for my own dead."

Thirteen

THE cemetery stood on a hill surrounded by green valleys. Gravestones were stained with lichen, and some were so old that wind and rain had blurred their carvings. Some stood straight as soldiers, and others tipped like drunks.

The fact that they did both, that there was no static order to it all, Jack thought, made the hill all the more poignant, all the more powerful.

The grass, still thick with summer, rose in wild hillocks and lifted the scent of living, growing things as it waved in the breeze. And on countless graves, flowers grew or were laid. Some wreaths were sheltered in clear plastic boxes, and others held little vials of holy water taken from some shrine.

He found the sentiment oddly touching even as it puzzled him. What possible help could holy water offer to the occupants of a graveyard?

He saw fresh flowers spread beneath stones that had stood for ninety years and more. Who, he wondered, brought daisies to the old, old dead?

Because there was no way he could reasonably refuse Rebecca's obvious desire for some time alone, he walked through the cemetery to the brilliant green carpet of

smooth and tended grass sheltered by the yews. He saw the stones with their brass plaques. Read the words.

A heart would have had to be stone not to be moved. While his was, he believed, contained, it wasn't hard. There was a connection here, even for him, and he wondered why he'd waited so long to come to this place, to stand on this ground.

Fate, he thought. He supposed it was fate, once again, that had chosen his time.

He looked back, over the stones, over the grass, and saw Rebecca laying another bouquet on another grave. Her cap was off now, out of respect, he assumed, and stuffed in her back pocket. Her hair, that delicate reddish gold, danced in the breeze that stirred the grass at her feet. Her lips were curved in a quiet and private smile as she looked down at a headstone.

And looking at her across the waving grass, the somber stones, he felt his contained heart give a single hard lurch. Though he was shaken by it, he wasn't a man to ignore trouble, whatever its form. He walked toward her.

Her head came up, and though her mouth stayed gently curved, he sensed a watchfulness in her now. Did she feel it, too? he wondered. This strange tug and pull, almost—if he believed in such things—a kind of recognition.

When he reached her, she shifted the last two bouquets to her other hand. "Holy ground is powerful ground."

He nodded. Yes, he realized. She'd felt it, too. "Hard to disagree with that right now."

She studied his face as she spoke, the hard, strong lines of it that fit together made something less than handsome, and something more. And his eyes, his smoky, secret eyes.

He knew things, she was sure of it. And some of them were marvels.

"Do you believe in power, Jack? Not the kind that comes from muscle or position. The kind that comes from somewhere outside a person, and inside him as well."

"I guess I do."

This time she nodded. "And so do I. My father's there." She gestured to a black granite marker bearing the name Patrick Sullivan. "His parents are living yet, and in Cobh,

as are my mother's. And there are my great-grandparents, John and Margaret Sullivan, Declan and Katherine Curry. And their parents are here as well, a ways over there for my father's side."

"You bring them all flowers?"

"When I walk this way, yes. I stop here last. My great-great-grandparents, on my mother's side." She crouched to lay the flowers at the base of each stone.

Jack looked over her head, read the names.

Fate, he thought again. Sneaky bitch.

"Felix Greenfield?"

"Don't see many names like Greenfield in Irish graveyards, do you?" She laughed a little as she straightened. "He was the one my mother spoke about on the tour, who survived the *Lusitania* and settled here. So I stop here last, as if he hadn't lived through that day, I wouldn't be here to bring him flowers. Have you seen what you wanted to see?"

"So far."

"Well then, you'd best come home with me and have some tea."

"Rebecca." He touched her arm as she turned. "I came here looking for you."

"For me?" She scooped back her hair and schooled her voice to stay smooth despite the sudden trip of her heart. "That's a fine romantic sort of thing to say, Jack."

"I should've said I came looking for Malachi Sullivan."

The laughter in her eyes vanished. "For Mal? Why is that?"

"Fate."

He saw the flash of fear run across her face, then with admiration, he watched it harden and chill. "You can go back to New York City and tell Anita Gaye she can kiss my ass on the way to hell."

"I'd be happy to, but I'm not here because of Anita. I'm a collector, and I have a . . . personal interest in the Fates. I'll match whatever Anita's paying your family and add ten percent."

"Paying us? Paying?" Her cheeks went hot with fury. Oh, when she thought of how everything inside her body

had softened and hummed just with looking at him! “That thieving bitch. Now look! Look, you’ve got me standing over my own dead ancestor and swearing. Since I am, I’ll finish by telling you to go to hell as well.”

He sighed a bit as she loped around graves and toward the road.

“You’re a businesswoman,” he reminded her when he caught up. “So let’s try to have a discussion. Failing that, I’ll point out I’m bigger and stronger than you are. Don’t make me prove it.”

“So that’s the way of it?” She whipped around on him. “You’re going to threaten and bully me? Well, try it and see if you don’t end up with another scar or two for your trouble.”

“I just asked you not to make me bully you,” he pointed out. “Why did your brother go back to New York this morning?”

“That’s none of your flaming business.”

“Since I’ve just traveled three thousand miles to see him, it is my flaming business.” Rather than fight fire with fire, he kept his tone quiet and reasonable. “And I can tell you, if he’s gone to see Tia Marsh, he’s not going to get a very warm reception.”

“A lot you know about it, as she’s paying his fare. As a loan,” she added with a sniff. “We’re not leeches or money-grubbers. And he’s been half sick since Gideon called to tell him about the murder.”

“What?” This time his hand clamped like steel on her arm. “What murder?”

She was mad as a hornet and because of it wanted to spit and kick at him. The bastard had stirred up something in her, had started stirring it from that first careless *ahoy*. But she saw something else in him now, something cold and determined. And that something else was hearing of murder for the first time.

“I’m not telling you a bloody thing until I know who you are and what you’re about.”

“I’m Jack Burdett.” He took out his wallet, flipped out his driver’s license. “New York City. Burdett Security and Electronics. You got a computer, you can do a Net search.”

She took the wallet, studied the identification.

"I'm a collector, just like I said. I've done some security work for Morningside Antiquities, and I've been a client. Anita dangled the Three Fates in front of me like bait because she knows it's the sort of thing I'm interested in, and that I have a tendency to find things out."

As she continued to flip through his wallet, he struggled for patience. Then just nipped it out of her fingers, shoved it back in his pocket.

"Anita's mistake was in assuming I'd find them for her, or that she could break through my own security measures and keep track of my movements. Who the hell is dead?"

"That's not enough. I'll do that Web search. Let me tell you something, Jack, I have a tendency to find things out as well."

"Tia Marsh." He fell into step beside Rebecca as she strode down the hill. "You said she paid for your brother's flight to New York. She's okay, then?"

Rebecca slanted him a look. "She's fine and well as far as I can tell. You know her, do you?"

"Only met her once, but I liked her. Did anything happen to her parents?"

"No. It has something to do with someone else altogether, and I'm not giving you names until I'm sure you've no part in it."

"I want the Fates, but not enough to murder. If Anita's behind that, it changes the complexion of things."

"You don't sound as if you'd put such a thing past her."

"She's a spider," Jack said simply. "I liked her husband, did some work for him. I've done work for her, too. I don't have to like all my clients. How did your brother get tangled up with her?"

"Because she—" She broke off, scowled. "I'm not saying. How did you get Malachi's name, unless she gave it to you?"

"Tia mentioned him." He walked in silence for a while.

"Listen, you and your family seem to have a nice business going here," he continued. "You should think about letting this go. You're out of your league with Anita."

"You don't know me or my league. We'll have the

Three Fates before it's done, that's a promise. And if you're such an interested collector, you can prepare yourself to ante up for them."

"And I thought you weren't a money-grubber."

Because she heard the humor in his voice, it didn't ruffle her feathers. "I'm a businesswoman, Jack, as you pointed out yourself. And I can wheel and deal as well as anyone. Better than most. I've done my research on the Fates. The complete set at auction at a place like Wyley's or Sotheby's could go for upwards of twenty million American dollars. More, if the right publicity spin's put on it."

"An incomplete set, even two-thirds of the three, would only net a fraction of that, and only from an interested collector."

"We'll have the three. We were meant to."

He let it go and kept pace with her brisk march up a long hill at the very edge of town. At the top was a pretty house with a pretty garden, and a pretty woman tending it.

She straightened, shielded her eyes with the flat of her hand. When she smiled in greeting, Jack caught the resemblance around the mouth.

"Well, Becca darling, what have you brought home with you?"

"Jack Burdett. I invited him home for tea before I knew he was a liar and a sneak."

"Is that so?" Eileen's smile didn't dim in the slightest. "Well, an invitation's an invitation after all. I'm Eileen Sullivan." She extended her hand over the garden gate. "Mother to this rude creature."

"It's nice to meet you. I enjoyed your talk during the tour."

"It's kind of you to say so. You're from America?" she added as she opened the gate.

"New York. I'm in Cobh as I was hoping to talk to your son Malachi, regarding the Three Fates."

"Sure, you have no trouble spilling it all out to her in a lump," Rebecca scolded. "With me it's all flirtation and pretense."

"I said I liked the look of you, and since you don't strike

me as a stupid woman, you'd know if a man looks at you and doesn't like what he sees, he's got a serious problem. Boiled down, that means there was flirtation but no pre-tense. I've annoyed your daughter, Mrs. Sullivan."

Amused, intrigued, Eileen nodded. "That's easily done. Maybe we should talk inside before the neighbors start wagging about it. Kate Curry's already peeking out the window. So, you've come from New York," she continued as she started up the short walk to the door. "Have you family there?"

"Not anymore. My parents moved to Arizona several years ago. They like the weather."

"Hot, I suppose. No wife, then?"

"Not anymore. I'm divorced."

"Ah." Eileen led the way into the company parlor. "That's a pity."

"The marriage was the pity. The divorce was a lot easier on both of us. You have a good home, Mrs. Sullivan."

She liked the way he put it. "Yes, I do, and you make yourself comfortable in it. I'll see about that tea, then we'll talk. Rebecca, entertain our guest."

"Ma." With a withering glance at Jack, Rebecca hustled after Eileen.

He could hear the whispers from the hallway where they stood. Argued, he decided with a grin. He couldn't make out the words, until the last of them. That was clear.

"Rebecca Anne Margaret Sullivan, you get in the company parlor and show some manners this minute, or I'll know the reason why."

Rebecca stomped back in, flung herself in the chair across from Jack's. Her face was full of storms, and her voice full of ice. "Don't think you'll get around me because you got around my mother."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Rebecca Anne Margaret."

"Oh, stuff it."

"Tell me why your brother went back to New York. Tell me why you think Anita's involved in a murder."

"I'll tell you nothing at all until I've had a whack at my computer and seen how much of what you've told me is the truth."

“Go ahead, do it now.” He waved a hand. “I’ll cover for you with your mother.”

Rebecca weighed her mother’s wrath against the burn of her own curiosity. Knowing she’d pay for it dearly, she got to her feet. “If one single thing you’ve said doesn’t match, I’ll boot you out personally.”

She walked to the doorway, and Jack saw her send an uneasy glance down the hall, where her mother had gone, before she charged up the steps.

Because he sympathized with a child’s healthy fear of her mother, he rose and wandered back to the kitchen.

“I hope you don’t mind.” He stepped in while Eileen cut cake into neat squares. “I wanted to see the house.”

“I heard that girl go upstairs, and after I told her not to.”

“My fault. I told her to go ahead and run a check on me. You’ll both feel more comfortable once she does.”

“If I didn’t feel comfortable now, you wouldn’t be in my home.” She tapped a long-bladed knife against the side of the cake plate, smiling a little when his gaze dropped to it. “I know how to judge a man when I look him in the eye. And I know how to take care of my own.”

“I believe you.”

“Good. Now I know why I went and baked this cake this morning, though the boys aren’t about to eat it.” She turned to the stove to finish the tea. “For company, it’s the parlor. For business, it’s the kitchen.”

“Then I guess it’s the kitchen.”

“Have a seat, and have some cake. When the girl gets going on that computer, there’s no telling when she’ll show her face again.”

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had homemade cake, or eaten in a kitchen that wasn’t his own. It relaxed him, and made the time he normally would have marked pass easily.

It was thirty minutes or more before Rebecca sailed in and pulled up a chair. “He’s who he says he is,” she said to her mother, “so that’s something.” When she reached for a piece of cake, Eileen slapped her hand away.

“You don’t deserve any sweets.”

“Oh, Ma.”

“Whatever your age, Rebecca, you don’t disobey your mother without consequences.”

Her brows drew together, but she left the cake alone. “Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.” She shifted her gaze, and the darts in it, to Jack. “I wonder what you’d be needing with a flat in New York, and another in Los Angeles, and still a third in London.”

Though she surprised him, he sipped his tea. It had taken more than average computer skills to dig that deep. “I travel a lot, and prefer my own place to hotels when I can manage it.”

“And what does the man’s personal business have to do with this, Becca?”

At her mother’s censorious tone, she bristled. “I’ve got to know the nature of him, don’t I? He shows up here this way, just after Mal’s left, and after that horrible business in New York, where he admits he’s just come from.”

“I’d have done the same,” he told her with a nod. “And more.”

“I intend to do more. But more takes time. What I did find was that you checked into your hotel here early this morning, driving a rental car. And you’d booked your room two days ago. That’s before the trouble in New York, so I can’t see what one has to do with the other.”

He leaned forward now. “Tell me who was murdered.”

“It was a young man named Michael Hicks,” Eileen told him. “God rest him.”

“Was he working with you?”

“He was not.” Rebecca huffed out a breath, then added, “It’s a complicated business.”

“I’m good at complications.”

Rebecca looked at her mother.

“Darling, someone has died.” Eileen laid a hand on her daughter’s. “An innocent young man, by all accounts. Everything changes because of it. All this has to be put right again. If there’s a chance Jack can help do that, we have to take it.”

Rebecca sat back, studied Jack’s face. “Will you help see she pays for what she’s done?”

“If Anita had anything to do with murder, I’ll see she pays. You have my word on it.”

Rebecca nodded and, because she still wanted cake, folded her hands on the table. “You tell it, Ma. You’re better at telling.”

EILEEN WAS GOOD at telling and, Rebecca discovered, Jack Burdett was good at listening. He asked no questions, made no comments, only sipped his tea and kept his attention on Eileen while she spoke.

“And so,” she finished, “Malachi’s gone back to New York City to do what needs to be done.”

Jack nodded, and wondered if this nice, cozy family had any conception of what they’d gotten themselves into. “So this Cleo Toliver has the second Fate?”

“It wasn’t perfectly clear if she had it or knew where it was. The boy who died was a dear friend of hers, and she’s blaming herself over it.”

“And Anita knows who she is, but not where. At the moment.”

“As it stands,” Eileen confirmed.

“It’d be wise to keep it that way. If she’s killed once, it’ll be easy to kill again. Mrs. Sullivan, is it worth it to you? To risk your family?”

“Nothing’s worth my family, but they won’t be stopped now. I’d be disappointed in them if they did. There’s a young man dead, and that has to be accounted for. This woman can’t steal and murder without an accounting.”

“How did she get the first Fate away from you?”

“How do you know she did?” Rebecca demanded. “Unless she told you herself.”

“You told me,” he said mildly. “You called her a thief. And you put flowers on the grave of your great-great-grandfather, one Felix Greenfield, who’d been aboard the *Lusitania*. Up until recently, I believed the first Fate to have been lost along with Henry W. Wyley. The way this plays out, the Fate and your ancestor were spared. How did he manage it? Did he work for Wyley?”

“Felix wasn’t the only one who survived,” Rebecca began.

“Oh, Becca, for pity’s sake, the man’s got a brain in his head, and he’s used it. I’m afraid Felix stole the statue. He was a bit of a thief, but he reformed. He slipped the little thing in his pocket just as the torpedo hit. Though it might seem self-serving, I like to think it was meant.”

“He stole it.” A grin spread over Jack’s face. “That’s perfect. Then Anita steals it from you.”

“That’s different,” Rebecca insisted. “She knew what it was, and Felix didn’t. She used her dead husband’s business reputation when Mal took it to her for appraisal. Then she used her body to dull his common sense—and him being a man, it was easily done. She made a fool out of all of us and that . . . well, we’ll have an accounting for that as well.”

“If this is a matter of pride, you’d better rethink. She’ll eat a tasty morsel like you alive.”

“She can try. And she’ll choke.”

“Pride isn’t a luxury,” Eileen said quietly. “And not always a kind of vanity. Surviving when others died changed Felix. It, you could say, made a man out of him. The Fate was a symbol of that change, and it stood for it in our family for five generations. Now we know what it is, beyond that symbol, and we believe the three should be brought back together. That was meant as well. Maybe there’s profit in it, and we won’t turn from that. But it’s not for greed. It’s for family.”

“Anita has the first, and knows—or thinks she knows—how to get the second. You’re in her way.”

“And the Sullivans aren’t so easily pushed aside as she might think,” Eileen said. “Felix floated freezing on a broken crate while one of the grandest ships ever built sank behind him. He survived, while it didn’t. While more than a thousand others didn’t. And he had that little silver figure in his pocket. He brought it here, and we’ll have it back.”

“If I help you do that, help you put the three together, will you sell it to me?”

"If you meet the asking price," Rebecca began, but her mother cut her off with one sharp look.

"If you help us, we'll sell it to you. You have my word on it," she said and extended her hand over the table.

HE WANTED TIME to think it through, so stayed over in Cobh another day. It gave him the opportunity to make a number of calls, begin a number of background checks on the players in what Jack was finding a very interesting game.

He trusted Eileen Sullivan. While he was attracted to Rebecca, he didn't have the same instinctive faith in the daughter as he did in the mother. Because he wanted a second run at her, Jack bought another ticket for the tour and strolled down to the dock.

She didn't look pleased to see him. The cheerful expression she wore while chatting with passengers went cold and hard when her gaze shifted, landed on him.

She snatched the voucher out of his hand. "What are you doing back here?"

"Maybe I can't keep away from you."

"Bollocks. But it's your money."

"I'll give you ten pounds more for a seat on the bridge and some conversation."

"Twenty." She held out a hand. "In advance."

"Distrusting and mercenary." He dug out twenty pounds. "Careful, I could fall in love with you."

"Then I'd have the pleasure of grinding your heart into dust. For that, I'd refund your twenty. Take your seat, then, and don't touch anything. I've got to get started."

He waited, let her wonder and stew as she maneuvered into the harbor and set her mother's recording.

"Looks like rain," he commented.

"We've a couple hours yet. You don't strike me as a man who makes the same trip twice without good reason. What do you want?"

"Another invitation to tea?"

"You won't get it."

“Now that’s cold. Other than me, have you noticed anyone hanging around, taking this tour, walking by your house, maybe showing up along your daily routine?”

“You think we’re being watched?” Rebecca shook her head. “She doesn’t do it that way. She’s not worried about what we’re doing here in Cobh. She’s concerned with what one of us might be doing when we’re not at home. She tracked my brothers when they went off, and I think she did that through the airline tickets—the credit card, you know. It’s not that difficult to get such information if you’re clever with the computer.”

“It’s not simple either.”

“If I can do it, she, or someone she pays, can as well.”

“And can you?”

“I can do damn near anything with a computer. I know, for instance, that you were divorced five years ago, after one year and three months of marriage. Not such a long time.”

“Long enough, apparently.”

“I know your address in New York City, should I want to pay a call sometime in the future. I know you went to Oxford University and graduated in the top ten percent of your class. That’s not too bad,” she added. “Considering.”

“Thanks.”

“I know you have no criminal record, at least none that shows on a surface look, and that your company, which you started twelve years ago, has a strong, international reputation and has given you an estimated net—net, mind you—worth of twenty-six million American dollars. And that,” she said with the first hint of laughter in her eyes, “isn’t so very bad either.”

He stretched out his legs. “That’s a lot of digging.” And very impressive work, he thought.

“Oh, not so very much.” She waved it—and the six hours she’d spent at her keyboard—off. “And I was curious.”

“Curious enough to take a trip to Dublin?”

“Why would I want to go to Dublin?”

“Because I’m going, tonight.”

“Is that a proposition, Jack? And while my mother’s voice is coming through the speaker?”

“It is, but whether it’s personal or business is up to you. There’s someone in Dublin I need to see. I think it’ll be worth your while to tag along.”

“Who would this be?”

“You want to find out, have a bag packed and be ready by five-thirty. I’ll come by for you.”

“I’ll think about it,” she replied, but was mentally packing her bag.

Fourteen

“I know I’m leaving you shorthanded, Ma.”

“That’s not what concerns me.” Eileen frowned as Rebecca rolled up a sweater like a sausage and stuffed it into her bag. “I said I had a good feeling about Jack Burdett, and that I trusted him to be an honest man, but that doesn’t mean I feel easy about my daughter going off with him after one day’s acquaintance.”

“It’s business.” Rebecca debated between jeans and trousers. “And if it were Mal or Gideon heading out like this, you wouldn’t think twice.”

“I’d think twice, as they’re as precious to me as you. But as you’re a daughter instead of a son, I’m thinking three or four times. That’s the nature of things, Rebecca, and there’s no point in getting sulky over it.”

“I know how to take care of myself.”

Eileen laid a hand on Rebecca’s tumbled curls. “You do, yes.”

“And I know how to handle men.”

Eileen lifted her eyebrows. “Those you’ve had dealings with up to now. But you haven’t dealt with the likes of this one before.”

“A man’s a man,” Rebecca said dismissively, and ignored her mother’s hearty sigh. “Mal and Gideon have

been traipsing all over the world while I stay here, at the wheel or the keyboard. It's time I had some part of the adventure of it, Ma. Now I've a chance to, if only to go as far as Dublin for it."

She's always fought to stand toe-to-toe with her brothers, Eileen thought. And had worked for it. Earned it. "Take an umbrella. It's raining."

She was packed and walking out the front door when Jack pulled up. She wore a light jacket against the steady rain and carried a single duffel. He appreciated both promptness and efficiency in a woman, and the independence that had her tossing the bag in the backseat before he could walk around to take it from her.

She kissed her mother, then ended up exchanging a hard, swaying hug before climbing into the car.

"It's my only girl I'm trusting you with, Jack." Eileen stood in the rain, laid a hand on his arm. "If I come to regret it, I'll hunt you down like a dog."

"I'll take care of her."

"She can take care of herself or she wouldn't be going with you. But she's my only daughter and my youngest child, so I'm putting the weight of it on you."

"I'll have her back tomorrow."

Telling herself to be content with that, Eileen stepped back and watched them drive away in the rain.

SHE'D EXPECTED THEY'D drive all the way to Dublin and had prepared herself for the tedium of it. Instead he drove to Cork airport and turned in the rental car, and she prepared instead for the short flight.

She wasn't prepared for the little private jet, or for Jack himself to take the controls.

"Is it yours?" She ordered her nerves to quiet as she took her seat in the cockpit beside him.

"The company's. Simplifies things."

She cleared her throat as he went over his checklist. "And you're a good pilot, are you?"

"So far," he replied absently, then shot her a glance. "You've flown before?"

“Of course.” She blew out a breath. “Once, and on a big plane where I wasn’t required to sit beside the pilot.”

“There’s a parachute in the back.”

“I’m trying to think if that’s funny or not.” She kept her hands folded as he was given clearance and began the taxi to his assigned runway. When he picked up speed, she watched the gauges, and when the nose of the plane lifted, her stomach gave one quick shudder.

Then smoothed out.

“Oh, it’s something, isn’t it?” She strained forward, watching the ground fall away. “Not like a big plane at all. It’s better. How long does it take to get a pilot’s license? Can I have a go at the wheel?”

“Maybe on the way back, if we have clear weather.”

“If I can pilot a boat in a storm, I ought to be able to fly a little plane in a shower of rain. It must be grand being rich.”

“It has its advantages.”

“When we have the Fates and sell them to you, I’m taking my mother on a holiday.”

It was interesting, he thought, that that would be her first priority. Not that she would buy a fancy car or fly to Milan to shop, but that she would take her mother on vacation.

“Where to?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Relaxed now despite the turbulence, she eased back to peer at the stacks of clouds. “Someplace exotic, I think. An island like Tahiti or Bimini, where she can stretch out under an umbrella on the beach and see blue water while she drinks some silly thing out of a coconut shell. What’s in those things anyway?”

“The road to perdition.”

“Is it now? Well then, that’ll be good for her as well. She works so hard, and she never complains about it. Now we’ve been throwing money around right and left when by rights it should be in the bank so she can feel secure.”

She paused, then shifted to look at him. “What she said to you yesterday, that it wasn’t about greed. That’s the truth for her. I might be greedy, though I prefer to think of it as practical, but she’s not.”

Greedy? No, a greedy woman didn’t fantasize about

taking her mother to a tropical island and getting her plastered on coconut drinks.

“Is that your way of telling me when you get the statue back you’ll skin me over the purchase price?”

She only smiled. “Let me have a go at the wheel there, Jack.”

“No. Why haven’t you asked me why we’re going to Dublin?”

“Because you wouldn’t tell me, and I’d be wasting my breath.”

“That’s refreshing. I’ll tell you this instead. I did background checks on you and your brothers, and on Cleo Toliver.”

“Is that so?” Her voice cooled.

“You ran me, Irish, so let’s call it tit for tat. Toliver had some light smears on her juvenile record—underage drinking, shoplifting, disorderly conduct. Basic teenage-rebellion-type stuff. She got plugged into the system because her parents didn’t rush to get her out again.”

“What do you mean?” A combination of shock and outrage warred inside her. “That they let her go to jail? Their own child?”

“Juvie’s not jail, but it’s close enough. Her parents divorced, and her mother likes to remarry. She bounced between the two of them, then took off when she hit eighteen. No dings on her adult record, so she either cleaned up her act or got better at avoiding the cops.”

“You’re telling me this because you think with her background, her record, she might be a problem for us. If Gideon thought that, he’d have said so.”

“I don’t know Gideon, and I prefer drawing my own conclusions. Speaking of your brothers, they’re both clear as far as legal difficulties. And you, you’re as pure as your skin.”

She jerked her head back when he reached over to brush a fingertip down her cheek. “Mind your hands.”

“What is it about Irishwomen and their skin?” he said as if to himself. “Makes a man want to lap it up, especially when it smells like yours.”

“I don’t mix flirtations and business,” she said stiffly.

"I do. As often as possible. Being a practical woman, I'd think you'd appreciate the efficiency of multitasking."

She had to laugh. "Well now, I'll admit that's a unique line, Jack. But if you think the sophisticated world traveler can lure the naive village girl with clever lines, you've mistaken the matter."

"I don't think you're naive." He turned his head, met her eyes. "I think you're fascinating. And more, I'm curious about what I felt run through me when I looked over the high grass and old stones of a cemetery and watched you lay flowers on a grave. I'm very curious about that, Rebecca, and I always satisfy my curiosity."

"I felt something, too. That's as much why I've come with you as wanting to know what's in Dublin. But don't think you can maneuver me, Jack, because you can't. I've a goal to meet, for myself, for my family. Nothing can get in the way of it."

"I didn't think you'd admit it." He gave his attention to his instruments. "That you'd felt something. You're a straightforward woman, Rebecca. A straightforward woman who knows computers, who can pack for a last-minute trip in a single bag and be on time. Where have you been all my life? We're about to start our approach," he said before she could answer.

THERE WAS ANOTHER rental car waiting at Dublin airport, and this time Jack hauled up Rebecca's bag before she could grab it herself. She didn't comment on it, nor on the conversation they'd had in the plane. She wasn't sure either would be safe topics at the moment.

She didn't speak at all until he headed away from the city instead of toward it.

"Dublin's the other way," she pointed out.

"We're not actually going into the city."

"Then why did you say we were?"

Her suspicious nature was just one more thing he found appealing. "We flew into Dublin, and now we're driving a few miles south. When we're done, we'll drive back and fly out of Dublin."

“And where might we be spending the night?”

“At a place I haven’t been to for a couple of years. You’ll have your own room,” he added, “with the option of sharing mine.”

“I’ll take my own. Who’s paying for it?”

He grinned, lightning fast, in a way that engaged his whole face and made her want to trace a finger over that faint, crescent scar.

“That won’t be a problem. It’s pretty country,” he commented, gesturing at the rising green hills that shimmered through the thinning rain. “Easy to see why he decided to retire here.”

“Who?”

“The man we’re going to see. Tell me, do you share your mother’s belief that the Fates are a kind of symbol?”

“I suppose I do.”

“And that they belong together for reasons more than their monetary, even artistic value?”

“Yes. Why?”

“One more. Do you agree that what goes around comes around?”

She blew out an impatient breath. “If you’re meaning there are cycles and circles to things, I do.”

“Then you’re going to appreciate this.” He took the car up a hill, then around to a pretty road lined with dripping hedgerows and painted bungalows with thriving gardens.

The road climbed again, turned again, and he swung into a short drive beside a lovely stone house where the chimney was smoking and the gardens were a small sea of beauty.

“Your friend lives here?”

“Yeah.”

Even as Jack stepped out of the car, the door of the house opened. An old man stood in the doorway, leaning on a cane and grinning. He had a monk’s fringe of snowy hair topping a wide face lined with deep creases. Silver-framed glasses slid down his nose.

“Mary!” His voice croaked like a frog. “They’re here,” he shouted, and came forward even as Jack hurried to him.

“Don’t come out in the rain.”

"Hell, boy, little rain doesn't hurt. Everything else does at my age, but not a bit of wet." He caught Jack in a one-armed embrace.

Rebecca saw now the old man was quite tall, but bent a bit with age. His big hand reached up to lie across Jack's cheek and looked, despite its size, fragile there, and somehow sweet.

"I've missed you," Jack said, and leaned down in an easy, unself-conscious gesture Rebecca admired and kissed the old man lightly on the lips. "This is Rebecca Sullivan."

He shifted his body, and again she noted the gentleness in him when he slid a hand under the man's arm.

"Well, you said she was a beauty, and so she is." He reached out and took her hand, simply held it. And she saw with puzzled embarrassment the sparkle of tears come into his eyes.

"Rebecca, this is my great-grandfather."

"Oh." At sea, she managed a smile. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

"My great-grandfather," he repeated. "Steven Edward Cunningham, the Third."

"Cunningham?" Her throat snapped closed. "Steven Cunningham? Sweet Jesus."

"It's a great pleasure to welcome you into my house." Steven stepped back, blinking at tears. "Mary!" he shouted again. "Deaf as a post," he stated, "and she's forever turning her bloody hearing aid off. Run up and get her, Jack. I'll take Rebecca into the parlor. She's fussing with your room," he said as he led Rebecca away. "Been fussing since Jack called to say you were coming."

"Mr. Cunningham." Off balance, she walked blindly into a neat parlor where everything gleamed, and sank at his urging into the deep cushions of a wing-backed chair. "You're the same Steven Cunningham who . . . who was on the *Lusitania*?"

"The same as who owes his life to Felix Greenfield."

"And you're Jack's—"

"Great-grandfather. His mother's my granddaughter. And here we are. Here we are," he repeated and pulled a

handkerchief from his pocket. "I'm sentimental in my old age."

"I don't know what to say to you. My head's spinning." She lifted a hand to her temple as if to hold it in place. "I've heard of you all my life. And somehow always thought of you as a little boy."

"I was just three when my parents made that crossing." He sighed deeply, then tucked the handkerchief away. "I can't be sure how much I actually remember, or how much I think I remember because my mother told me the story so often."

He walked over to a polished gateleg table crowded with framed photographs and lifted one, brought it to Rebecca. "My parents. It's their wedding photo."

She saw a handsome young man with a dashing mustache and a woman, hardly more than a girl, glorious in silk and lace and her bridal glow.

"They're beautiful." Tears threatened to spill. "Oh, Mr. Cunningham."

"My mother lived another sixty-three years, thanks to Felix Greenfield." Steven took his handkerchief out again and gently pressed it into Rebecca's hand. "She never remarried. For some there's only one love in a lifetime. But she was content, and she was productive, and she was grateful."

"The story's true, then." Composing herself, she handed him the photograph.

"I'm proof of that." He turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. "Here comes Jack with my Mary. When she's done fussing over you, we'll talk about it."

MARY CUNNINGHAM WAS indeed deaf as a post, but in honor of the occasion, she turned her hearing aid on. Rebecca was given a lovely room with fresh flowers in china vases and invited to rest or freshen up before supper.

She did neither, but simply sat on the side of the bed hoping her mind would settle. It was Jack who knocked on her door fifteen minutes later. Rebecca stayed where she was and studied him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought it would mean more this way. It did to him, and that matters to me.”

She nodded. “I think in my heart, I always believed it happened just as I’d been told. But in my head, I wasn’t so sure. I want to thank you for bringing me here, for giving me this.”

He crossed over, crouched in front of her. “Do you believe in connections, Rebecca? In the power of them, even the inevitability of them?”

“I’d have to, wouldn’t I?”

“I’m not a sentimental man,” he began, but she laughed and shook her head.

“I saw you with Steven, then with Mary, so don’t tell me you’re not sentimental.”

“About people who matter to me, but not about things. I don’t romanticize.” He took her hand, felt her brace. “I looked at you. That’s really all it took.”

“It’s confusing.” She managed to keep her voice steady, though her heart was humming in her throat. “This maze of circumstances that links our families.”

“It’s more than that.”

“I’d like to keep things simple.”

“Not a chance,” he told her as he drew her to her feet. “Besides, I like complications. Life’s bland without them. You’re a hell of a complication.”

“Don’t.” She pressed a hand to his chest as he pulled her closer, and felt like an idiot. “I’m not being coy, I’m being careful.”

“You’re trembling.”

“Oh, you enjoy that, don’t you? Getting me all stirred up and confused.”

“Damn right.” He gave her one hard tug. It brought her to her toes, had her sucking in a breath for an oath. Then his mouth was on hers, hard and hot and hungry enough to blur the curse into a small sound of shock.

He kissed like a man accustomed to taking, with a ruthless skill that had her pulse pumping fast and her belly quivering with need. Though the reaction stupefied her, she felt her own bones go liquid.

And so did he.

His hands dived into her hair, used it to draw her head back. "The first time I saw you," he said. "That's never happened to me before."

"I don't know you." But her lips were warm with the taste of his, her body primed for the weight of him. "I don't sleep with men I don't know."

He lowered his head, skimmed his teeth lightly over her throat. "Is that a firm policy?"

"It used to be."

He nipped his way along her jaw. "We're going to get to know each other very quickly."

"All right. That's all right. Don't kiss me again now. It isn't proper, not with them downstairs this way, Jack. They're waiting supper for us."

"Then we'll go down."

THEY SETTLED IN the small dining room made charming with china figures and antique glass. The walls were decorated with a collection of old, floral-patterned plates.

"You have such a lovely home," Rebecca complimented Mary. "It's so nice of you to let me come."

"It's a treat for us." Mary beamed and helpfully cocked her ear in Rebecca's direction. "Jack never brings his girls to see us."

"Doesn't he?"

"No, indeed." She had the soft music of Ireland in her voice. "We only met the one he married twice, and once was at the wedding. We didn't like her very much, did we, Steven?"

"Now, Mary."

"Well, we didn't. She had a cold streak, if you ask me, and—"

"The roast is perfect, Gram."

Distracted, Mary sent Jack a twinkling look. "You always favored my pot roast."

"I married you for it," Steven said with a wink. "Like a lot of young men, I did the Grand Tour when I was done with university," he told Rebecca. "Outside of Dublin, I

stayed at a small inn and met my Mary, whose parents ran it. I fell in love with her over pot roast, and ended my tour then and there. It took me two weeks to convince her to marry me and move back to Bath.”

“You exaggerate. It took you only ten days.”

“And we’ve been married now sixty-eight years. We lived in America for a time. In New York. My father’s family had fallen on very hard times. They’d never recovered from the crash of ’twenty-nine. One of my daughters married an American and settled there. It’s her daughter who’s Jack’s mother.”

He reached over to lay his hand over Mary’s. “We’ve had four children, two sons and two daughters. They gave us eleven grandchildren, and they six great-grandchildren and counting. Every one of them owes their life to Felix Greenfield. That one unselfish and courageous act set the rest in motion.”

“He didn’t intend it. The way it’s been told in my family,” Rebecca explained. “He only wanted to live, to survive. He was panicked when he found the life jacket. He thought only of saving himself, then he saw your mother, and you, trapped in the debris. He said she was so calm, so beautiful in the midst of all the horror. And she held you close to comfort you, and you her, without even crying for all you were just a little thing. And he couldn’t turn away.”

“I remember his face,” Steven said. “Dark eyes, white skin already smeared with smoke or soot. My father was gone. I didn’t see it happen, or don’t remember. That she’d never speak of. But we fell when the ship lurched. She was carrying me, and we fell. She twisted herself to keep me from hitting the deck. She always had a limp when she tired after that.”

“She was a brave and wonderful woman,” Rebecca said.

“Oh, she was. And I think her courage met Felix Greenfield’s that day. The ship was sinking, and the deck tilting higher and higher. He pulled her up it, trying to get us to one of the lifeboats. But the boat lurched again, and though he tried to reach us—I see his face even now as he called out and tried to get to her—we fell into the water.

Without the life jacket he'd given us, we wouldn't have had a prayer."

"Even with it, it's a miracle. He said she was hurt."

"She broke her arm shielding me as we went into the water, and as I said, she'd already badly twisted her leg. She wouldn't let me go. I had barely a scratch. The miracle," he said, "was my mother and Felix Greenfield. Because of them, you could say the thread of my life has been long and productive."

When Rebecca stared, Jack lifted his water glass. "Which brings us to the Fates. Did I tell you my great-great-grandfather had a small antique shop in Bath?"

A chill ran over Rebecca's skin. "You didn't mention it, no."

"Yes, indeed." Steven polished off his roast beef. "Inherited it from my grandfather. We were going to visit my mother's parents there. My grandmother wasn't well. After my father was lost, we stayed in Bath rather than returning to New York. Because of that I developed quite an interest in antiques and made my own living through them, in the same shop my grandfather had. Another twist of fate that owes its run to Felix."

He crossed his knife and fork tidily over his plate. "I can't tell you how fascinated I was when Jack told me Felix stole one of the Three Fates from Henry Wyley's state-room just before he saved my life. Mary dear, are we going to have that apple pie in the parlor?"

"Never can wait for his pie. Go on and settle in, then, I'll bring it along shortly."

Questions were tripping over her tongue, but her mother had drummed manners into her. "I'll help you clear, Mrs. Cunningham."

"Oh, there's no need."

"Please, I'd like to help."

Mary shot Jack an arched look as everyone got to their feet. "The one you married never offered to clear a dish, to my recollection."

While the dishes were seen to, Rebecca was treated to a full rundown of Jack's ex-wife. She'd been beautiful,

brainy and blond. An American lawyer who, according to Mary, worried more about her career than hearth and home. They'd taken their time marrying and had divorced, in her opinion, in a finger snap and without even the heart for battling over it.

Rebecca made appropriate noises and filed the information away. She was interested; in fact, she was dying to know everything. But she couldn't juggle the matter in her brain with thoughts of the Fates.

She wheeled in the dessert tray herself and held back the barrage of questions that raced through her mind.

"This one's been raised right," Mary said with approval. "Your mother must be a fine woman."

"She is, thank you."

"Now, if the two of you don't finish what you've started and give this poor child the rest of it, I'll do it myself."

"Connections," Jack said. "We've talked about them, haven't we, Rebecca?"

"We have."

"The little shop in Bath was called Browne's. It was established in the early eighteen hundreds and catered, for a number of years, to the gentry who came to Bath for the waters. Often, its clientele were those who needed to liquidate possessions into cash, discreetly. So its stock was varied and often unique. While discreet, it was a carefully run business, and records were meticulously kept. According to them, in the summer of 1883, a certain Lord Barlow sold a number of trinkets and artifacts to Browne's. Among them was a small silver statue, Grecian style, of a woman holding a pair of scissors."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God."

"My grandfather was proprietor of Browne's when Wyley made his last crossing," Steven continued. "I have no way of knowing if he'd been in touch with my grandfather regarding the Fate. I first learned of them when I was a young man, enthusiastically studying my trade. I was interested in the legend of the statue and whether or not the one Browne's had purchased so long before had been authentic. When I heard that Wyley had owned one of the

set, and had, by all accounts, taken it with him on the ship, I was more fascinated.”

“But even if the statue Browne’s had bought was authentic,” Jack put in, “its value was diminished as the first Fate was, by all accounts, lost along with Wyley. So what was left was an intriguing connection to another *Lusitania* passenger, and a piece of a legend.”

“Was it real? Where is it now?” Rebecca demanded.

“My mother never tires of family history.” Rather than answering, Jack rose to put another log on the parlor fire. “I was raised on it, and the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the legend of the Fates were part of all that. And, I came by my own interest in antiques naturally,” he added, laying a hand on Steven’s shoulder. “When Anita mentioned the Fates, it stirred my interest in them again, enough that I phoned my mother and asked her to confirm the stories she’d told me. Enough for me to arrange for an overdue visit here, with a stop in Cobh to check out Sullivan and pay my respects to Felix Greenfield.”

He crossed to a satinwood display cabinet, opened it. “Imagine my surprise when I discovered the Sullivans were just one more connection, to this.”

He turned and held up the third Fate.

“It’s here.” Though her legs felt like rubber, Rebecca rose. “It’s been here all along.”

“Where it’s been,” he said as he held it out for her, “since Granddad closed the doors of Browne’s twenty-six years ago.”

She held it in her cupped hand, testing the weight, studying the cool, almost sorrowful silver face. Gently, she ran her thumb over the shallow notch in the right corner of the base. Where, Rebecca knew, Atropus would link with Lachesis.

“Another thread, another circle. What will you do now?”

“Now, I take it with me back to New York, negotiate with Cleo Toliver for hers, then figure out how to get yours back from Anita.”

“It’s good you remember the first is mine.” She gave the statue back to him. “I’ll be going to New York as well.”

“You’ll be going back to Cobh,” he corrected. “And staying an ocean away from Anita.”

She angled her head. “I’ll be going to New York, with you, or on my own, for I’m damned if you or my brothers will finish this off without me. You’d best resign yourself, Jack, that I won’t be tucked in a corner to wait while the men do the work. I pull my own weight.”

“There now.” Mary cut her husband a second slice of pie. “What did I tell you? I like this one much better than the one you married, Jack. Sit down and finish your pie, Rebecca. Of course you’re going with him to New York.”

Her expression was smug as Rebecca turned away and sat. She forked up a bite of pie. “Thank you, Mrs. Cunningham. I wonder if I should stop in Dublin and buy some clothes for the trip, or wait and buy some things in New York. I’ve only packed one change of clothes.”

“Oh, I’d wait if you can. You’ll have such a fine time shopping in New York, won’t you?”

“It’s not a damn vacation,” Jack snapped.

“Don’t interrupt your Gram,” Rebecca said mildly.

“Let it go, boy.” Steven waved a hand. “You’re outnumbered.”

Fifteen

MALACHI knew exactly how he would handle Tia, from his initial greeting, to his overall tone of approach. He would apologize again, of course. There was no question about that. And he would use all the charm and persuasion at his disposal to soften her stance toward him.

He owed her; there was no question of that either. For the financial backing, but more, much more, for the help she'd given his brother.

That he could repay by keeping their association completely professional, friendly but reserved. He thought he understood her well enough to know that was the way she'd prefer it.

Once they were on the proper footing again, they would get down to business.

He and Gideon would move into a hotel. Naturally they couldn't continue to impose on her privacy. But he hoped he could convince her to allow the Toliver woman to stay. In that way, he'd be assured they were both safe. And, almost as important, that they were out of his way.

A bit worn from the trip, he knocked briskly on her apartment door. And hoped her sense of hospitality would run to a cold beer.

Then she opened the door, and he forgot the beer and his carefully outlined approach.

"You've cut your hair." Without thinking, he reached out to dance his fingers over the short ends of it. "Just look at you."

She didn't jerk back. That was the willpower she'd been working on for hours. But she stepped back, stiffly. "Come in, Malachi. Set your bags down," she invited. "I hope your flight went well."

"It was fine. It suits you, you know. The hair. You look wonderful. I missed seeing you, Tia."

"Do you want a drink?"

"I would, please. I'm sorry, I haven't even thanked you for fronting me the means to fly over."

"It's business." She turned and walked into the kitchen.

"You've changed more than your hair."

"Maybe." Assuming he'd prefer a beer, as his brother did, she pulled one out of the refrigerator, shifted to get a glass from the cupboard. "Maybe I've had to."

"I'm sorry, Tia, for the way I handled things."

Proud of herself, she popped the top of the beer and poured it into the glass without the slightest tremor in her hand. "The way you handled me, you mean."

"Yes. I could make excuses for it." He took the glass she held out to him. Waited for her gaze to meet and hold his. "I could even make you accept them, but I won't bother. I regret lying to you more than I can tell you."

"There's no point in hashing it over at this stage." She started to walk back into the living room and stopped when he stepped over to block her.

"It wasn't all a lie."

Though her color came up, her voice was cool and brisk. "There's no point in discussing that either. We have a mutual interest, and a mutual claim, on a particular piece of art. I intend to use my resources, and yours, to get it back. That's all there is to discuss."

"You're making it easier on me."

"Oh?" She cocked her head to what she hoped was a sarcastic angle. "How?"

“By not being vulnerable, I don’t have to worry so much about bruising you.”

“I had thin skin once. That doesn’t seem to be one of my problems anymore. Now, house rules.” This time she skirted quickly around him and began to breathe easier as soon as she had some distance. “No smoking in the apartment. You can use the terrace or, as Gideon is just now, the roof. He and Cleo had a good case of cabin fever working up, so I suggested they use the roof for a while. It’s not as confining as the terrace, and it’s safe.”

He started to tell her he and his brother would go to a hotel, then changed his mind. If she wasn’t bothered, why should he be?

“I quit smoking two years ago, so it’s not a problem for me.”

“Good, you’ll live longer. You clean up after yourself, and that includes dishes, laundry, papers, whatever. I like a tidy space. You’ll have to sleep on the couch, as Gideon and Cleo have the spare bed. That means you’ll have to be prepared to get up at a reasonable hour in the morning.”

Because she was starting to sound more like Tia, he began to enjoy himself and sat on the arm of the couch. “What’s reasonable?”

“Seven.”

“Ouch.”

“You and Gideon will have to work out a shower schedule. You’ll have use of the small bathroom. Cleo can share mine, but it and my bedroom are off limits to you and your brother. Clear enough?”

“Crystal, darling.”

“I’m keeping a record of expenses. The flight, of course, and food, any other transportation. You will pay me back.”

That irritated him enough to have him push to his feet. “We fully intend to pay you back. We’re not leeches. I can get a bank loan and clear it up straightaway.”

Feeling small, she turned away. “That’s not necessary. I’m angry with you. I can’t help it.”

“Tia—”

“Don’t.” Alerted by the gentle tone, she whirled back.

“Don’t *soothe* me. I can be angry with you and do what needs to be done. I’m very good at working around unstable emotions. Now, do you cook?”

He raked a hand through his hair. “After a fashion.”

“Good, Cleo doesn’t. That leaves you, Gideon, me and takeout. Now we can—” She broke off, glancing over as she heard the key in the lock.

Cleo came in first, looking a bit sweaty, outrageously sexy and suspiciously rumped. Her smile was slow and considering as she sized up Malachi. “So, this must be big brother.”

“Mal.” Gideon strode in behind her, and the two men caught each other in a hard, unself-conscious hug. “It’s good to see you. We’ve got a fucking mess on our hands.”

It took thirty minutes, and another beer, to bring him up to date.

“I don’t see what business this Burdett has sticking his nose in it.” Malachi brooded into his second beer, then got up to pace. “It just adds another complication.”

“If he hadn’t stuck his nose in, I wouldn’t know my phones are tapped, would I?” Tia rose, picked up the glass Malachi had set down and put a coaster under it.

“He *says* they’re tapped.”

“Why would he make it up? In any case, I went to see my father this morning and asked him about Jack. My father confirms who he is, and that he’s a serious collector. And the police detective vouched for him.”

“You’re just pissed off because there’s another guy in the mix.” Cleo fluttered her lashes and took a sip of Gideon’s beer when Malachi turned to scowl at her. “It’s the testosterone thing, and nobody blames you for it. Tia, you got any cookies in here?”

“Um, I think I have some sugarless wafers.”

“Honey, we really need to talk. Life should never be about sugarless wafers. Now, before you climb up my ass,” she said to Malachi, “remember we’ve had a little more time to think about Burdett and his place in all this. He knows Anita,” she continued, ticking off the points on her fingers. “He knows security, and he’s interested in the Fates. We hope to sell mine, and the third when we get it.

The way I see it, you've got two potential buyers now instead of one. We can have our own private auction."

"I might not like having another player in the game," Gideon put in, "but it makes sense, Mal. Anita's been tracking us right along. Could be this Burdett helps us with that end. And Tia's father says how he's got money, so we sell to him. I'd rather that than have any more dealings with that bitch Anita. Besides all this, I called Ma from the pay phone down the street to check in, and she's met him. She trusts him, and that's enough for me."

"I'll decide that for myself. You said he left you a business card, Tia?" Malachi drummed his fingers on his thigh as he worked out the details in his mind. "I'll ring him up and have a meeting with him, face-to-face. And if he's such a bloody security expert, he can fix these damn phones so we're not running down to a phone box every time we turn around."

"You need some carbs," Cleo decided. "You got carbs around here, right?"

"Ah . . ." Tia glanced nervously toward her kitchen. "Yes, I—"

"Don't worry. I'll root around. I get pissy when my carbs are low," she said sympathetically to Malachi.

"I'm not being pissy."

She unfolded herself and walked over to pinch his cheeks. "Since we're the ones you're pissing on, handsome, we should know. You Sullivans don't travel very well. Slick there was ragged out when we got here, too. You're pretty, aren't you?" She cocked her head. "You guys have some superior DNA."

She teased a laugh out of him. "You're quite the package, aren't you?"

"Damn right. Hey, Tia, let's just order some pizza. Couple larges with the works ought to do it."

"I don't really eat—" She broke off when Cleo turned and gaped at her.

"If you're about to tell me you don't eat pizza, I'm getting a gun and putting you out of your misery."

It didn't seem the time to discuss fat grams, or the fact that she suspected she might be allergic to tomato sauce.

"If the phones are tapped and I order two large pizzas, isn't that going to seem strange to whoever's listening since I'm supposed to be here alone?"

"So, they'll think you're a greedy pig. Let's live dangerously."

"And besides, I have a two o'clock lunch appointment, which I should be leaving for right now."

"Who are you meeting?" Malachi asked as she walked into the bedroom. "Tia?"

"Bedroom's off limits," Gideon muttered before his brother could follow. "She's very strict about it."

"She's not acting like herself." He jammed his hands in his pockets and frowned at the bedroom door. "I don't know as I like it."

"Figuring on what's been going on around here the past couple of days, you could cut her a break. She took us in," Cleo reminded him. "She sure as hell didn't have to. You messed with her head. Hold on." She held up a hand when he spun around and snarled. "I'm not saying I wouldn't have played it the same way, but when you've already got low-self-esteem issues, having a guy fuck with you can really screw you up."

"That's quite an analysis in a short order."

"You dance naked for a few months, you learn a lot about people." She shrugged. "We're going to like each other fine after we get to know each other better, sweetheart. I already like your baby brother, and your taste in women," she added, nodding toward the bedroom door.

"Later you can explain to me how dancing naked turns you into a psychologist, but for now . . ." Malachi banged a fist on the bedroom door. "Tia, where the devil are you going?"

The door opened, and she hurried out. He caught the drift of the perfume she'd just sprayed on. She'd painted her lips as well, and slipped into a streamlined black blazer. A small and unwelcome curl of jealousy formed in his gut. "Who are you meeting for lunch?"

"Anita Gaye." She opened her purse to check the contents. "I can call the pizza in from a phone booth on the way."

“Cool. Thanks. Great jacket,” Cleo commented.

“Really? It’s new. I wasn’t sure if . . . well, it doesn’t matter. I should be back by four or four-thirty.”

“Just one bloody minute.” Malachi beat her to the door, slammed a hand on it. “If you think I’m having you walk out of here and have lunch with a woman we know hires killers, you’ve lost your fucking mind.”

“Don’t swear at me, and don’t tell me what you’ll have me do.” Nerves hopped in her stomach and urged her to shrink back, but she held her ground. “You’re not in charge of me, or of this . . . consortium,” she decided. “Now move aside. I’m going to be late.”

“Tia.” Since anger didn’t work, he switched smoothly to charm. “I’d be worried about you, is all. She’s a dangerous woman. We all know how dangerous now.”

“And I’m weak and foolish and out of my league.”

“Yes. No. Oh, Christ.” He held up a hand, though he was tempted to strangle her, or himself, with it. “Just tell me what you’re trying to do here.”

“Have lunch. She called and asked me. I agreed. I assume she thinks she can pump some information out of me regarding the Fates and Henry Wyley. And you. I’m perfectly aware of her agenda, as she’s never spoken above twenty words to me before in her life. However, she isn’t and won’t be aware of mine. I’m not the moron you think I am, Malachi.”

“I don’t think that of you. Tia—” He bit back an oath when he noted neither Cleo nor his brother had the courtesy to pretend they weren’t listening. “Let’s go up on the roof and talk about this.”

“No. Now, unless you plan to wrestle me to the ground and tie me in a closet, I’m going out to have lunch.”

“Atta girl, Tia,” Cleo said under her breath and earned an elbow in the ribs from Gideon.

“Mal,” Gideon said quietly, “ease back now.”

When he did, Tia wrenched open the door.

“Don’t forget the pizza,” Cleo called out just before Tia slammed it in Malachi’s face.

“If that woman hurts her—”

“What’s she going to do?” Cleo demanded. “Stab Tia

with her salad fork? Cool your jets a minute and think. This is smart. Odds are Anita thinks Tia's a dork, when *she's* the one who'll be out of her league. Smart money says Tia comes back with a lot of information, while Anita slinks off with nothing."

"She's bloody brilliant, Mal," Gideon confirmed. "And we need her. You should relax."

"Right." But he knew he wouldn't until Tia came back.

EVEN WITH HER active fantasy life, Tia had never imagined herself as a kind of spy. Sort of a double agent, she decided as she arrived exactly on time for lunch. And all she had to do was be herself to pull it off. Shy, jittery, anal and boring, she thought as she was shown to her table.

Some secret agent.

Naturally Anita was late because, in Tia's experience, women who weren't shy, jittery, anal and boring were most often late for appointments. Because they had a life, she supposed.

Well, she sure as hell had a life now and still managed to be prompt.

She ordered mineral water and tried not to look conspicuous and, well, jittery, as she sat alone in the quiet elegance of Café Pierre, for the next ten minutes.

Anita swept in—there was really no other word for that stylish and urbanely rushed entrance—wearing a gorgeous suit the color of ripe eggplant and a spectacular necklace fashioned from complicatedly braided gold and chunks of amethyst.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. I hope you haven't been waiting long." She leaned down and air-kissed Tia's cheek before sliding into her chair and setting her cell phone beside her plate.

"No, I—"

"Trapped with a client and couldn't shake loose," Anita interrupted. "Vodka martini," she told the waiter. "Stoli, straight up, dry as dust, two olives." Then she sat back, let out the long breath of a woman about to decompress. "I'm

so glad we could do this. I so rarely have the chance to have a non-business lunch these days. You look well, Tia.”

“Thank you. You—”

“You’ve done something different, haven’t you?” Anita pursed her lips, tapped her crimson fingertips on the table as she tried to put a clearer picture of Tia in her mind. “You’ve changed your hair. Very flattering. Men make such a to-do about long hair on a woman. I can’t think why,” she added, tossing back her own luxurious locks. “Now, tell me all about your travels. It must have been fascinating lecturing all over Europe. Tiring though. You look just exhausted. But you’ll bounce back.”

You’re really a champion bitch, aren’t you? Tia thought and sipped her water as Anita’s martini was served. “It was a difficult and fascinating experience. You don’t see as much of the world as you might think. You’re in airports and hotels, and the lecture venues.”

“But still, there are benefits. Did you meet that gorgeous Irishman you were dining with while you were traveling?”

“Actually, I did. He attended one of my lectures in Europe, then looked me up when he had business here in New York. He was awfully handsome, wasn’t he?”

“Extremely. And he was interested in mythology?”

“Hmm.” Tia picked up her menu, scanned her choices. “Yes, very much. Particularly in the groupings. The Sirens, the Muses, the Fates. Do you suppose I could get this grilled chicken salad without the pine nuts?”

“I’m sure. Are you still in touch with him?”

“With who?” Tia tipped down her menu, tipped down her reading glasses. Smiled vaguely. “Oh, with Malachi. No, he had to go back to Ireland. I thought he might call, but I suppose . . . It is three thousand miles, after all. Men don’t generally call me after a date when they live in Brooklyn.”

“Men are such pigs. The Amazons had the right idea. Use them for sex and propagation, then kill them.” She laughed, then turned to the waiter when he stepped up to the table. “I’ll have the Caesar salad, a mineral water and another martini.”

“Um . . . do you use free-range chicken?” Tia began,

and deliberately turned the ordering of a simple salad into a major event. She caught Anita's smirk out of the corner of her eye and considered it a job well done.

"It's interesting, you talking about the Fates," Anita said.

"Was I?" Tia slipped off her glasses, put them carefully in their case. "I thought it was Amazons—though, of course, they weren't gods, or Greek. Still, they were a fascinating female culture, and I've always—"

"The Fates." Anita managed to polish off her first martini through clenched teeth.

"Oh yes. Female power again. Women, sisters, who determine the length and quality of life for gods and for men."

"With your interest, and your family background, you'd have heard of the statues."

"I've heard of a lot of statues. Oh!" Tia exclaimed innocently and swore she could hear Anita's teeth grinding. "The Three Fates. Yes, of course. In fact, one of my ancestors was reputed to have owned one—I think it was Clotho, the first Fate. But he died on the *Lusitania* and by all accounts had it with him. It's very sad if it's true. Lachesis and Atropus have nothing to measure and cut without Clotho to spin the thread. Then again, I know more about the myths than antiques. Do you think the statues exist? The other two, I mean."

"I suppose I'm romantic enough to hope they do. I thought someone with your knowledge, and your connections, might have some ideas."

"Gosh." Tia bit her lip. "I hardly ever paid any attention to that sort of thing. Which is what I told Malachi when we talked about it."

"He talked to you about the statues, then?"

"He was interested." Gingerly, Tia picked through the basket of warm bread and rolls. "He collects mythological art. Something he started doing on one of his business trips to Greece some years ago. He's in shipping."

"Is that so? A handsome, wealthy Irishman, with an interest in your field. And you haven't called *him*?"

"Oh, I couldn't." As if flustered, Tia stared down at the tablecloth and fiddled with the collar of her jacket. "I wouldn't feel comfortable calling a man. I never know what

to say anyway. Besides, I think he was disappointed I couldn't give him any help with the Fates. The statues, that is. I was very helpful with the myths, if I do say so myself. And with one of them at the bottom of the Atlantic, they'd never be complete, would they?"

"No."

"I suppose if they were—complete, that is—they'd be quite valuable."

"Quite."

"If Henry Wyley hadn't taken that trip, at that time, on that ship, who knows? But then again, that's fate. Maybe you could find one of them, if they still exist or ever did. You must have all kinds of sources."

"I do, and I happen to have an interested client. I always hate to disappoint a client, so I'm doing what I can to verify their existence, and to track them down."

Anita nibbled delicately on a roll as she watched Tia. "I hope you won't mention that to—was it Malachi?—if he calls you again. I wouldn't like him to scoop me on this."

"I won't, but I don't think it'll be an issue." Tia put a lot of wind into her sigh. "I did tell him I'd heard, oh, some time ago, that someone in Athens claimed to have Atropus. That's the third Fate."

With her heart pounding at her own improvisation, Tia carefully studied her salad for flaws.

"In Athens?"

"Yes, I think someone spoke about it last fall. Or maybe it was last spring. I can't quite remember. I was doing some research on the Muses. Those are the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. They each have their own specialty, such as Clio, who—"

"What about the Fates?" Anita demanded.

"What about the what? Oh." Tia laughed a little and sipped her water. "Sorry, I suppose I tend to run off on tangents. It's so irritating to people."

"Not at all." Anita imagined herself just leaning over and choking the boring twit to death over her salad. "But you were saying?"

"Yes, it must have been in the spring of last year." Face intent, she dribbled a stingy amount of dressing on her

salad. “I really wasn’t looking for information on the Fates, certainly not on the art pieces. I only paid attention to be polite. This source I contacted . . . what was his name? Well, it doesn’t matter as he wasn’t nearly as much help as I’d hoped. With the Muses, that is. But during the conversation he mentioned that he’d heard this person in Athens had Atropus. The statue, not the mythological figure.”

“I don’t suppose you remember the name of the person in Athens?”

“Oh my, I’m not good with names.” With an apologetic glance at Anita, Tia forked up salad. “In fact, I don’t think it came up at all, as it was just something mentioned in passing. And it was so long ago. I remember it was Athens only because I’ve always wanted to go there. Plus, it seemed logical that one of the statues would be there. In Greece. Have you ever been?”

“No.” Anita shrugged. “Not yet.”

“Neither have I. I don’t think the food would agree with me.”

“Did you mention this to Malachi?”

“About Athens? No, I don’t think I did. It didn’t occur to me. Oh my! Do you suppose I should have? Maybe, if I’d thought of it, he’d have called me again. He really was terribly handsome.”

Idiot, Anita thought. Imbecile. “Anything’s possible.”

TIA FELT GIDDY. The way she imagined a woman might feel after committing adultery in a sleazy motel with a younger, unemployed artist while her stuffy, dependable husband presided over a board meeting.

But no, she decided as she quick-footed it into her apartment building, that sort of giddiness would come *before* the actual adultery, on the way to the sleazy, rent-by-the-hour motel. After, you’d feel guilty and ashamed and in need of a long shower.

Or so she imagined.

Still, she’d lied, deceived—and figuratively screwed someone—and she didn’t feel guilty in the least. She felt powerful.

And she liked it.

Anita detested her. Did people think she couldn't tell when they found her boring and annoying and basically stupid? Well, it didn't matter, she assured herself as she rode, on a cloud of triumph, to her floor. It didn't matter in the least what a woman like Anita thought of her. Because she, Tia Marsh, had won the round.

She sailed into the apartment, prepared to crow, and found only Cleo, sprawled on the sofa watching MTV.

"Hey. How'd it go?"

"It went well. Where is everyone?"

"They went to call their mother. Irish guys have a real thing for their mothers, don't they? Then they're going to pick up some stuff—ice cream. They just took off a couple minutes ago."

Cleo glanced at the television screen before switching it off.

"So, what went down with Anita?" Cleo questioned.

"She thinks I'm a brainless neurotic who's grateful for any scrap of attention a real person tosses my way."

Cleo rolled off the couch—a fluid grace Tia admired hopelessly. "I don't. Not that it matters, but I think you're a smart, classy ass-kicker who just hasn't tried out her boots yet. Want a drink?"

The description had Tia gaping so that she didn't register being invited to drink in her own apartment. "Maybe. I don't really drink."

"I do, and this seems like the time for it. We'll chug down a glass of wine and you can fill me in."

Cleo opened a bottle of Pouilly-Fumé, poured two glasses. And listened. Somewhere during that first glass, Tia realized the only person who listened to her with the same focused interest was Carrie. Maybe, she thought, that's why they were friends.

"You sent her to Athens?" Cleo let out a hoot of laughter. "That's fucking brilliant."

"It just seemed . . . I guess it was."

"Damn right." Cleo shot up a hand, so fast and close, Tia's head jerked back as if to avoid a slap. "High five!"

"Oh. Well." With a giggle, Tia slapped palms.

“You’re going to have to go through all this again with the boys,” Cleo continued. “So since we’ve got this girl moment before they get back, give me the dish on Malachi.”

“The dish?”

“Yeah. I know you’re pissed at him, and personally if I were you I’d want to boil his balls for breakfast, but he’s really gorgeous. How are you going to play him?”

“I’m not. I wouldn’t know how, so I’m not. This is business.”

“He’s got a good case of the guilts over you. You could use that.” Cleo dipped a finger into her wine, licked it off. “But it’s not just guilt. He’s got the hots for you, too. Guilty hots, that gives you some major power.”

“He’s not attracted to me that way. It’s just pretense so I’ll help.”

“You’re wrong. Listen, Tia, there’s one thing I know. Men. I know how they look at a woman, how they move around a woman, and what’s going on in their sex-obsessed brains when they do. That guy wants to slurp you up like soda pop, and since he’s guilty for fucking with you, that makes him edgy, frustrated and stupid. You could have him sitting up and begging like a Labrador, you play your cards right.”

“I don’t have any cards,” Tia began. “And I don’t want to humiliate him.” Then she thought of how she’d felt when she’d realized he’d lied to her. Used her. She took another sip of her wine. “Well, maybe I do. A little. But I don’t think it’s relevant. Men don’t have the same urges about me as they do for women like you.”

She stopped, appalled, and set down her glass. She should *not* drink. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to . . . I meant that as a compliment.”

“Relax. I got it. You got more going on than you think. Brains, goofiness, repression.”

“None of those sound very sexy.”

“They’re working just fine on big brother. Then you’ve got that dreamy wood-nymph look going for you.”

“Wood nymph? Me?”

“Honey, you ought to look in the mirror more often. You’re really hot.”

“No, I’m really very comfortable . . .” She trailed off when Cleo collapsed in wild laughter. “Oh. *Hot.*” Laughing herself now, she peered closely at Cleo’s face. “Are you drunk?”

“Nope, but I might work on that later.” She leaned back. She didn’t make friends easily, at least not with other women. But there was something about Tia.

“I always wanted to look like you,” Tia blurted out.

“Me?”

“Tall and sultry and exotic. And built.”

“We all work with what we got. And what you’ve got is making big brother’s glands go loop-de-loop. Take my word. Listen.” Cleo leaned closer. “When they get back, I’m going to drop a little bombshell. Slick’s not going to like it, and big brother’s already looking at me sideways. I could use some help. Support, a distraction, whatever you’ve got.”

“What is it?”

Cleo started to speak, then heard the key in the lock. Tia saw something move over her face that might have been grief, might have been regret. Then she tossed back the last of her wine. “Countdown,” she mumbled.

“ATHENS?” GIDEON BROKE into a delighted, almost demented grin. “Athens?” he repeated and plucked Tia out of her chair, kissed her enthusiastically on the mouth. “You’re a bloody genius.”

“I, uh . . . Well.” Her ears buzzed. “Thanks.”

“A bloody genius,” he said again, and swung her in a quick circle before he shot that grin at his brother. “And you were worried Anita would gobble her down like lunch. We’ve a certified mastermind here.”

“Set her down, Gideon, before you bruise her. That was clever,” Malachi said to Tia. “Clever and quick.”

“It was logical,” she corrected and, with her head spinning just a bit, and rather pleasantly, sat again. “I don’t

know if she'll actually go to Greece, but she'll certainly look there."

"It gives us some breathing space," Malachi agreed. "Now what do we do with it? Rebecca's doing what she does to get background information on this Jack Burdett. We'll leave that, and him, to her for now. Seems the first thing, logically speaking, is to figure out how Cleo's to get the White-Smythe Fate. We'll want to do that quietly, without putting Anita on the scent, then get it into a safe, secure place."

"That's not a problem." Cleo didn't take a deep breath, but she did brace herself, did shift her gaze until she met Gideon's directly. "I've already got it, and it's already in one."

Sixteen

“**Y**OU had it all along?” Shell-shocked and with temper just starting to bubble beneath, Gideon stared at Cleo. “From the beginning?”

“My grandmother gave it to me when I was a kid.” She felt the bats beating wings in her stomach. “She’d started to get pretty spacey, so I guess she didn’t think of it as more than a kind of doll. It’s been like my good-luck piece. It went where I went.”

“You had it in Prague.”

“Yeah, I had it.” Because the steady, quiet tone of his voice made her feel a little sick, she poured another glass of wine.

“I never heard the story. The Three Fates deal. If that part of it ever came down through my mother’s family, it didn’t get as far as me. I didn’t know what it was until you told me about it.”

“And wasn’t it lucky for you I came along and educated you?”

She decided the bitter edge of the words, delivered with just the perfect dip of contempt, was as effective as a jab in the gut. “Look, Slick, some guy chases me down at work, starts asking about my good-luck charm, gives me the

song and dance about big money and Greek legends, I'm not handing it over to him on a platter. I didn't know you."

"Got to know me, didn't you?" He leaned over, clamping his hands on the arms of her chair, caging her in with his body. "Or do you make a habit of rolling around on a hotel floor with strangers?"

"Gideon."

"This isn't for you." He whipped his head around, flicked the keen edge of his fury over his brother to silence any interference. Then snapped it back to Cleo.

"You knew me well enough for that. You knew me well enough, didn't you, when we shared the bed Mikey gave us hours before he died."

"That's enough." Though her hands were ice cold with fear, Tia used them to pull on Gideon's arm. It was, she realized, like trying to pry open a steel wall with her fingers. "He was her friend. She loved him. However angry you are, you know that, and you know you haven't the right to use him to hurt her."

"She used him. And me."

"You're right." Cleo lifted her chin, not in defiance but in a kind of invitation. Punch me, she seemed to say, I'd prefer it. "You couldn't be more right. I overestimated myself, underestimated Anita. And Mikey's dead. However much disgust and rage you've got working in you for me right now, it doesn't touch what I've got for myself."

"It might come closer than you think." He shoved himself away from her.

"Okay." Something inside her broke, something she hadn't realized was there to be damaged. "Okay. I screwed up with you. I figured I'd cut a deal with Anita, take the money and hand you your share. Everybody's happy. I figured, well, he'll be a little pissed I did it behind his back, but when he's got all that green in his hands, how can he complain?"

When he turned back, violence shimmering almost visibly around him, Tia stepped between them. "Stop. Think. What she did made sense. If she'd been dealing with a normal businesswoman, even a dishonest one, it made

sense. None of us could have predicted how far Anita would go.”

“What she did was lie.” He ignored Tia’s tugging hand. “To all of us.”

“It started with lies.” Tia’s voice had just enough punch behind it to have Gideon glancing at her. “Trust and full disclosure’s been the main problem here all along. We’re all splintered in different directions, with different goals. Different agendas. And as long as we stay that way, Anita has the advantage. She has one direction, and one goal. Unless we agree on ours, she’s going to win.”

“That’s right.” Malachi laid a hand on Tia’s shoulder, and though she stiffened, she didn’t pull away. “I’m no more pleased about how we got to this point than any of the rest of us. We all, well, all but Tia here, have reasons for regrets. We can stew about them. Or we can punch a few walls. *Gid.*”

His voice gentled and he waited until his brother turned those angry eyes on him. “Remember the punching bag Da set up at the boatyard? We called it Nigel,” he said to the women. “And we beat hell out of it instead of each other. Most of the time.”

“We’re not boys now.”

“We’re not, no. So instead of sulking off, or finding a handy Nigel, why don’t we start from here? The good news is we have the second Fate. And where might this bank be, Cleo?”

“Over on Seventh.” She dug into her jeans pocket for the key she’d put there that morning. “I have to get it. I have to sign and show ID to get into the box. I can do it in the morning.”

“*We’ll* do it in the morning,” Gideon corrected. “Right now I want some air. I’m going up to the roof.”

Cleo sat where she was when the door slammed behind him. Then as the shards of what had broken inside her stabbed, she got to her feet. “That went real well.” Appalled that her voice broke, she bore down. “I’m going to take a nap.”

When the office door shut behind her, Tia pushed her

hands through her hair. "Oh boy. I never know what to do. I never know what to say."

"You did and said exactly right. Stop shoving yourself down, Tia. It's irritating."

"Well, pardon me. I'm going to go see if I can help Cleo."

"No, that's the easy way." With a small sigh, he touched her shoulder again. "I'll go talk to Cleo, you try Gideon. Let's see if we can make this mess we've created into some sort of unit."

He started for the office door, then turned. "You were brilliant with Anita," he said, then knocked briskly and opened the door without waiting for an invitation.

Cleo lay on her back, on the unmade pullout. She wasn't crying, but she knew she was working up to a good, explosive jag. "Look, I've had enough of the Sullivan brothers for this act. Let's consider this intermission."

"That's too bad because the show's not over." He lifted her feet, sat, then dropped them into his lap. "And because this Sullivan brother is willing to admit he might have done exactly as you did. I wouldn't be proud of it, would look back from here and see all the places where I went wrong, when I should've turned right instead of left. But that wouldn't change a fucking thing, would it?"

"Are you being nice to me so I'll cooperate? Go, team, go?"

"That'd be a nice benefit, but the fact is, you've had a hell of a time, and I'm part of the reason why. Gideon now, he's not as devious-natured as you and me. Not that he's a doormat or a fool, but he's more inclined to say what he thinks and is often annoyed everyone doesn't do the same. He has a refined sense of fair play, our boy."

Knowing it, hearing Malachi say it, didn't go far toward mollifying her. "People who play fair mostly lose."

"Don't they just?" He laughed a little and began to rub her feet in a friendly way. "But when they win, they win clean. That matters to him. You matter to him."

"Maybe *did* matter."

"Matter still, darling. I know my brother, so I know that."

But not knowing you so well, I have to ask. Does he matter to you?"

She tried to tug her foot out of his hand, but he held it firmly, kept on rubbing. "I wasn't trying to screw him out of the money."

"That wasn't my question. Does he matter to you?"

"Yeah, I guess he does."

"Then I'll give you a piece of advice. Fight back. Use shouts and oaths until you've burned him out, temper-wise. Or use tears and drown it. Either works with him."

She shoved a second pillow under her head. "That's going back to devious, isn't it?"

"Well." He patted her foot. "Do you want to win or lose?"

The crying jag had backed off, enough for her to sit up, snuffle once and study him. "I wasn't sure I'd like you. It's handy, all things considered, that I do."

"That's mutual. So tell me, as it's a subject that's been preying on my mind. Do most of the women who work as strippers have the body God gave them, or what medical science can provide?"

TIA WASN'T HAVING as much luck with Gideon. For a time, she just sat quietly in one of the little iron chairs in the roof garden. She rarely came up here, as she didn't trust the air or the height. Which was a pity, she thought, as she so loved the view of the river.

As she was a woman accustomed to being ignored, she sat while Gideon stood at the stone rail, smoking and brooding in silence.

"We spent days and nights together, running all over goddamn Europe, and she had it in that fucking purse of hers all along."

Okay, Tia mused, he speaks. That was a start. "It belongs to her, Gideon."

"That's not the point." He spun around, ridiculously handsome, Tia thought, wrapped in his fury. "Did she think I'd cosh her on the head and steal it from her? Sneak

out with it in the night after making love with her and leave her in some ugly room alone?"

"I can't answer that. I wouldn't have had the nerve to go with you in the first place, or the presence of mind to protect myself—which is what she did. I . . . this is going to sound sexist, but it's different for a man to go running around Europe with a woman than it is for that woman to go running around with a man. It's riskier and it's scarier. It just is."

"I won't argue that, but we weren't together a week when . . . things changed between us."

"Sex is, in some ways, another scary risk." She felt heat sting her cheeks as he frowned at her now. "If it had been a matter of using you—which is what you're thinking—she'd have been the one to sneak out with Lachesis in the night. Instead she brought you here."

"Then went behind my back and—"

"Made a mistake," Tia finished. "One that cost her more than it cost you. You and I know what shape she was in when you brought her here. We're the only ones who know that. And maybe I'm the only one who could see how you were with her. How gentle and kind. How loving."

He made a short, rude sound and crushed the cigarette under his heel. "She was drunk and sick because I made her that way. What was I supposed to do? Shove her about?"

"You took care of her. And when I heard her wake up crying in the middle of the night, you took care of her again. She was probably too tangled up in her own grief to know that. I've never been in love," she said, taking a few cautious steps toward him, and the wall. And the drop. "So I could be wrong thinking that you're in love with her. But I know what it is to have feelings for someone stirred up, then be hurt by them."

"Mal's sick over that, Tia." He took her hand, not realizing her instinctive resistance was for the height and not for the gesture. "I promise you."

"This isn't about that. I'm just saying that when you're not so mad, or so hurt, you should try to look at it from her

side. Or if you can't, at least resolve yourself enough so we can work together."

"We'll work together," he promised. "I'll deal with the rest of it."

"Good. Good." Why was it people nervous about heights couldn't resist looking down from tall buildings? she wondered. Compelled, she stared down at the street until her head spun. She managed a shaky step back, then another. "Whew. Vertigo."

"Steady now." He took her arm when she swayed. "You're fine."

"I guess I will be. More or less."

CLEO DIDN'T HAVE a chance to try out Malachi's advice. It was hard to fight—words or tears—with someone who avoided you as if you carried the plague. It was hard to have a showdown with a man who'd rather spend the night sleeping on the roof of an apartment building in New York than share a corner of the bed with you.

It hurt, in parts of her she hadn't known she had to hurt. And was worse because she was afraid she deserved it.

"Go there, get it, come back," Malachi repeated as a gritty-eyed Gideon gulped down a second cup of morning coffee.

"So you've said already."

"Best not to take a straight route either way. The bank's near enough . . . the other flat," Malachi decided, with a glance at Cleo. "She might have people watching that general area yet."

"We kept these guys off our asses all over Europe." Gideon set his empty cup on the counter, then, at Tia's meaningful clearing of the throat, picked it up again and rinsed it out in the sink. "We can handle this."

"Just watch your back. And the rest of you as well."

Gideon nodded. "Ready?" he asked Cleo.

"Sure."

Tia linked her fingers together, barely resisted wringing them when Gideon and Cleo walked out her door. "You

don't need to worry about them," she said as much to herself as Malachi.

"No. They can handle themselves all right." But he stuck his hands in his pockets and wished, passionately, he hadn't given up smoking. "It'll be good to see it, have a good look at it. Be sure it's authentic."

"Yes. Meanwhile, I have a lot of work to catch up on."

"This is the first time we've been alone, really. There are things I'd like to say."

"You've said them."

"Not all of them. Not things I thought of after you'd given me the boot."

"They're not applicable now. I haven't been able to work on my book for days. I'm behind schedule. You can watch television, listen to the radio, read a book. Or go up and jump off the roof. It's all the same to me."

"I appreciate the ability to hold a grudge." He moved, smoothly, into her path as she started toward her office. "I've told you I'm sorry. I've told you I was wrong, and that hasn't budged you a bit. So why not listen to the rest of it?"

"Let's see . . . could it be that I'm not interested? Yes, that could be it." She enjoyed hearing the sarcasm in her own voice. It made her feel in charge. "The personal portion of this relationship is over."

"I disagree with that."

He took a step toward her; she took one back.

And the retreat, however slight, made her feel vulnerable all over again. "You want to argue about it?" She shrugged, trying to put a little Cleo into it. "I'm not very good at arguing, but in the interest of putting this aside once and for all, I'll do my best. You treated me like a fool, and worse than that, you made sure I believed you found me attractive, even desirable. And that, Malachi, is contemptible."

"It would be, right enough, if it were true. The fact is I did find you attractive and desirable, and that was a major dilemma for me." He watched irritation cross her face. Irritation he knew was rooted in disbelief. So he ignored it. "And so I made my first of several mistakes. Do you know

what started me on that series of mistakes where you're concerned?"

"No. And I don't care. I'm getting a headache."

"You're not. You're hoping you get a headache so you'll have something else to think about. It was your voice."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your voice. When I was sitting in that auditorium, and your voice was so pretty, just a little nervous around the edges at first, then it got stronger. Such a nice, flowing voice. I admit I was bored witless about what you were saying, but I liked hearing you say it nonetheless."

"I don't see what that—"

"And there were your legs." He wasn't stopping now, not when he could see the nerves tangling up with her temper. "I passed the time listening to your voice and admiring your legs."

"That's ridiculous."

Ah, he considered. Now she was flustered, and flustered was better than irritated, better than nervous. Because a flustered Tia wouldn't be able to stop him from saying things he so much needed to say. "But that wasn't the main thing. I liked how shy and tired and confused you seemed when I came up to you with my book. Oh, so polite you were."

He stepped toward her again, and this time she eased herself around so the couch was between them. "You weren't thinking I was tired, you were thinking how you'd pump me about the Fates."

He nodded. "True enough, I was focused on the Fates, but I had room for both in my head. Then when I lured you away from the hotel and into a walk, I liked seeing how dazzled you were when you started to look around, when you really saw where you were."

"You liked thinking I was dazzled by you."

"I did. I admit it. It was flattering, but still that wasn't the moment things started to shift around so I'd finish off the first of the mistakes."

He moved to the end of the couch, and she backed into the coffee table, flushed, then nearly skipped backward to the far end.

“It was when we got back to your room.”

“My trashed room.”

“Yes.” He caught a whiff of her scent that lingered in the air where she’d been standing. So soft. So quiet. “I was angry over that, and furious with myself, as well, knowing I’d had a part in bringing that on you. There you were, all frazzled and upset, digging for some pill or other, and that thing you suck on like a lolly.”

“An inhaler is a medical—”

“Whatever.” He was smiling now, pacing her around the sofa. “Do you know what did it for me, Tia? What just slipped right through my defenses and had me starting to moon over you?”

She snorted. “Moon? My butt.”

“It was when I looked in the bathroom. That wonderful Finnish bath and I saw all those bottles and packages. Energy this, stress relief that. Special soap and God knows.”

“Of course. You were attracted to my allergies and phobias. I’ve always found them ruthless sexual tools.”

He found the prim, damn near prissy tone like music. “I was fascinated that a woman who believed she needed all that to get through the day would have taken herself off, alone, on such a journey. What a brave soul you are, darling, under it all.”

“I am not. Will you stop stalking me?”

“My plan had been to see if I could get solid information from you, in hopes you’d lead me to the other statues. Very simple and no harm done. But there was harm. Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

There was a tickle at the back of her throat, a pressure settling on her chest. “I don’t want to discuss this anymore.”

“I kept seeing you sitting there, with all your things jumbled around you. And how you talked so calmly to the police even though you were pale and shaken.”

Now there was heat, or outrage. “You left me there, left me until you thought I might be of use again.”

“You’re right. But it wasn’t just the Fates I thought of when I came to New York. It wasn’t only them I wanted.

Do you remember how I kissed you outside your door? Do you remember how that was?"

"Stop it."

"I made you go inside alone, and closed the door between us myself. If you hadn't mattered, I'd have come inside. I knew you'd let me. But I couldn't, couldn't touch you that way while I was lying to you."

"You'd have come in, and you'd have taken me to bed if you could've stomached making love to someone like me."

He stopped in his tracks, like a man who'd come up sharp against a thick glass wall. "What the hell does that mean? Someone like you. It pisses me off to hear you say that." He moved fast, nearly had her by the arm before she scampered back and away. "And I'm damned if I'll have you believe it. I wanted you that night, too much for my own good, or yours. And I've had the taste of you inside me ever since. The way I see it now, there's only one way to solve all this. I'm having you."

"Having me what?" When he stopped his forward motion, laughed like a loon, it clicked. The blood rushed to her face, then fell away again. "You can't just say something like that. You can't just assume—"

"I'm not assuming, and I'm not just saying. I've been trying to say since I got here, and I'm giving up on words. I want my hands on you. Stop gulping air before you need that sucking thing."

"I'm not gulping air." But she was, even as she raced around to the back of the couch again. "And I'm not going to bed with you."

"It doesn't have to be the bed, though I think you'd enjoy it more if it was." He feinted left, dodged right and grabbed for her arm. He deliberately shortened his reach to let her escape, as he was enjoying himself.

Her color was back now, prettily pink in her cheeks.

"You're not very good at this," he commented when she nearly tripped over her own feet. "I'll wager you haven't had many men chase you around your sofa."

"As I don't date twelve-year-olds, no, I haven't." If she'd hoped to insult him, his chuckle told her she'd

missed the mark. "I want you to stop it, right now." She shot a look toward her office, measuring the distance.

"Go ahead and try for it. In the interest of fair play, I'll give you a head start. I want to kiss the back of your neck. Just run my lips over that elegant curve."

He dived for her. With a squeal, she pinwheeled her arms and, overbalancing, flipped onto the couch. More out of luck than design, she kept rolling so he landed flat on the cushions when she hit the floor, butt first.

With a nervous giggle that surprised her more than him, she leaped up and made the dash for her office.

He caught her a step outside the door, spun her around and pressed her back, hard, against the wall. Words rushed into her throat, babbling words that stuck there as she stared into his hot and glittering eyes.

"This is how unattractive, how undesirable I find you."

He crushed her mouth with his, ravaged it, without any of the warm and stirring tenderness he'd shown her before. His body pressed unrelentingly against hers so that the pounding of his heart seemed to ram inside her.

She brought her hands up with some idea of . . . with no idea at all. And they fell limply to her sides again.

He lifted his head, an inch only, so his face blurred in her vision. "Are we clear on that now?" he demanded. When she could do no more than shake her head, he captured her mouth again.

It was like being shot out of a cannon, or torn out of a roller coaster in mid-dive. At least she imagined both those events would whip a rush of color and sound into the brain and bounce the pulse rate screaming high. Turn the limbs to water and cause the system to be trapped somewhere between iced terror and molten exhilaration.

Her ears began to ring, reminding her she was holding her breath. But when she let it out, it sounded like a moan.

That helpless response had him chewing restlessly on her bottom lip before he ended the kiss. "How about now?"

"I . . . I forgot the question."

"Then I'll rephrase it."

He swept her into his arms. Really, she could think of no other way to describe how he plucked her off her feet.

“Oh, God,” was the best she could manage when he carried her into the bedroom, kicked the door shut behind them.

“Hold that thought. You know, of course, I’m only doing this so you won’t be angry anymore.”

“Oh.” He laid her on the bed. “Okay.”

“I’ve no personal interest whatsoever in getting you naked and sinking my teeth into you.” He straddled her, watching her face as he unbuttoned her blouse. “But sometimes a man has to make sacrifices for the greater good.” He skimmed his thumbs, whisper light, over the swell of her breasts. And she began to tremble. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I, yes . . . No. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’ve lost my mind.”

“I was hoping you would, Tia.” He eased her up so he could slip the blouse away. “You’re such a pretty little thing.”

“I’m not wearing the right underwear.”

He’d distracted himself by running a fingertip up and down her torso. Her skin, he thought, was like warm rose petals. “What’s that?”

“If I’d known we’d . . . I’m not wearing the right kind of underwear for this.”

“Really?” He studied the simple, serviceable white cotton bra. “Well then, we’d best get rid of it right away.”

“I didn’t mean . . .” She gulped audibly when he slid his hand under her, and undid the bra’s catch with two fingers. “You’ve done that before.”

“I confess I have. I’m a cad.” He bent down to rub his lips over hers as he tugged the bra aside. “I’m going to take terrible advantage of you now.” He used his thumbs again, running them over her nipples until heat balled in her belly. “You should probably call for help.”

“I don’t think you need any.”

With that he scooped her up into a fierce hug. “Christ, you’re one in a million. Kiss me back.” He brushed his lips over hers. “Kiss me back now. I need you.”

In all her life, no one had said those three words to her. The thrill of them spurted through her, flooded her heart

and gushed into the kiss. She threw her arms around him, shifting her body so it pressed against his with an abandon neither of them had expected.

Rocked, he dug his fingers into her flesh, struggled for about two seconds to maintain some reasonable control. Then he tumbled her back and did just as he had threatened. He sank his teeth into her.

She rose under him, like a woman riding a wave, and with no thought but the taking, tugged at his shirt. "I want . . . I want . . ."

"So do I." He was breathless now, with muscles quivering. There was the taste of her skin, warm and sweet in his mouth, the feel of it, silky smooth, under his hands. And the surprising, delightful enthusiasm of her as she ran those small, nervous hands over him.

She was so delicately built, and the curves of her so wonderfully subtle. Her scent was a quiet, very female drift that slowly hazed the senses until it seemed as though he could simply breathe her in. Eager to explore, he let his lips rush down her body, back up to those small and lovely breasts.

Back to her warm, willing mouth.

When he did no more than press his hand against the heat and she came with a quick, shocked cry, he felt like a god.

He was murmuring something, or perhaps he was shouting it. There was such a roaring in her head, she couldn't tell. Her system was barraged by a series of long, liquid pulls, of quick, slapping jolts with each sensation rapping so hard into the next it wasn't possible to separate them.

And her body absorbed them greedily, then called for more.

And his, his was so firm and smooth, and hot. Was it any wonder her hands were in such a rush to touch? When she did she could feel the quiver of a muscle, the wild leap of a pulse.

Need. It was need for her.

Then she forgot his need for her own when his fingers slid slickly over her, into her. She could do nothing more

than fist her hands in the rumpled bedspread, holding on even as she flew.

His mouth came back to hers, and she opened. Opened everything, so that when he thrust inside her, he entered both heart and body.

He said her name again. It seemed to echo endlessly in his head as he sank into her, into that wet heat. She rose to him, fell away, rose again until the rhythm was like music. He lost himself in it, in her, as the beat became more urgent, and urgency became desperation. And desperation a brilliant pleasure that swallowed them both whole.

WEAK AND WRECKED, she lay under him. In some dim area of consciousness she was aware of his weight, of the galloping race of his heart, even of the shallow breaths he took. But she was much more aware of the lovely limp stretch of her own body, of the hot river of her own blood that swam under her skin.

A part of her mind continued to huddle in a corner and gape with shock and stingy disapproval. She'd made frantic, reckless love with a man she had no business trusting. And at nine o'clock in the morning. A Thursday morning.

Those same basic facts brought on a wave of smugness she knew she should be ashamed of.

"Stop thinking so hard," Malachi said lazily. "You'll hurt yourself. I missed the nape of your neck." He turned his head so he could nibble a bit on her shoulder. "I'll have to make up for that oversight when I can move again."

She closed her eyes and ordered herself to listen to that scolding voice. "It's nine in the morning."

He turned his head, focused on her bedside clock. "Actually, it's not. It's ten-oh-six."

"It can't be. They left at just before nine." It was so nice to be able to run her fingers through his hair, through all that rich, dark chestnut. "I looked at the clock so I'd know when to start worrying if they weren't back." She tried to shift to see the clock for herself, but he stopped the movement with his mouth on hers.

“And when are you scheduled to start worrying?”

“At ten.”

“You’re running behind, then. Darling, it takes a bit of time to make love if you put any effort into it.”

“Ten? It’s after ten?” She wiggled, shoved, squirmed. “They could be back any minute.”

“So they could.” Her movements were perfect, he decided. “So what?”

“They— We can’t be in here. Like this.”

“Door’s closed, and the bedroom’s off limits, as I recall.”

“They’ll certainly know what we’ve been doing. And we shouldn’t have—”

“They will, I imagine. Oh, it’s shocking.” He snuck a hand up to stroke her breast.

“Don’t tease me.”

“I can’t help it, any more than I can help wanting you again. I like you out of bed, Tia, but I have to tell you.” He bit her earlobe and made her shiver. “I surely like you in it as well. I’m just going to take a few more minutes here, and show you.”

“We have to get up, right now,” she began, but his tongue slid down to her breasts. “Well. Well, I guess a few more minutes won’t make any difference.”

Seventeen

GIDEON Sullivan should give lessons on payback, Cleo decided. He should write a goddamn book on it.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR LOVER FEEL LIKE SLIME
IN TEN EASY LESSONS

But there was no way she was going to break. He could be cold; she'd be colder. He could speak in monosyllables. Well then, she'd communicate in grunts.

If he thought the fact that he'd chosen to sleep on the stupid roof rather than share a piece of the bed with her hurt her feelings, he'd miscalculated.

She wished it had rained. Buckets.

They used the subway, which was, Cleo thought, the perfect venue for a stony silence. She sat with her well-developed New York stare into middle distance while he read a tattered paperback edition of *Ulysses*.

Guy should lighten up, she thought to herself. Anybody who chose, of his own free will, to read James Joyce for pleasure wasn't her type anyway.

He probably figured she'd never cracked a book in her life.

Well, he was wrong. She liked to read as much as the

next guy, but she didn't choose to spend her spare time wading through some metaphoric jungle of depression and despair.

She'd just leave that to Slick, who was so goddamn Irish he probably bled green.

She got to her feet at their stop. Gideon simply marked his place in the book and shuffled off the car with her. She was too busy sulking to notice how his gaze swept over the others who got off, or the way he angled his body to shield hers. He followed her through the tunnels to the crosstown train.

He stood patiently on the platform while she tapped her foot, shifted her weight.

"Don't think we were followed," he said quietly.

She nearly jolted at the sound of his voice, which irritated her enough that she forgot to grunt in response. "Nobody knows we're at Tia's, so they can't follow us."

"They may not know we're at Tia's, but someone might be watching her building. I wouldn't want to lead them to her or let them scamper along after us."

He was right, and it reminded her she'd led someone to Mikey. "Maybe I should just throw myself in front of the next oncoming train. Maybe that would be enough penance for you."

"That's a bit over the top, and self-defeating. At least until you get the statue out of the bank."

"It's all you ever wanted anyway."

The platform vibrated with the sound of the crosstown train. "It must comfort you to think that."

She shoved herself, blindly, into the subway car, all but hurled herself into a seat. He took one across from her, opened his book, began to read.

And kept reading when the ride bumped and juggled the words on the page. There was no point in arguing with her, he reminded himself. Every reason not to do so in public. The priority was to get to the bank, retrieve the Fate, get it back to Tia's. Quietly and unobtrusively.

After that a good shouting row might be in order. Though he could hardly see what good it would do. Despite the enforced intimacy they were, at the base,

strangers. Two people from different places, with different ideas. And different agendas.

If he'd let himself think of them as more, had let his feelings for her tangle up with the reality of things, that was his problem.

His primary quest, so to speak, had been Lachesis. And so, shortly, that part of the journey would end.

He wished he could go back to Cobh, back to the boatyard and work off some of this excess energy and heat by scraping hulls or some damn thing. But the second Fate was only one of three, and he had a feeling it would be some time before he saw home again.

He felt her move, caught the flash of the blue shirt she'd borrowed from his brother as she rose onto those endless legs of hers. He got up, shoved the book in his jacket pocket.

She strode onto the platform and away as if she were in a great hurry. But then as everyone else did the same, Gideon doubted anyone would take notice. She practically flew through the streets as he scurried after her.

When she reached for the door of the bank he forgot his vow not to touch her, and his hand closed over hers. "You walk in there ready to chew a hole in somebody's neck, people are going to notice."

"This is New York, Slick, nobody notices nothing."

"Chill it down, Cleo. You want a round with me, then we'll have one. But right here and right now, chill it down."

She decided, right there and right then, that the one thing she hated most about him was that he was able to cut through the crap and maintain. "Fine." She offered him a frozen smile. "All chilled."

"I'll wait out here." He stepped back from the door.

He watched the traffic, cars and people. He saw no one who appeared to be interested in him and had just reached the conclusion that anyone who opted to live in a place with so many people and so much noise was either brain-damaged or would be before it was done, when Cleo came out again.

She nodded to him, tapped her fingers lightly on her

shoulder bag. He moved in so the bag and its most recent contents were tucked between their bodies.

"We'll take a cab back," he said.

"Fine. But we're making a stop. Tia lent me two hundred. I need some damn clothes."

"This isn't the time to shop."

"I'm not shopping, I'm buying. I'm desperate enough to settle for the Gap, and that's going a ways for me. We can hike over to Fifth." She was already heading in that direction, giving him no choice but to follow. "Then we'll be sure nobody's tailing us, I grab a couple of shirts, some jeans, we catch a cab and we're home. Then I might just burn the clothes I've been stuck with since Prague."

He might have argued, but was a man who knew how to weigh his options quickly. He could drag her into a cab, then sit on her until they got back to Tia's.

Or he could give her a half hour to do what she felt she needed to do.

"I hate it in here," she muttered the minute they were inside. "It's so . . . pert." She headed for black.

He kept so close to her side, Cleo was tempted to grab something and head to a dressing room just to see if he'd come in with her. She wouldn't put it past him.

Trust was obviously not the word of the day.

She got what she considered the absolute bare essentials. Two T-shirts, a long-sleeved tee, jeans, one sweater, one shirt. All black. Then watched the total ring up to two hundred twelve dollars and fifty-eight cents.

"Arithmetic isn't your long suit, is it?" he asked when she swore under her breath.

"I can add. I wasn't paying attention." She dug out what she had, and was still eight dollars and twenty-two cents short. "Give me a break, will you?"

He gave her a ten, then held out his hand for the change.

"It's less than two bucks." She slapped the money into his hand, swung the bag over her free shoulder. "I'm busted."

"Then you should take more care with how you spend what you have. Mind you take the eight and twenty-two off what I owe you for the earbobs. I'll spring for the taxi."

“You’re a real sport, Slick.”

“If you want to be kept by a man, you’ll have to look elsewhere. I’m sure you’d have no problem finding one.”

She said nothing to that. Could say nothing over the ball that lodged in her throat. Instead, with him gripping her arm, she marched to the curb and shot out a hand for a cab.

“I’ll apologize for that.”

“Shut up,” she managed. “Just shut up. We both know what you think of me, so just drop it.”

When her head was clear again, she’d thank whatever god of the despairing had a free cab veering to the curb at her feet. She climbed in, snapped out Tia’s address.

“You don’t know what I think of you. And neither do I.”

He let that be the last of it during the ride.

She’d have walked straight into her temporary bedroom when they entered the apartment, but Gideon stopped her. “Let’s see the statue first.”

“You want to see it.” She shoved her purse into his stomach hard enough to knock the breath out of him. “Go ahead.”

She made it halfway across the room when she stopped dead.

“Look, Cleo—”

She held up a hand, shook her head frantically. His stomach, already suffering, took a fast dive as he imagined her weeping. But when she turned, her wide, foolish grin had him narrowing his eyes.

“Quiet!” She hissed it out in a whisper, jerked a thumb toward Tia’s bedroom. “They’re in there.”

“Who?” Visions of Anita Gaye or one of her muscle men burst in his brain. Cleo had to leap in front of him.

“Jesus, Slick, open your ears.”

He heard it then, the quick, strangled cry that could mean only one thing. When dumbfounded curiosity sent him a few steps closer, he caught the unmistakable sounds of a mattress squeaking.

“Well, Christ.” He dragged a hand through his hair and had to swallow a laugh. “What the hell are we supposed to do now?” He whispered it, finding himself grinning back

at Cleo. "I can't just stand out here listening to my brother going at it with Tia. It's mortifying."

"Yeah. Mortifying." Snickering, she all but pressed her ear to the bedroom door. "I think they've got a ways to go yet. Unless your brother's one of those get on, get in, get off, get out sort of guys."

"I wouldn't have any way of knowing. And I'd as soon not find out. We'll go up on the roof for a bit."

"Go, Tia!" Cleo murmured as they headed toward the front door. She managed to hold off the laughter until they were safely in the elevator, heading up.

"Do you think they heard us?"

"I don't think they'd have heard a nuclear blast." Cleo caught her breath and walked out with him to take the steps to the roof. She walked into the sunlight, dropped into a chair and kicked out her long legs.

Then felt her mood dip again when Gideon opened her purse. The moment of shared amusement was over, and it was back to business.

He pulled out the Fate, held it up so it glinted and gleamed. "Not much of a thing," he commented. "Pretty enough, and canny, too, when you take a moment to examine the details. You've let it get tarnished."

"It was a lot worse before. It's still only one of them."

His gaze shifted, studied the sun flash on her dark glasses. "It's one Anita doesn't have, and we do. The middle one, the one who measures. How long will this life be? she might think. Fifty years, five, eighty-nine and three-quarters? And what will be the measure of this life in deed? Do you ever think of that?"

"No. Thinking about it doesn't change it."

"Doesn't it?" He turned the statue over in his hand. "I think it does. Thinking about it, pondering over what you'll do, what you won't, those are layers to a life."

"And while you're thinking about it, you get run over by a bus, and so what?"

He leaned back against the wall, studying her as she sat among pots of flowers, pots of greenery. "Is that why you didn't tell me you had it? Because it's nothing more than a means to an end to you? Without any meaning at all?"

“You plan to sell it, don’t you?”

“We do. But it’s not just money I’m holding in my hand. Now more than ever it’s not.”

“I’m not going to talk about Mikey.” Her voice went thin and quivered before she clamped down and steadied it. “And I’m not going to apologize again for playing it the way I did. You got what you wanted out of me, and some heat in the sheets besides. You’ve got no complaints.”

He stood, Fate curled in his hand. “And what did you get, Cleo?”

“I got the hell out of Prague.” She leaped to her feet. “I got home, and I’ve got the potential for enough money to keep the wolf from my throat for a good long time. Because whatever you think, I’m not looking to whore myself so some guy will pave the way for me. I stripped, okay, but I didn’t turn tricks. And I’m not stupid enough to let some guy fuck me over and leave me broke and stranded again like I was after Sidney.”

“Who’s Sidney?”

“Just another bastard in the perpetual lineup I seem to attract. Can’t blame him, though, since I was the one who was stupid. He came on to me, and I fell for it. Told me how he was part owner of this theater in Prague, how they were putting together a show and looking for a dancer—an American dancer who could choreograph and was willing to invest. What he wanted was a patsy, and some free nooky. With me, he got two-for-one.”

She tucked her thumbs in her front pockets because what she wanted to do was hug herself, hard, and rock. “He wanted to get back to Europe, and I was his ticket. I sprang for the freight because what the hell. I wanted to try something new. I wasn’t making a name for myself here, so I’d make one over there. The more bullshit he pumped out, the more I bought.”

“Were you in love with him?”

“Yeah, you’re a bone-deep romantic.” She tossed her hair back, walked to the wall. Dark hair streaming back, eyes shielded by sunglasses, lips curled in a cynical twist. “He was great to look at, and he had a real smooth line. Lines always sound just a little smoother with an

accent. I was gone over him, which is different from being in love. And I was all wrapped up in the idea of someone giving me a shot at choreography.”

A shot at something, she thought now, she could be good at. “So I lived the high life in Prague for a few days, then woke up one morning to find he’d cleaned me out. Took my money, my credit cards, left me with a whopping hotel bill I couldn’t pay until I pawned the watch and couple rings I was wearing.”

“Did you go to the police? The embassy?”

“Jesus, Gideon. What color is the sky in your world? He was gone, long gone. I reported the credit cards stolen, packed up and got a job. And I learned a lesson. When something sounds too good to be true, it’s because it’s a big, fat lie. Lesson number two? Look out for number one. First, last, always.”

“Maybe you should learn one more.” He turned the Fate so its face shone like the sunlight. “If you don’t believe in something, in someone, what’s the fucking point?”

DOWNSTAIRS IN THE apartment, Tia snuggled up against Malachi and thought about taking a nap. Just a short one, a catnap, as she felt very like a cat at the moment. One with a bellyful of cream.

“You have the loveliest shoulders,” he told her. “They should always be naked. You never want to cover these up with clothes or hair.”

“Anita said men like long hair on a woman.”

The name spoiled his dreamy mood and had his mouth tightening. “Don’t think about her just now. We’d best get up and see if Gideon and Cleo are back.”

“Back?” She sighed, started to stretch. “Back from where? Oh my God!” She sat up straight, too shocked to think about snatching sheets to cover herself. “It’s eleven o’clock! Something must have happened to them. What were we thinking!”

She scrambled out of bed, picked up her hopelessly wrinkled blouse and stared at it, mildly horrified.

"If you come back here a minute, I'll show you what we were thinking."

"This is completely irresponsible." She pressed the blouse to her breasts and backed toward her closet for a fresh one. "What if something's happened to them? We should go out and look for them, or—"

She broke off when her bell rang. "That must be them now." Relief was so huge, she grabbed a robe rather than her blouse and bundled hurriedly into it as she dashed for the door.

"Thank God. I was so worried . . . Mother."

"Tia, how many times have I told you, even when you look through the peephole, you should always, always ask who's there." She aimed a kiss an inch above Tia's cheek as she sailed in. "You're ill. I knew it."

"No, I'm not ill."

"Don't tell me." She pressed a hand to Tia's forehead. "Flushed, and in your robe in the middle of the day. Your eyes are heavy, too. Well, I'm on my way to the doctor, so you can come with me. You take my appointment, dear. I'd never forgive myself otherwise."

"I'm not sick. I don't need to see the doctor. I was just . . ." Lord, good Lord, what could she say?

"We'll just get you dressed. I have no doubt, none whatsoever, that you picked up some strange foreign virus while you were traveling. I told your father as much this very morning."

"Mother." Tia hurdled over a footstool and, with the skill of a tight end, did a fast lateral rush in front of the bedroom door. "I feel absolutely, perfectly well. You don't want to miss your appointment, do you? You look a little pale. Have you been sleeping well?"

"When have I ever?" Alma smiled her martyr's smile. "I don't think I've had more than an hour's rest at a time since you were born. Why, it took all my reserves just to get dressed this morning. I'm sure my platelets are low. I'm just sure of it."

"You tell the doctor to test them," Tia urged as she pulled her mother to the door.

"What's the point? They won't tell you when you're re-

ally sick, you know. I need to sit down awhile. I'm getting palpitations."

"Oh . . . Then I think you should hurry to the doctor. I think you need to—" She broke off, sagged, when the door opened to Gideon and Cleo. "Ah, well . . . hmmm. You're back. These are associates of mine, Mother."

"Associates?" She scanned the faded jeans, the Gap bag Cleo still carried.

"Yes, yes. We're working on a project together. In fact, we were just about to—"

"You're working in your robe?" Alma demanded.

"Busted," Cleo said under her breath, but one of Alma's many complaints wasn't her hearing.

"Just what does that mean? Just what is going on here? Tia, I demand an explanation."

"That's a bit delicate." Malachi stepped out of the bedroom. He, too, wore jeans and a smile that could have melted an iceberg at twenty yards. He'd tossed on a shirt, then deliberately left it unbuttoned. There were times, he'd calculated, the truth served best.

"I'm afraid I distracted your daughter while our associates were out." He crossed over, took Alma's hand and shook it gently. "Completely unprofessional of me, of course, but, well now, what could I do? She's so lovely. I see now where she gets it."

He lifted the hand he still held to his lips while Alma stared at him. "I've been completely undone by your daughter, Mrs. Marsh, since first we met."

He draped an arm over Tia's stiff shoulders and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "But I'm embarrassing her, and you as well. I'd hoped to meet you and Tia's father under less awkward circumstances."

Alma's eyes rushed from Malachi's face to her daughter's, and back again. "Almost any would be less awkward."

He nodded, adding as much sheepishness as he could manage. "Can't argue with you there. Hardly a good beginning to get caught with your pants down by the lady's mum before you've exchanged how-do-you-dos. I can only tell you I'm enchanted by your daughter."

As gracefully as possible, Tia slipped out from under

his arm. "Maybe you could step into the kitchen for a moment? All of you? So I could have a word with my mother."

"If you like." Malachi cupped her chin, lifted it until their eyes met. "It should be as you like." He touched his lips to hers, lingering over it before he followed the others into the kitchen.

"I demand an explanation," Alma began.

"I think an explanation is superfluous, under the circumstances."

"Who are those people and what are they doing in your apartment?"

"They're associates, Mother. Friends. We're working together on a project."

"And having orgies every morning?"

"No. That was just today."

"What's come over you? Strangers in your home? Strange Irish men in your bed in the middle of the morning? I knew nothing good would come of your running off to Europe. I knew there would be terrible consequences. No one would listen to me, and now look."

"Terrible consequences. Mother, what's so terrible about me having friends? What's so dire about there being a man who wants to go to bed with me in the middle of the morning?"

"I can't get my breath." Alma clutched at her chest and dissolved into a chair. "There's a tingling down my arm. I'm having a heart attack. Call nine-one-one."

"Stop it. You can't call an ambulance every time we disagree, every time I take a step away. Every time," she added, crouching at her mother's feet, "I do something just for me."

"I don't know what you're talking about. My heart—"

"Your heart's fine. You've got the heart of an elephant and every doctor you find tells you the same thing. Look at me. Mother, can't you just look at me? I cut my hair," Tia said quietly. "You haven't even noticed because you weren't looking. All you see when you look at me is a sickly little girl, someone who can keep you company at the doctor's and give you an excuse for a nervous disposition."

“What a horrible thing to say.” Shock had Alma forgetting all about the possibility of cardiac arrest. “First you take up with some strange man, and now you say horrible things to me. You’ve joined a cult, haven’t you?”

“No.” Unable to help herself, Tia lowered her head to her mother’s knee and laughed. “No, I haven’t joined a cult. Now I want you to go downstairs. Your driver’s waiting for you. Go to your appointment. I’ll come see you and Father very soon.”

“I’m not sure I’m well enough to get to the doctor’s on my own. I need you to come with me.”

“I can’t.” Gently Tia drew Alma to her feet. “I’m sorry. If you want, I’ll call Father and ask him to meet you there.”

“Never mind.” Wrapping martyrdom around her like a stole, Alma walked to the door. “Obviously nearly dying in childbirth, then devoting my life to your health and well-being aren’t enough to have you give me an hour of your time when I’m ill.”

Tia opened her mouth, then swallowed the placating, agreeable words. “I’m sorry. I hope you feel better soon.”

“Boy, she’s good.” Cleo came out of the kitchen the instant she heard the front door close. “I mean, she’s the champion. Hey.” She walked over to hook an arm around Tia’s waist. “You’ve gotta shake it off, honey. She was doing a number on you.”

“I could’ve gone with her. It would only have taken a little time.”

“Instead you stood up to her. A better choice, if you ask me. What you need is some ice cream.”

“No, but thanks.” She took a deep breath, felt it catch near her sternum, but resolutely pushed it out. Then turned so she could face all of them at once. “I’m embarrassed, I’m tired, and this time I do have a headache. I’d like to apologize for the entire business, all at once. And I’d like to see the Fate, examine it, hopefully verify it before I take some medication, get dressed and go downtown to see my father.”

Malachi held up a hand and showed her the statue his brother had given him in the kitchen.

Without a word, Tia took it into her office, to the desk. There with her glasses perched on her nose, she studied it under a magnifying glass. She felt them hovering behind her as she continued her studies. "We'd be more certain if my father could examine it or, better yet, give it to an expert."

"We can't chance that," Malachi told her.

"No. I certainly won't risk my father by connecting him. These are the maker's marks," she said, tipping the base up. "And, according to my research, they're correct. You and Gideon are the only ones here who've seen Clotho. I've only seen photographs and artists' renderings, but stylistically this is a match. And you see here . . ." She tapped the tip of her pencil on the notches, right and left on the base. "These slots connect her, the middle sister, with Clotho on one side, Atropus on the other."

She glanced up, waited for Malachi to nod. She took a tape measure out of the drawer, noted down the exact height, width. "Another match. Let's check weight."

She took it into the kitchen, used her scale. "It's exact, down to the gram. If it's a forgery, it's a careful one. And the odds of that, given its connection through Cleo, are small. In my not so considered opinion, we have Lachesis. We have the second Fate."

She set it on the counter, slipped her glasses off and set them beside the statue. "I'm going to get dressed."

"Tia. Damn it. Give me a minute," Malachi said to Gideon, then went after her.

"I need to take a shower," she told him and would have closed the door in his face if he hadn't just pushed it open. "I need to change and figure out what I'm going to tell my father and what I'm not going to tell him. I'm not as skilled in this game-playing as you are."

"Are you embarrassed we made love, or embarrassed your mother knows of it?"

"I'm embarrassed period." She turned into the bathroom, took a bottle of pills out of the medicine cabinet. She took one of the bottles of water she kept in the linen closet and downed a Xanax. "I'm upset that I had an argument with my mother and sent her away unhappy with

me. And I'm trying not to imagine her collapsing on the street because I was too busy and disinterested to go with her to her doctor's appointment."

"Has she ever collapsed on the street before?"

"No, of course not." She got out another bottle of pills and took two extra-strength Tylenol for the headache. "She just mentions the possibility of it often enough so the image is always fresh in my mind."

With a shake of her head, she met his gaze in the mirror. "I'm a mess, Malachi. I'm twenty-nine years old, and I've been in therapy for twelve years next January. I have regular appointments with an allergist, an internist and a homeopathic healer. I tried acupuncture, but since I'm phobic about sharp implements, that didn't last long."

Even thinking about it made her shudder a little. "My mother's a hypochondriac and my father's disinterested," she continued. "I'm neurotic, phobic and socially inept. I sometimes imagine myself suffering from a rare, lingering disease—or being lactose intolerant. Neither of which is true, at least up till now."

She braced her hands on the sink because saying it out loud, hearing herself say it out loud, made it all sound so pathetic. "The last time I went to bed with a man—other than this morning—was three years ago in April. Neither of us was particularly delighted with the results. So, what are you doing here?"

"First, I'd like to say that if it'd been over three years since I'd had sex, I'd be in therapy as well."

He turned her to face him, then kept his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Second, being shy isn't being socially inept. Third, I'm here because here's where I want to be. And finally, I'd like to ask if when we've got all this business done with, you'd come back to Ireland with me for a bit. I'd like you to meet my own mother, under less touchy circumstances than I met yours. Now look what you've done," he said when the bottle she held slipped out of her hand and hit the floor. "You've got those little pills everywhere."

Eighteen

ANITA considered the possibility of flying to Athens and personally interrogating every antique dealer and collector in the city. Though there would have been something satisfying in this hands-on approach, she couldn't expect another Fate to simply fall into her lap.

Moreover, she wasn't willing to go to quite that much trouble on the vague memory of a bumbling fool like Tia Marsh. No, as much as she craved action, it wouldn't do.

She needed direction, she needed leads. She needed employees who could follow both so she wasn't required to shoot them in the head.

She sighed over that. She'd been vaguely disappointed that her former employee's murder had warranted no more than a few lines in the *New York Post*. Really, that said quite a bit about the world, didn't it? she mused. When a dead man garnered less press than a pop singer's second marriage.

It only proved that fame and money ran the show. Something she'd known all her life. Those two elements had been her goal even when she'd been moldering in that lousy third-floor walk-up in Queens. When her name had been Anita Gorinsky, when she'd watched her father work

himself to a nub for a stingy paycheck her mother had struggled to stretch week by week.

She'd never belonged there, inside those dingy walls her mother had tried to brighten with flea market art and homemade curtains. She'd never been a part of that world, with its rooms that smelled forever of onions and its tacky hand-crocheted doilies. Her mother's wide, fresh-scrubbed face and her father's scarred workingman's hands had been an embarrassment to her.

She'd detested them for their ordinariness. Their pride in her, their only daughter, their joy in sacrificing so that she could have advantages, had disgusted her.

She'd known, even as a child she'd known she was destined for so much more. But destiny, Anita thought, often needed a helping hand.

She'd taken their money for schooling, for clothes, and had demanded more. She'd deserved it. She'd earned it, Anita thought. Every penny of it she'd earned with every day she'd lived in that horrid apartment.

And she'd paid them back, in her way, by seeing that their investment in her produced considerable dividends.

She hadn't seen her parents, or her two brothers, in more than eighteen years. As far as the world she now lived in was concerned—as far as she herself was concerned—she had no family.

She doubted anyone from the old neighborhood would recognize little Nita in the woman she'd become. She rose and walked to the giltwood pier glass that reflected the spacious sitting area of her office. Once her hair had been a long fall of mink brown her mother had spent hours brushing and curling. Her nose had been prominent and her front teeth had overlapped. Her cheeks had been soft and round.

A few nips, a couple of tucks, some dental work and a good hairstylist had changed the outer package. Streamlined it. She'd always known how to enhance her better assets.

Inside, she was exactly as she'd always been. Hungry, and determined to feed her appetites.

Men, she knew, were always willing to set a full plate in front of a beautiful woman. As long as the man believed the

woman would pay with sex, there was no end to the variety of meals.

Now, she was a very wealthy widow—who could buy her own.

Still, men were useful. Think of all the contacts her dear, departed husband had put at her disposal. The fact was, Paul was handier dead than he'd been alive. Widowhood made her even more respectable and available.

Considering, she went back to her desk and opened her husband's burgundy leather address book. Paul had been very old-fashioned in some respects and had kept his address book meticulously up to date. In the last years, when his hand hadn't been quite so steady, she'd written in the names herself.

The dutiful wife.

She paged through until she found the name she was looking for. Stefan Nikos. Sixtyish, she recalled. Vital, wealthy. Olive groves or vineyards, perhaps both. She couldn't quite recall. Nor could she recall if he currently had a wife. What mattered was he had money, power and an interest in antiquities.

She unlocked a drawer, drew out a book of her own. In it, she'd noted down everyone who'd come to her husband's funeral, what flowers they'd sent. Mr. and Mrs. Stefan Nikos hadn't made the trip from Corfu, or Athens—they had homes in both places—but had sent an offering of five dozen white roses, a Mass card and, best of all, a personal note of condolence to the young widow.

She picked up the phone, nearly buzzed her assistant to make the call, then reevaluated. Best to make it herself—friend to friend—she decided, and was already practicing the words and tone as she dialed.

She wasn't put through right away, but she held the line and her temper so that when Stefan picked up, her voice was as warm and welcoming as his.

"Anita. What a wonderful surprise. I must apologize for keeping you waiting."

"Oh, no. You didn't. I'm the one who's surprised I'd be able to reach a busy man like you so easily. I hope you and your lovely wife are well."

“We are, we are, of course. And you?”

“Fine. Busy, too. Work’s a godsend to me since Paul died.”

“We all miss him.”

“Yes, we do. But it’s wonderful for me to spend my days at Morningside. He’s here, you know, in every corner. It’s important for me to . . . well . . .” She let her voice thicken, just slightly. “It’s very important to keep his memory alive, and to know old friends remember him as I do. I know it’s been a very long time since I contacted you. I’m a bit ashamed of that.”

“Now, now. Time passes, doesn’t it, my dear?”

“Yes, but who knows better than I that one should never let people drift away? And here I am, Stefan, calling you after all this time for a favor. I nearly didn’t.”

“What can I do for you, Anita?”

She liked the fact that a hint of caution had come into his voice. He’d be a man accustomed to hangers-on, to old acquaintances hitting him up for favors. “Yours was the first name I thought of because of who you are, and your friendship with Paul.”

“You are having difficulties with Morningside?”

“Difficulties?” She paused, then let embarrassment, even a touch of horror, color her tone. “Oh no. No, Stefan, nothing like that. Oh, I hope you don’t think I’d call this way to ask for any sort of financial . . . I’m so flustered.”

She twirled, gleefully, in her desk chair. “It concerns a client, and some pieces I’m trying to track down at his behest. Honestly, your name popped into my mind, a kind of shot in the dark, as the pieces are Greek images.”

“I see. Is your client interested in something in my collection?”

“That would depend.” She tried a quiet laugh. “You don’t happen to own the Three Fates, do you?”

“The Fates?”

“Three small silver statues. Individual, that apparently link together by their bases to make a set.”

“Yes, I have heard of them, but only as a kind of story. Statues forged on Olympus that will, if complete, grant

the owner anything from eternal life to untold fortunes, even the fabled three wishes, one for each Fate.”

“Legends increase the value of a piece.”

“Indeed they do, but it was my impression that these pieces were lost, if they ever existed in the first place.”

“I believe they existed,” she said, running a fingertip over the statue of Clotho, which sat now on her desk. “Paul often spoke of them. More to the point, my client believes it. To be frank, Stefan, he’s piqued my interest enough that I’ve made some inquiries, started considerable legwork. One source, which appears to be valid, insists that one of the statues, the third one, is in Athens.”

“If this is so, it’s not come to my ear.”

“I’m tugging on any line at this point. I hate to disappoint a client. I was hoping you could make some discreet inquiries. If I can possibly get away in the next few weeks, I’d love to take a trip to Greece myself. Combine business and pleasure.”

“Of course you must come, and stay with us.”

“I couldn’t impose.”

“The guest house here in Athens or our villa on Corfu are at your disposal. Meanwhile, I’ll be happy to make those discreet inquiries.”

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it. My client is somewhat eccentric, and very much obsessed just now with these pieces. If I could locate even one, it would mean a great deal. I know Paul would be so proud to know that Morningside had a part in finding the Fates.”

Pleased with herself, Anita made a second, personal call. She glanced at her watch, flipped through her day-book and calculated when she could most conveniently squeeze in the meeting she intended to set up.

“Burdett Securities.”

“Anita Gaye for Jack Burdett.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Gaye, Mr. Burdett is unavailable. May I take a message?”

Unavailable? Stupid twit, don’t you *know* who I am? Anita set her teeth. “It’s very important I speak with Mr. Burdett as soon as possible.”

Instantly, she thought. She had a second-tier plan to put into motion.

"I'll see he gets your message, Ms. Gaye. If you'd give me a number where he can reach you, I'll—"

"He has my numbers. All of them."

She slammed down the phone. Unavailable, her ass. He'd best make himself available, and soon.

She wasn't about to let Cleo Toliver and the second Fate slip through her fingers. Jack Burdett was just the man to run them down for her.

HE WAS ON the phone himself. In fact, Jack had spent most of the trans-Atlantic flight on the phone, or on his laptop. For herself, Rebecca watched two movies. Actually, one and a half, as she'd fallen asleep during the second. And had yet to forgive herself for wasting a single minute of the flight in sleep.

She'd never flown first-class before, and had decided it was a method of travel she could easily grow accustomed to.

She wanted to use the phone herself, to call her mother, to call her brothers. But she didn't think the current budget would swing for that sort of expense. And she could hardly ask Jack to pay for it.

At the rate they were going she was a little concerned he'd think she was only interested in his money. That was hardly the case, though she didn't consider his money a strike against him.

She'd liked watching him with his great-grandparents. He'd been so sweet and so gentle with them. Not sappily so, she thought now. So many, to her mind, treated the elderly as if they were children, or inconveniences, or simply oddities.

There'd been none of that with Jack. It said something about a man, in her opinion, when he had an easy and natural way with his family.

Of course he was a bit too bossy for her usual taste, but she had to be honest enough to admit that men who fell in

line whenever she snapped her fingers annoyed the very hell out of her.

He was a pleasure to look at as well, and that was no more strike against him than his wallet. And he was smart—more, he was canny. Since she was trusting him with a great deal, it helped knowing she'd put her faith in a canny sort of man.

She shifted, started to speak to him, and saw he was making yet another call. Although a bit annoyed, Rebecca promised she wouldn't point out he'd barely said two words to her in more than five hours.

"Message from Anita Gaye," Jack said suddenly.

"What? She called you? What did she want?"

"She didn't say."

"Are you ringing her back?"

"Eventually."

"Why don't you do it now so we know—"

"Let her stew awhile, that's one. Second, I don't want her to know I'm on a plane, and we're about to start the final approach with all the accompanying announcements. If she's calling, she wants something. We'll just let her want it for a while longer."

NEW YORK WAS a thrill, and though Rebecca didn't want to behave like a slack-jawed tourist, she intended to enjoy every minute of it. There were important things to do, and vital business to attend to, but that didn't mean she couldn't hug the excitement of being there, of finally being *somewhere*, tight against her.

It was everything she imagined. The sleek towers of buildings, the acres of shops, the fast and crowded streets. To see them for the first time while being whisked along in a limousine—a genuine limousine as big as a boat, with seats of buttery leather *and* a uniformed driver complete with cap—was the most delicious of adventures.

She could barely wait to call her mother and tell her about it. And oh, how her fingers itched to flip and fiddle with all the little switches. She sent Jack a sidelong look.

He was sitting, legs stretched out, dark glasses in place with his hands folded restfully over his stomach.

She started to reach up to the panel, snatched her hand back. Perhaps he was sleeping and wouldn't see, but the driver might.

"Go ahead and play with them," Jack murmured.

She flushed, shrugged. "I was just wondering what everything did." She reached up, idly she thought, and toyed with the various light schemes. Then the radio, the television, the sunroof. "It wouldn't be so hard to put all this in an ordinary car," she concluded. "Certainly you could have it in a caravan, and people would feel very plush while they traveled."

She eyed the phone, thought of her family again. "I need to get in touch with my brothers. I don't like not being able to just ring them and tell them I'm here."

"We'll go by and see them in person. Shortly."

The limo glided, quiet as a ghost, to the curb, and Rebecca had her first look at Jack's building. It didn't seem like much, she mused as she stepped onto the sidewalk. She'd expected a man with all his wherewithal to live in some glossy place with fancy touches and one of those soldierly doormen.

Still it seemed a sturdy sort of place to her, and pitted with character. She was neither surprised nor disappointed when he used both keycard and code to gain entrance into the narrow lobby. And yet another card, another code to access the elevator.

"I would have thought you lived alone," she began as the elevator started up.

"I do."

"No, I mean to say not in a flat with neighbors."

"I do," he said again. "I have the only apartment in the building."

"It seems awfully big not to make use of the other space."

"I make use of it."

The elevator stopped. He disengaged locks and alarms, then opened the door into his living space.

"Well." She stepped inside, onto a floor with wide, dark

planks, scanned the biscuit-colored walls, the bold art, the wide windows. "You've made use of this space right enough."

There were gorgeous old rugs. She didn't know enough about such things to recognize Chinese Deco, but she liked the blend of colors and the way they accented the deep hues and deep cushions of the sofas, the chairs, even the heavy polished wood.

She wandered through, noting first it was tidy, then that it was tasteful. And last that it was stylish. She liked the wavy glass blocks that separated the kitchen from the living space, and the framed arches that led to what she supposed were hallways and bedrooms.

"It seems a lot of room for a single man."

"I don't like to be crowded."

She nodded, turned back. Yes, she thought, it suited him. A clever and unusual space for a clever and unusual man. "You can be sure I won't crowd you, Jack. Is there a place I can put my things, maybe have a wash and change before we go see my brothers?"

"Two bedrooms down the hall. Mine's on the right, spare's on the left." He waited a beat, watching her. "Take your pick."

"My choice, is it?" She let out a careful breath as she lifted her duffel. "I'll take the spare for the moment. And I have something to say to you."

"Go ahead."

"I want to sleep with you, and I don't generally have that kind of want for a man on such short acquaintance. But I'm thinking it might be better if we're a bit careful with each other for a while yet. Until we're both perfectly sure that the sex isn't some sort of payment, on either side."

"I don't take sex as payment."

"That's good, and you'll be sure if it's offered it isn't meant as such. I won't be long." She carried her bag through the arch and took the room on the left.

He jammed his hands in his pockets, paced to the window. Then turned and had taken two strides after her when his office line beeped.

He listened to his assistant relay the message that Ms. Gaye had called, again. Maybe he'd let her stew long enough.

He passed through another archway and into the small office he kept in the apartment. Before he placed the call, he checked the phone for tampering, ran a brief systems check, then engaged his own recording device.

Some might have called him paranoid. He preferred thinking of it as standard operating procedure.

"Anita. Jack."

"Oh, thank God! I've been trying to reach you for hours."

He lifted a brow at the frantic tone in her usually unruffled voice and made himself comfortable in his desk chair. "I've been out of reach. What's wrong, Anita? You sound upset."

"I am. I'm probably being foolish, but I am. Very upset. I need to speak to you, Jack. I need help. I'll leave for home right now if you can meet me there."

"Wish I could." Not going to be too easy, honey, he thought. "I'm not in New York."

"Where are you?" He could hear the hardening in her voice.

"Philadelphia," he decided. "Quick job check. I'll be back tomorrow. Tell me what's wrong."

"I don't know who else to call. I just don't know anything about this sort of thing. It's about the Fates. Remember, I mentioned them to you over dinner."

"Sure. What about them?"

"I told you I had an interested client. I've mentioned it to others, made some inquiries, though I'll admit I didn't think anything would come of it. But it has."

"You found one?" He opened his carry-on, took out the protective bag. "That sounds like good news."

"I might have found one. That is, I was contacted about one, but I don't know what to do. Oh, I'm rambling. I'm so sorry."

"Take your time." He unwrapped Atropus, turned her to face him.

"All right." She took an audible breath. "A woman called me, claimed she had one of the statues and was in-

terested in selling it. Naturally, I was skeptical, but I had to follow through. Even when she insisted on meeting me outside the office. She insisted I come to the observation deck at Empire State.”

“Get out.”

“I know. I was amused, actually. It seemed so film noir. But she behaved rather oddly, Jack. I think she must have a drug problem. She demanded an exorbitant amount of money, and she threatened me. Physically threatened me if I didn’t pay.”

A faint frown moved over his face as he turned Atropus around and around on his desk. “It sounds like you should talk to the police, Anita.”

“I can’t afford the publicity. And in any case, what point is there? They were only threats. She had a picture, I think it was a scanned print, of what might very well be one of the Fates.”

Interesting, he considered. More and more interesting. “If it was, you know computer images can be generated easily. Sounds like a standard con.”

“Well, yes, but it looked genuine. The detailing on the statue. I want to pursue this, but I’m . . . I confess, I’m more than a little shaken. If I go to the police, I’ll lose this contact for my client.”

“How did you leave things?”

“She wants to meet me again, and I’ve stalled her. Frankly, she frightens me. Before I arrange any sort of meeting with her, I need to know who I’m dealing with. Right now I only have a name, the name she gave me. Cleo Toliver. If you could find her—”

“I’m not a detective, Anita. I can give you the name of a good firm.”

“Jack, I can’t trust this to a stranger. I need a friend. I know it’s going to sound crazy, but I’m sure I’m being followed. Once I know where she is, who she is, I’ll know if I should try to negotiate this deal or take some sort of legal action against her. I need a friend, Jack. I’m very unnerved by all this.”

“Let me see what I can do. Cleo Toliver, you say? Give me a description.”

"I knew I could count on you. You'll keep this off the record, won't you? A favor for a friend."

He glanced at the recorder. "Naturally."

IN UNDER AN hour, Cleo let out a whoop of joy. "That's gotta be the Chinese food." The thrill of pot stickers might have had her leaping to the door herself if Malachi hadn't intercepted her.

"Let's just have Tia take a look and be sure."

With some regret, Tia set aside Wyley's journal and walked out of the spare room to the front door. One look through the peephole had her gasping in surprise.

"It's Jack Burdett," she hissed. "He's got someone with him, but I can't really see her."

"Let's have a look." Malachi nudged her aside, looked for himself, then let out his own whoop. To Tia's surprise, he flipped locks, pulled open the door, then yanked the redhead into his arms.

"There's my girl!" He spun her once, kissed her hard, then dropped her back on her feet. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded in a lightning change of mood. "What the hell are you doing with him?"

"I'll tell you if you give me two seconds to get a breath." Instead of answering, she turned to launch herself at Gideon. "Isn't this a wonder? The three of us in New York."

"I'd like to know why we are," Malachi continued, "when you should be home."

"So you and Gid can have all the fun? Bollocks to that. Hello, you must be Tia." Smiling broadly, she stuck out a hand, grabbed Tia's and shook hard and fast. "I'm Rebecca, and sorry to confess, I'm sister to these two heathens who can't be bothered to tell you who's walked in your door. It's such a lovely place you have here. It is Cleo?" She turned to the brunette who leaned lazily against the back of the couch. "It's a pleasure to meet you. This is Jack Burdett, as Tia already knows, and we've brought considerable news with us."

The bell rang again.

“That better be the Chinese,” Cleo said. “And let’s hope he brought extra egg rolls.”

“Becca.” Gideon drew her aside, lowered his voice as Tia dealt with the delivery. “You’ve no business running off this way with a strange man.”

“Why not?” Cleo demanded. “I did. Tia, I’m going to open some wine. Okay?”

“Yes.” Because her head was spinning, Tia leaned back against the door, her arms full of Chinese takeout. Her apartment was full of people, and most of them were talking at once. In very loud voices. She was going to eat food loaded with MSG and would probably die young because of it.

Her mother was barely speaking to her, there was a priceless objet d’art hidden behind the two-percent milk in her refrigerator, and she was sharing her bed with a man who was currently shouting at his sister.

It was exhausting. It was . . . wonderful.

“Been a busy little bee, haven’t you?” Jack commented. “Here. Let me give you a hand with those. Anybody order pot stickers?”

“I did.” Cleo wandered over to him with an open bottle of wine. “I might share if you can manage to shut those three up.”

“I can do that.” He angled his head, took a good long look at her. “She didn’t do you justice. Didn’t figure she would.”

“Oh. Who?”

“Anita Gaye.” The name, as he’d expected, dropped the room into silence. “She called about an hour ago, asked me to find you.”

Cleo’s fingers tightened on the neck of the bottle. “Looks like I’m found.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rebecca demanded.

“Easier to tell it once. She gave me the impression you’re a dangerous character,” he said to Cleo.

“Bet your ass.”

“Good. Let’s break out these pot stickers and talk about it.”



HER LIVING ROOM was a mess. Correction, Tia thought, her life was the mess. There was a voice inside her head lecturing her to clean it up, this very minute. But it was a little hard to hear it with all the voices going on outside her head.

She now had connections to thieves and murderers. And *two* precious objets d'art in her apartment.

"Cunningham," Malachi said as he studied the two statues. "It just figures. If you think about it all, if you believe the way life spins around, it just figures. There's two of them." He looked at his brother. "There's what we were after."

"We were," Gideon agreed, "at the start of it."

"We're not at the start of it anymore." Cleo surged to her feet, rage trembling through her. "That one's mine, and don't you forget it. I'll see it melted down into a puddle before that bitch gets her hands on it."

"Calm yourself down, Cleo," Malachi advised.

"The hell I will. The three of you want to pay her back, that's your business. But it stopped being about money when she had Mikey killed. He's worth more than money."

"Of course he is." For the first time in days, Gideon touched her, gently, just a brush of his hand against her leg.

"I'm sorry about your friend." Rebecca set down her wineglass. "I wish there was a way to make it right again. It's clear enough we have to think of something else. None of us planned for anything beyond skinning her for money once we found these two. Christ knows why we thought we ever would, and still we have. That must count for something."

"I won't sell it to her. Not for any amount."

"How about selling it to me?" Jack used chopsticks expertly for another bite of pork-fried rice.

"So you can turn around and sell it to her?" Cleo demanded. "I don't think so."

"I'm not going to sell anything to Anita," he said icily.

"If you think she'll sell you the one she has, you're

nuts.” Disgusted, Cleo stretched out on the floor again.

“I’m not buying anything from her either.”

“They only achieve their true value as a set,” Tia pointed out. “If you’re not going to negotiate for the set with Anita, the only way to get the first one back is to steal it.”

Jack nodded as he topped off two of the glasses still on the coffee table. “There you go.”

“Oh, I like that way of thinking.” Pleased, Rebecca sat up straight, shot Jack a warm, approving look. “Still, you have to remember that if it’s stolen back, it was stolen from us to begin with. Or, I suppose stolen from Tia in a way, then from us. It’s complicated, but it comes down to it being mutually owned, wouldn’t you say?”

Tia blinked rapidly, pressed a finger on what felt like a muscle tic just under her left eye. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I do. It’s not enough.” Cleo shook her head. “Even if you pull it off, she loses a thing. A thing that wasn’t hers to begin with. It’s not fucking enough.”

“No, it’s not,” Gideon agreed. “Not any longer.”

“You want justice?” Jack lifted his glass, skimmed his gaze around the room.

“That’s right.” Gideon laid a hand on Cleo’s shoulder, then looked at his brother, at his sister, back at Jack when they nodded. “That’s what has to be.”

“Okay. Justice makes it a little trickier, but we’ll work it out.”

Nineteen

NOTHING, Malachi decided, was going to be solved during this first disorganized and impromptu meeting. They needed time to let it all settle in. Time, as Tia had said, to define their direction and their goal.

As usual the brainy and delightful Dr. Marsh had cut through to the heart of the matter. The six people currently scattered around her apartment had a variety of agendas and styles.

The outside force of Anita Gaye had only one.

To win, they would have to meld those six individuals into one single unit. That required more than cooperation. It would demand trust.

Since they had to start somewhere, Malachi decided to explore the new element.

Jack Burdett.

He wasn't entirely sure he cared for the way the man looked at his sister. That was a bit of personal business he intended to wind through the rest as soon as possible.

In any case, Tia was looking more than a little shell-shocked. She did better, to his way of thinking, when she had some time inside her own head. So the first order of the day was to clear out the apartment and give her a bit of room.

“We all need to chew on this for a while.” Though he didn’t raise his voice, the chatter quieted. It was something Jack noticed, and filed away.

“Fine with me.” Jack got to his feet. “Meanwhile, I’ve got something for you, Tia.”

“Something for me.”

“Consider it a hostess gift. Thanks for the Chinese.” He dug into his bag and came out with a phone. “It’s secure,” he told her. “And so will the line be, once I hook it up. You can use this line to make and receive calls you don’t want our eavesdropping friends to hear. I don’t imagine I have to tell you not to give the number out.”

“No. But doesn’t the phone company have to . . . Never mind.”

He flashed a grin at her. “Where do you want it?”

“I don’t know.” She rubbed her fingers between her eyebrows, tried to think. Her office was out as long as Cleo needed it for a bedroom. Her own bedroom seemed wrong, somehow selfish. “The kitchen,” she decided.

“Good choice. I’ll take care of it. Here’s the number,” he added, taking a small card from his pocket.

“Do I memorize it, then eat the paper?”

“You’re all right, Doc.” With a chuckle he hefted the bag and headed toward the kitchen. Then stopped. “Seems like you’re a little crowded in here. I’ve got plenty of room. Rebecca’s staying at my place.”

“Do you think so?” Malachi’s voice was dangerously soft.

“Stop it,” was all Rebecca said, and she said it under her breath.

“I can take one more, if anyone wants to relocate. That evens things up.”

“I’ll go.” Cleo rolled up off the floor, careful not to look at Gideon.

But Jack looked at him, saw the start of surprise, the quick, baffled anger. “Fine. Saddle up. This won’t take me long.”

“I don’t have much.” She shot Tia a grin. “You might actually get some work done this way.”

She walked off into the office, and Malachi sent his sis-

ter a fulminating look that only made her yawn. "You think I'm letting you take up with a man this way?"

"What way would that be, Malachi?" She fluttered her lashes at him, and the eyes behind them were cold steel.

"We'll just see about all this." He lurched to his feet and strode off into the kitchen after Jack. "I'm going to need a word with you."

"Figured that. Just let me take care of this."

Malachi frowned as he watched him work. He had no idea what the man was doing with the little tools and bits of equipment, but it was very clear Jack knew.

"Hand me the small Phillips head bit out of the kit there," Jack asked.

"You screwing this into the wall?" Malachi handed over the bit, watched Jack fit it onto a mini cordless drill. "She won't care for that."

"Little sacrifices, big payoff. She's already swallowed more than a couple of holes in the wall." He fixed the phone jack in place, ran the line, then, taking what looked like a palm-sized computer out of his bag, ran a series of numbers through it.

"You can use this to contact your mother," Jack said conversationally. "But I wouldn't mention to the doc that the phone company's getting stiffed on the long-distance calls. She's a straight arrow. Your mother's phones are clear. Or were when I was there and checked them out. I showed her what to look for, and she'll be doing a check twice a day. She's a sharp lady. I don't think they'll get past her."

"You form impressions quickly."

"Yeah. This is set. Reach out and touch someone," he added and packed up his tools.

"Then why don't we step into my office?" Malachi suggested, and grabbed a couple of beers out of the refrigerator.

From her seat on the sofa, Rebecca had a clear view of small dramas. She watched her two angry brothers split off into opposite directions, Gideon into the little room to the right, where Cleo had gone. The door slammed smartly behind him. And Malachi out the front door of the apartment with Jack. That door closed with ominous control.

“It seems everyone’s gone off to argue without us.” She stretched, yawned again. The flight had tired her out more than she’d realized. “Why don’t I help you tidy up this disaster we’ve made of your home. You can tell me what’s brewing with my brother and Cleo, and what’s brewing with my other brother and you.”

Tia looked blankly around the room. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“Pick your spot,” Rebecca told her. “I’m good at catching up.”

“WHAT DO YOU mean you’ll go?” Gideon demanded.

“Makes sense.” Cleo stuffed clothes into her bag. “We’re crowded here.”

“Not that crowded.”

“Enough that you’re sleeping on the goddamn roof.” She heaved the bag onto the daybed and turned. “Look, Slick, you don’t want me here, in your face. You’ve made that crystal. So splitting off makes it easier all around.”

“It’s that easy for you? The man says I’ve got room and you jump over to him?”

Her cheeks went ice-white. “Fuck you.”

She grabbed her bag again, and so did he. For ten bitter seconds they waged a fierce tug-of-war. “I didn’t mean it that way.” He wrenched the bag free, heaved it aside. “What do you take me for?”

“I don’t know what I take you for.” Despite Malachi’s earlier advice, she’d had no intention of using tears on him and was furious that they were blurring her vision. “But I know what you take me for. A liar and a cheat, and a cheap one at that.”

“I don’t. Damn it all to bloody hell, Cleo, I’m angry with you. I’ve a right to be.”

“Fine. Be as pissed off as you want. I can’t stop you. But I don’t have to have it shoved down my throat every day. I screwed up. I’m sorry. End of story.”

She started to shove by him to retrieve her bag, but he caught her arms, tightening his grip when she tried to jerk away. “Don’t cry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Let go.” Tears were spurting out faster than she could blink them back. “I don’t blubber to get my way.”

“Don’t cry,” he said again, and his grip gentled to a caress. “Don’t go.” He drew her in, rocked her in his arms. “I don’t want you to go. I don’t know what I want altogether, but I know I don’t want you to go.”

“This isn’t ever going to go anywhere.”

“Stay.” He rubbed his cheek against hers, transferring tears. “And let’s see.”

She sighed, let her head rest on his shoulder. She’d missed this. God, she’d missed just this simple connection so much it ached in the bones. “You can’t go soft on a woman just because she drips on you, Slick. Just makes a sap out of you.”

“Let me worry about that. Here now. Here.”

He skimmed his lips over her damp cheek, found her mouth and sank in, soft and slow.

The tenderness of it had her muscles trembling and her belly doing one long, lazy roll. Even when he deepened the kiss it was all warmth, without any of those edgy flashes of heat she expected, she understood.

For one of the first times in her life she stood poised on absolute surrender, with a man in total control of her. Heart, body, mind.

It terrified her. And it filled her.

“Don’t be nice to me.” She pressed her face into his shoulder as she struggled for balance. “I’ll just screw it up.”

Not as tough as she pretended, Gideon thought. And not nearly as sure of herself. “Let me worry about that as well. You’ve only one thing to do at the moment,” he added, and tipped her face back to his.

“What?”

He smiled at her. “Unpack.”

She sniffled, and hoped to get a little of her own back. “Is that how you get what you want? By being nice?”

“Now and then. Cleo.” He cupped her face in his hands, watched the wariness come back into those deep, dark eyes. He didn’t mind it. If she was wary of him, she was thinking of him. “You’re so beautiful. Seriously beautiful. It can be a bit disconcerting. Unpack,” he said again. “I’ll

tell Burdett you'll be staying here. With me," he added. "You're with me, Cleo. That's something we'll both have to deal with."

ON THE ROOF, Jack took stock. One way in and out, he considered. That made this area either a trap or a solid defense. It might be wise to set up a few measures here.

If a man didn't anticipate a war, he always lost the battle.

"Hell of a view," he commented.

"Got a smoke?"

"No, sorry. Never picked up the habit."

"I quit." Malachi rolled his shoulders. "Some time ago. I'm regretting that right about now. Well then, let's have first things first."

"That would be Rebecca."

Malachi acknowledged this with a nod. "So it would. She shouldn't be here in the first place, but since she is, she can't be staying with you."

"Shouldn't. Can't." Jack turned his back on the view and leaned on the safety wall. "If you've used those words with her very often, I bet you've gotten some interesting scars."

"True enough. She's a perverse creature, our Becca."

"And she's smart. I like her brain. I like her face," Jack added, eyes direct on Malachi's. "I like the whole package. That's a problem for you, her being your sister." He took a pull from the bottle of Harp. "I've got one of my own, so I get that. Mine went off and married some guy despite the fact that, in my opinion, she had no business even knowing what sex meant. She's got two kids now, but mostly, I like thinking she found them under a berry bush. Probably in the same patch where my mother found us."

Amused, Malachi dipped a hand in his pocket. "You grow berries in that flat of yours?"

"Let's put it this way. She's taking the spare room. Her choice. It stays her choice, either way. I gave your mother my word I'd take care of her. I don't break my word. Not to someone I respect anyway."

Malachi was more than a little surprised to find himself relaxed. More yet to realize he believed Jack was as good as his word.

Maybe, just maybe, they'd forge that unit.

"I suppose this saves me from a bloody battle with Rebecca. But the fact remains, she's an impulsive, headstrong girl who—"

"I'm in love with her."

Malachi's eyes widened, his thoughts scattered. "Jesus Christ, man, that's fast work, isn't it?"

"It only took one look, and she knows it. That gives her the advantage." He paused. "She'd use an advantage when it comes to hand."

"She would," Malachi agreed, not without sympathy. "If need be."

"What she doesn't know, and what I haven't figured out, is what I'm going to do about it. I'm not a fatalist. I think people drive the train."

"So do I." He thought of Felix Greenfield, of Henry Wyley, and a sunny afternoon in May. "But we don't always choose the tracks."

"Whatever the tracks, we've got our hand on the switch. If that wasn't the way it worked, I'd believe that those statues, the circle they've made, have something to do with what happened to me when I looked at Rebecca. Since I don't, I'll just say I'm in love with your sister. So you can stop worrying that I'll let anything or anyone hurt her. Including myself. That do it for you?"

"I'm just going to sit down here a minute." He did so, drank contemplatively, then set the bottle on the little iron table by his chair. He bounced his palms off his knees while he studied Jack. "Our father's gone, and I'm the oldest, so it falls to me to ask you . . ." He trailed off, dragged his hands through his hair. "You know, I'm just not ready for it. Let's have part two of this particular discussion at some later date."

Jack tipped back his beer again. "Works for me."

"You're a cool one, you are. Better for her that you are. So let's move on to another area. The Fates."

"You've been in charge."

Malachi leaned back, cocked a brow. "This is a family affair for us, Jack."

"Never said different, but you're in charge. When push comes to shove, the others look to you for the answer. That goes for Tia, too. Probably Cleo, though she's the wild card."

"She's had a rough go, but she's steady enough. You have a problem with what you see as the pecking order here?"

"I might have, except I get the impression you know how to delegate, and how to let everyone play to their strengths. I know what mine are. I don't mind taking orders, Sullivan, if I agree with them. And I won't mind telling you to fuck off if I don't. Bottom line, I owe you. Felix Greenfield," he continued. "And I want the Fates. I'll work with you so we all end up with what we want."

"Next on the bill," he added. "It's a little too loose for my liking to keep Cleo's Fate in Tia's refrigerator. My apartment's got the best security money can buy. I want to keep it in my safe there, along with mine."

Picking up his beer, Malachi passed the bottle from hand to hand as he thought it through. Trust, he thought. Without it, they'd never solidify. "I won't argue with the practicality of that, but to say you'd then have two of three in your hands. What's to stop you from going after the other on your own, or even negotiating with Anita? No offense."

"None taken. Going after the other alone would be tricky, logistically. Not impossible, but tricky. Moreover, Rebecca wouldn't like it one damn bit, and that matters. And finally, I don't double-cross people I like. I especially like the doc." His grin was fast and wolfish.

"As do I."

"Yeah, that comes through clear. As for dealing with Anita, I don't negotiate with sociopaths. And that's just what she is. She gets the chance, she'd take any one of us out, cold blood, then go have her weekly manicure."

Malachi settled back again, drank again. "Agreed. So, we won't give her that opportunity. We've all got some pondering to do."

"Why don't we take twenty-four hours? Then we can give Tia a break and meet at my place tomorrow."

“All right.” Malachi got to his feet, held out a hand. “Welcome aboard.”

“YOU AND MAL were involved in your private and manly discussion for some time.” Rebecca angled in the seat of the tanklike SUV Jack had driven uptown. “What was it about?”

“This. That. The other.”

“You can start with this, move along to that.”

“It comes to mind that if we’d wanted you in on the discussion, we’d have asked you up on the roof.”

“I’m as much a part of this as anyone.”

“Nobody says different.” He turned off Fifth, headed east to Lexington, watching his rearview mirror as a matter of course.

“And as such, I’ve a perfect right to know what the two of you had your heads together about. This is a team, Jack, not a group made up of roosters and hens.”

“It has nothing to do with the way you button your shirt, Irish, so cool the feminist jets.”

“That’s insulting.”

He headed south awhile, then jogged east again. No tail, he decided, and no surveillance on Tia’s building that he could spot. That could change, but for now, it was handy.

He let Rebecca stew while he wound his way back home. He circled the building, keyed in the code for the garage he’d had built to his personal specs. The reinforced steel door rose, and he guided the SUV inside.

He had his Boxster stored inside as well, along with his Harley and his surveillance van. A man, he thought, had to have some toys. Storing them in a public garage had never been an option for him, and not simply because the yearly rate would have outstretched the cost of sending a kid through Harvard Law, but because he wanted them close. And under his own system.

He climbed out, reset the locks and alarms on the door, on the SUV, then uncoded the elevator. “You coming up?”

he asked Rebecca. "Or do you want to sulk in the garage?"

"I'm not sulking." She sailed by him, crossed her arms over her chest. "But it would be a natural enough response to being treated like a child."

"Treating you like a child's the one thing I don't have in mind. Okay, take a pick. You want the rundown of this, that, or the other?"

She tipped her head up, wishing she wasn't amused. "I'll take this."

"This would be your brother expressing his concern that you're staying here with me."

"Well, it's none of his flaming business, is it? And a nerve he has, too, when it's plain he's cozied himself up with Tia. And I hope you told him so."

"No." Jack pulled open the elevator door so she could stomp into the apartment. "I told him I was in love with you."

She stopped dead, spun around. "What? What?"

"Which seemed to ease his mind more than it eases yours. I've got some things to do. Be back in a few hours."

"Back?" As if to catch her balance, she threw her arms out. "You can't just leave after you've said such a thing to me."

"I didn't say it to you. I said it to your brother. Stretch out, Irish. You look beat." And with this, he closed the door, locked her in and left her stammering curses at him.

He didn't go far. It was only one flight down to the base he kept in the building. He worked from there when it was convenient, or when he was simply restless in his apartment upstairs and wanted a distraction.

Right now he wanted both the convenience and the distraction.

It was a comfortable space. He'd never seen the purpose in spartan work areas when there was a choice. There were deep chairs, good lighting to make up for the lack of windows, the antique rugs he favored and a fully equipped kitchen.

He went there first, started coffee and, while it brewed,

accessed the messages that had come through on his various lines. He booted up one of the computers ranged over a long L-shaped counter, called up his e-mail and listened to the electronic voice read it out while he fixed the first cup of coffee.

He answered what couldn't wait, put aside what could, then shifted to the personal messages. The e-mail from his father made him grin.

The aliens, having performed hideous medical experiments—of an embarrassingly sexual nature—on us, have returned your mother and me to Earth. You can hear all about it on Larry King. Now that I have your attention, maybe you could spare five minutes to get in touch. Your mother sends her love. I don't. I like your sister better. Always did. Guess who.

With a laugh, Jack sat down at the keyboard. "Okay, okay."

Sorry to hear about the alien experience. Typically, they insert tracking devices in their abductees. You may want to chew on tinfoil while having any personal conversations, as this is known to jam their frequencies. Just FYI. Recently back in NY. Am keeping gorgeous Irish redhead prisoner in my apartment. Possibility of exotic sexual favors from same may keep me busy for the next couple weeks. Love back to Mom. None to you. I'm not even sure you are my father. You guess who.

Knowing his father would crack himself up reading the post, Jack hit send. Then got down to work.

He ran a modified check on Cleo, enough in his estimation to placate Anita. On a separate computer he started a background check on her for himself.

He'd already come to the same conclusion as Tia, as Malachi. The six of them were going to have to work together as a single entity. He had no problem with teamwork, but he wanted to know all there was to know about the team.

While the data scrolled, he rolled over to the monitors and, telling himself it was best all around if he kept an eye on Rebecca, engaged the cameras he had installed in his own apartment.

She was in his office, at his computer, and she looked steamed. Curious, he turned on audio.

“Bugger you, Jack, if you think I can’t get by your bloody passwords and blocks.”

“If you can, Irish,” he replied, “I’m going to be very impressed.”

He watched her awhile, noting the rapid streak of her fingers over the keyboard, the curl of her lip as she met another obstacle.

Most women, in his experience, when left to their own devices in a man’s space would poke in drawers, closets, examine the contents of the medicine cabinet or the kitchen cupboards. But she’d gone straight for the information highway.

It did his heart good.

He muted the audio, then busied himself writing a report on Cleo that would convince Anita he was doing her a favor, and offer her nothing helpful.

“That’ll set you on the boil,” he thought aloud.

He rolled away again to let it simmer before he read it over one last time and picked up the phone.

“Detectives Bureau. Detective Robbins.”

“The man with the badge.”

“The man with fraudulent ID.”

“Not me, pal. You must be thinking of someone else. How’s the crime-fighting world?”

“Same old. How’s it going in Paranoia-ville?”

“No complaints. Wondered if you wanted to take that twenty I owe you and go double or nothing on the Angels and O’s tonight.”

“Are you intimating that I, a public servant, gamble?”

“I’ll take the O’s.”

“You’re on, sucker. Now that the pleasantries are over, what’re you after?”

“Now you’ve hurt my feelings. But since you ask, I got some descriptions to run by you. Muscle, probably free-lance, certainly local. Thought maybe you could run them through the system for me, see if anything pops.”

“Maybe. You got names?”

“No, but I’m working on it. Bachelor Number One.

White male, forty to forty-five, brown hair, thinning, no eye color, pale complexion, prominent nose. About fifteen, a hundred and seventy.”

“Lot of guys fit that, including my brother-in-law. Worthless fuck.”

“My information is he likes to use his fists and isn’t long on brains.”

“Yeah, that’s my brother-in-law. Want me to haul his ass in and kick him around?”

“Up to you. Your brother-in-law take any recent trips to Eastern Europe?”

“He doesn’t move his white, dimpled butt out of his recliner to go to the corner deli. You looking for a world traveler, Burdett?”

“I’m looking for an asshole who’s recently back from a little trip to the Czech Republic.”

“That’s a coincidence. We’ve got a corpse on ice, fits your general description. Had a passport in the pocket of his fancy suit. Had two stamps on it. One Praha. That’s, my erudite friends tell me, Prague, Czech Republic. The other was New York, about ten days old.”

Bull’s-eye, Jack thought, and swiveled back to a keyboard. “Can you spare the name?”

“Don’t see why not. Carl Dubrowsky, Bronx boy. Got a pretty yellow sheet on him—mostly assault—and a skate on a Man One. What do you want with our dead guy, Jack?”

Jack plugged in the name and started a search of his own. “Tell me how he got dead.”

“It was probably the four holes a twenty-five-caliber put into him. He turned up stiff in an empty warehouse in Jersey. Let’s have a little quid pro quo here.”

“I’ve got nothing right now, but I’ll hand it to you when I do.” He switched computers, readied to start a second search. “Got an address on that warehouse?”

“Jesus, why don’t I just fax you the file?”

“Would ya?”

At Bob’s rude response, Jack grinned and noted down the address.

When he’d finished on the phone, he typed up meticu-

lous notes on all the data he'd generated. He was getting to his feet, coffee on his mind, when he glanced at the monitors.

The maniacal gleam in Rebecca's eyes had him moving closer, switching the audio back on.

"Not so smart, are you?" she was muttering. "Not so bloody clever."

"You are," he commented, surprised and, yes, impressed, that she'd gotten past his security. Admittedly he didn't keep anything confidential on that unit, and the blocks were moderate. But they were there, and it had taken a hacker with considerable skill to cut past them so quickly.

"Just as I thought," he said to her image. "We're made for each other."

He got another cup of coffee and went back to work while she raided his hard drive.

Twenty minutes later, he'd done all he felt he needed to do for the moment. And so, he noted as he looked toward the monitors again, had she.

She switched the computer off, stretched, then, looking pleased with herself, wandered out of the room, across the living space and down the hall. Jack shifted his attention to the next monitor, watched her roll the stiffness out of her shoulders, pull the band out of her hair and shake it out.

When she started to unbutton her blouse he reminded himself he wasn't a Peeping Tom. He ordered himself to switch off the cameras.

And he tortured himself by watching her peel the blouse away.

When she reached behind for the bra clasp, he ground his teeth and hit the kill switch.

He got a beer instead of coffee and spent the next half hour filing away his work. And wondering how the hell he could be expected to concentrate.

By the time he walked into his apartment again, he had a number of very interesting fantasies going. None of which involved finding her fully dressed but for her pretty, bare feet in his kitchen with fragrant steam puffing out of a pot.

“What are you doing?”

“Why, I’m climbing the Matterhorn, what do you think I’m doing?”

He stepped in, took another good sniff of the pot. Of her. “It looks suspiciously like cooking.”

The shower and change, as well as the session on his computer, had revived her. But while fatigue wasn’t a factor any longer, temper was still in play.

“As I had no idea how long you intended to keep me locked in here, I wasn’t about to sit around and starve to death. You’ve no fresh fruit or vegetables, by the way, so I’m making due with canned and jarred.”

“I’ve been out of town. Write down whatever you want, and I’ll get it for you.”

“I can do my own marketing.”

“I don’t want you going out alone.”

She slid a carving knife out of the wooden block, idly checked its tip with her thumb. Her mother’s daughter, Jack thought. Both knew how to make their point.

“You’ve no say where I go, or when.”

“You use that on me, you’re going to be really sorry after.”

Her smile was every bit as thin and sharp as the blade. “You’d be sorrier, wouldn’t you?”

“Can’t argue with that.” He opened the fridge, took out a bottle of water. “Let me rephrase. I’d prefer you didn’t go out alone until you know the lay of the land.”

“I’ll take your preferences into consideration. And one more thing. If you think that saying you love me is going to have me leaping joyfully into your bed—”

“Don’t push that button, Rebecca.” His tone had gone hard, very hard and very cold. “You won’t like the result.”

She angled her head. She found it interesting that drawing the knife had barely made him blink. But she’d ruffled him quite a bit by mentioning love, and sex.

“I don’t like you winging something like that out at me, then closing the door in my face.”

“I closed it in my face.”

She considered that, accepted it. “I’m capable of doing that, if and when I want.” With her left hand, she picked

up a spoon, stirred the pot. "I don't know what I want just now. When I do, you'll be the first to hear about it. Meanwhile, don't shut me up in here like a parakeet in a cage again. If you try, I'll break all your pretty knickknacks, rip your clothes to rags, stop up your toilet and various other unpleasant things. And I'll find the way out as well."

"Okay, fair enough. When do we eat?"

She huffed out a breath, slid the knife back into its slot. "An hour or so. Enough time for you to go out again and fetch back some French or Italian bread to go with this meal. And something sweet for after it."

She tossed her hair back. "I was pissed off, but not enough to bake."

Twenty

IT was, Tia told herself, a foolish child who was nervous about walking into her parents' home. But her palms were damp, and her stomach churned as she stepped into the dining room of the Marsh town house.

It was eight forty-five. Her father sat down to his breakfast every morning, seven days a week, at precisely eight-thirty. He would now be on his second cup of coffee and have moved from the front page of *The New York Times* to the financial section. He'd have finished his fruit and would have moved on to the next course. Which, Tia noticed, was an egg-white omelette today.

Her mother would take her herbal tea, her freshly squeezed juice and her first of the daily dose of eight glasses of bottled water—using them to wash down her morning complement of vitamins and medication—in bed. With it, she'd have a single slice of whole wheat toast, dry, and a cup of seasonal fruit.

At nine-twenty, Alma would come downstairs, regale Stewart with whatever physical complaints she might have that morning, ramble off her appointment and task schedule while he checked his briefcase.

They would kiss good-bye, and he would walk out the door at nine-thirty.

It was, Tia believed, as reliable and exacting a schedule as a Swiss train.

There had been a time when she'd been part of that schedule. Or, she thought, had been worked into it. Was it their fault or hers that she'd been so unable to do anything, anything at all, to interfere with its precision?

Their fault or hers that even now the idea of doing so made her queasy?

Stewart glanced up as Tia entered, and his creased brow lifted in mild surprise. "Tia. Did we have an appointment?"

"No. I'm sorry to interrupt your morning."

"Don't be foolish." But even as he said it, he glanced at his watch. "Would you like some breakfast? Coffee?"

"No, thank you. Nothing." She stopped herself from linking her restless fingers together and sat across from him. "I wanted to speak to you before you went in to work."

"All right." He spread a thin layer of butter on lightly toasted whole wheat bread, then blinked. "You've cut your hair."

"Yes." Feeling foolish, she lifted a hand to it. "A few days ago."

"It's very flattering. Very chic."

"Do you think?" She felt her color rise. Foolish again, she decided, to be so flustered by a compliment from her own father. But they came so few and far between. "When Mother saw it, I don't think she was pleased. I imagined she'd have told you."

"She may have." He smiled a little as he continued to eat. "I don't always listen, particularly when she's in a mood. She has been."

"It's my fault, and one of the reasons I wanted to see you this morning. Mother dropped by my apartment on her way to a doctor's appointment. It was . . . an awkward moment. I was with someone." She drew a long breath. "I was with a man."

"I see." Stewart hesitated, frowned, stirred his coffee. "Do I see, Tia?"

"I'm involved with someone. He's staying with me at my apartment while he's in New York. I'm working on a project with him, and some other people just now. And

I'm . . . I'm having an affair with him." She finished on a rush and fell into miserable silence.

Stewart contemplated his coffee another moment. It was a toss-up which of them was more uncomfortable. "Tia, your personal . . . relationships aren't my business, or your mother's. Naturally, I assume anyone you're involved with is suitable and appropriate."

"I'm not sure you'd find him so either, but I do. Surprisingly," she rushed on, "he thinks I'm interesting and attractive, which makes me feel interesting and attractive. And I like it. In any case, Mother was—and I imagine is—very upset. I'm not sure I can smooth things over with her, but I'll certainly try. I'm going to apologize in advance if I'm unsuccessful. I can't and won't order my life to suit her needs. Or yours. So I'm sorry."

"Well." Stewart set down his fork, drew air through his nose. "Well," he repeated. "I never expected to hear that from you. You're saying that though your mother and I may disapprove, may even be angry, you'll do as you please."

She *knew* the pain in her stomach was tension, but couldn't help wondering if she had a tumor. "In a nutshell, I suppose that's it."

"Good. It's about goddamn time."

She forgot all about the possibility of stomach cancer. "Excuse me?"

"I love your mother, Tia. Don't ask me why, as I haven't a clue. She's a pain in the ass, but I love her."

"Yes, I know. I mean, I know you love her—not that she's . . . I always knew you loved each other," she finished.

"You say that as if you weren't part of the equation."

She started to make an excuse, then simply let the truth spill out. "I don't feel I am."

"Then we're all at fault. She's never been able to cut the cord with you. Perhaps I cut it too easily, or too quickly. And you tolerated both actions."

"I guess I did. But you've always been a good father to me."

"No, I haven't." He set his coffee down, studied her astonished face. "And I can't say I gave the matter much

thought or attention since you were, oh, twelve or so. But I have since the day you came to ask for Henry Wyley's journal, and I brought it down to you. And you were sitting, waiting for me, and you looked so unhappy."

"I was unhappy."

"And surprised now that I noticed." He lifted a hand, then picked up his cup again. "It surprised me as well, and made me wonder how often I hadn't noticed."

"I made you unhappy," Tia stated, "by not being what you wanted."

"Yes, and my way of dealing with that was to leave you to your mother, as it seemed you had a great deal more in common with her than with me. Strange, I've always considered myself a very fair man. But that was remarkably unfair to all involved. The best thing for you and your mother, in my opinion, is your cutting the cord yourself. You've let her push you around your entire life. Whenever I tried to interfere—and I can't claim I tried particularly hard—one or both of you circumvented that effort."

"You gave up on me."

"You seemed content enough the way things were. Children leave home, Tia. If one's committed to a marriage, then one lives with another person most of one's life. I've structured mine in a way that satisfies and pleases me. You come from two very self-absorbed people. And what are your phobias and nervous disorders but another sort of self-absorption?"

She stared at him, then let out a half laugh. "I suppose you're right. I don't want to stay that way. I'm almost thirty, how much can I change?"

"Whether or not you change, you're still almost thirty. What difference does your age make?"

Nearly speechless, she sat back. "You've never talked to me like this before."

"You never came to me before." He moved one shoulder, elegantly. "It's not my habit to go out of my way, or vary my routine. Speaking of which . . ." He checked his watch.

"I need a favor," Tia said quickly.

"This is quite the red-letter day in the Marsh household."

“It concerns the Three Fates.”

The vague impatience that had crossed Stewart’s face faded. “You’ve developed a significant interest in them recently.”

“Yes, I have. And I’d like that interest to stay between you and me. Anita Gaye also has a significant interest. She may ask you about them again, try to pick your brain for any detail you might have through Henry Wyley’s connection to them. If and when she does, I wonder if you could remember—vaguely, casually—some mention of the third Fate being seen or reputed to having been seen in Athens.”

“Athens?” Stewart sat back. “What game are you playing, Tia?”

“An important one.”

“Anita isn’t a woman who would scruple to break rules if doing so was profitable.”

“I’m more aware of that than I can tell you.”

“Tia, are you in trouble?”

For the first time since she’d entered the house, she smiled. “That’s something you’ve never asked me. Not once in my life. If I am in trouble, I’m determined to handle it, even enjoy it. Can you find a way to mention Athens to her?”

“Easily.”

“And not, under any circumstances, to mention Wyley’s journal or my relationship with the man Mother met at my apartment?”

“Why would I? Tia, do you have a line on one of the Fates?”

She wanted to tell him, wanted the thrill of seeing pride and surprise in his eyes. But she shook her head. “It’s very complicated, but I’ll tell you everything as soon as I can.” She got to her feet. “One last question. As a dealer, what would you pay for them?”

“It would depend. Speculatively, up to ten million. If I had an interested client, I’d advise him to go upwards of twenty. Perhaps a bit more. Contingent on testing and verification, of course.”

“Of course.” She walked over, kissed his cheek. “I’ll go upstairs and try to make things up with Mother.”

* * *

WHILE TIA WAS stroking Alma's ruffled feathers, Jack dropped in on the Detectives Bureau. He'd have preferred leaving Rebecca in his apartment, but since locking her in was the only way to be sure she stayed there, he'd brought her along. He didn't care to risk coming home to a trashed apartment, and had no doubt she'd make good on that threat.

Bringing her had the added benefit of watching her absorb and file every detail of the cop shop. He could almost hear the wheels turning in her head as they climbed the stairs to the detectives' bull pen. Just as he had the satisfaction of seeing cops give her the same once-over.

He saw Bob at his desk, phone cradled on his shoulder. And watched his friend's gaze shift over, scan Rebecca, then sweep up. There was a question in them when they met Jack's, and the warmth of humor and appreciation.

"Hang here just a minute," Jack told Rebecca, then strolled to Bob's desk. He sat on the corner, exchanged a few nods of greeting with other cops while Bob finished his call.

"Hubba hubba," Bob said. "Where'd you get the sexy little redhead?"

"How's your wife?"

"Smart enough to know when I stop looking at sexy little redheads, it's time to shovel the dirt over my cold, dead body. What do you want?"

"More information about the cold, dead body we discussed yesterday."

"I gave you what I had."

"I need a photo."

"Why don't you just ask for my badge?"

"Thanks, I can get my own. I might be able to shake something loose on it for you, but I need to ID him first."

"Let's try this. You tell me what you know, then maybe I can find a picture of the stiff."

"Want to meet the redhead?"

Bob laid his fingers on his own wrist, nodded. "Yeah, I've still got a pulse. What do you think?"

With a grin Jack motioned Rebecca over. "Detective Bob Robbins, Rebecca Sullivan, the woman I'm going to marry."

Bob's jaw dropped, then he was on his feet. "Well damn, Jack. Damn. Nice job. Hey, good to meet you."

Rebecca smiled as Bob pumped her hand. "Jack has delusions of grandeur. At the moment, we're in the way of being business associates."

"She's a tough sell, but I'm working on it. Irish, why don't you tell our speechless friend here what you found out about the warehouse in New Jersey?"

"Of course. Doing a bit of digging last night, it came to light that that particular property, which most recently was the scene of a murder, was sold the day before that unfortunate event by Morningside Antiquities."

"And that should interest me because?"

"Let me show the picture to a couple people," Jack continued. "If my hunch plays, I'll have an interesting answer to that question."

"You got a lead on an open homicide, Jack, you don't dick around with it."

"Follow up on Morningside."

"Anita Gaye," Rebecca said clearly, and had both men scowling at her. "Fortunately I don't have any testosterone muddling my ego. Anita Gaye of Morningside Antiquities. You might want to take a look at her, Detective Robbins. There's no point in going further until we've shown the picture and verified that the man who was killed is indeed the one we think he is."

She shot Bob a brilliant smile. "We're all after the same thing in the end, aren't we, Detective? But if you don't trust this one here"—she jerked a head toward Jack—"I'll figure you have good reasons not to. I'm still working on whether I trust him or not myself."

Bob sucked air between his teeth. "I'll get you a picture."

"Ever heard about keeping an ace in the hole?" Jack grumbled when Bob walked away.

"I have, yes. As I've heard about laying cards on the table when it's time to deal. And my way worked." She

scooped her hair back, studied his face. "You throw marriage around pretty freely, Jack."

"No, I don't. You're it. Get used to it."

"Why, that's so flaming romantic, I feel I might swoon."

"I'll give you some romance, Irish. Just pick the time and place."

Not quite as sure of herself as she wanted to be, she folded her arms over her chest. "Just be keeping your mind on the job."

"Consider it multitasking again," he said, then eased off the desk when Bob came back with a file.

TIA DID THE best she could with her mother. A thorough stroking would have taken two or three hours at least, and she just didn't have the time to spare. She had one more stop to make. If she didn't keep on schedule, Malachi and the others would worry and wonder.

There was an odd comfort in that, she realized. Having someone worry about you. She supposed, if she were honest, she'd let herself fall into that comfort zone with her mother. Always. Though the truth was Alma didn't worry about her daughter nearly as much as she worried about herself.

That was her nature, Tia told herself as she stepped out of the cab on Wall Street. All the therapy sessions with Dr. Lowenstein had never pushed her into understanding and accepting that one fact.

It had taken an Irishman, three silver statues and an odd mix of new friends to clear her vision and stiffen her spine.

Or maybe, in some strange way, it had taken Anita Gaye. When all was said and done and her life got back to whatever passed as normal, she'd have to thank Anita for thrusting her into a situation that forced her to test her own abilities.

Of course, if things worked out as she hoped, Tia doubted Anita would appreciate the gratitude.

She hummed as she rode up the elevator in the broker-

age firm. Tia Marsh, she thought, scheming, plotting, having regular sex. And all without chemical aids.

Well, hardly any.

She felt rather smug, almost confident. And secretly powerful.

It was even better when she stopped by Carrie's assistant's desk and realized the man didn't recognize her. "Tia Marsh," she said, flustered and delighted when she saw him blink in surprise. "Does Ms. Wilson have a minute to spare?"

"Dr. Marsh. Of course." He stared at her as he reached for his phone. "I'll just let her know you're here. You look wonderful today."

"Thank you."

She was going shopping, Tia decided, at the first opportunity, for an entire new wardrobe to go with the hair. And the attitude.

She was going to buy something really, really red.

"Tia." Carrie hurried out of her office. She looked sharp and smart, and very rushed. "We didn't have an appointment, did we?"

"No. I'm sorry. I just need a few minutes if you can manage it."

"A few is what I've got. Come on back. Tod, I'm going to need the analysis on the Brockaway accounts by noon."

"He didn't recognize me," Tia commented as Carrie led her into her snazzy corner office.

"What? Oh, Tod?" Carrie laughed, shot a look at the computer screen where she'd been working, then headed to her coffeepot. "Well, you do look different, honey. Fabulous, really." She poured a cup, didn't bother to ask Tia if she wanted any, as it was real coffee. Then took a good look at her friend as she sat. "Really fabulous. Not just the hair, either." She set the mug aside, got back to her feet, scrutinized Tia's face.

"You've had sex."

"Carrie! For heaven's sake." Tia closed the office door, quickly.

"You've had sex since I saw you." Carrie wagged a finger. "Spill it."

"I didn't come here to talk about that, and you've only got a few minutes."

To settle the matter, Carrie simply strode to her desk, snatched up her phone. "Tod, hold my calls, and tell Minlow I may be a few minutes late for our ten o'clock. There." She hung up the phone. "Talk. I want details. Names, dates, positions."

"It's complicated." Tia gnawed on her bottom lip. It was like being Clark Kent, she decided, and not being able to tell anyone you were really Superman. She couldn't stand it. "You can't tell anyone."

"What am I, the town crier? It's Carrie, Tia. I already know all your secrets. Or I did. Who is he?"

"Malachi. Malachi Sullivan."

"The Irish guy? He came back?"

"He's staying with me."

"He's *living* with you? I'm going to cancel my ten o'clock."

"No, no." Tia pushed her hands through her hair and laughed. "I don't have time. Really. As soon as I can, I'll tell you everything. But he . . . we're . . . it's amazing. I've never felt so . . . potent," she decided and, unable to keep still, wandered around the office as she spoke. "That's a good word. Potent. He can barely keep his hands off me. Isn't that something? And he actually listens to me, asks my opinion. He makes fun of me, but not in a mean sort of way. He makes me look at myself, Carrie, and when I do, I'm not so stupid, so clumsy, so inept."

"You've never been any of those things, and if he's letting you see that, I'm disposed to like him. When do I meet him?"

"It's complicated, as I said—"

"Oh Christ, he's married."

"No. No, nothing like that. It's a project we're working on."

"Tia, just let me get this out of the way. Is he asking you for money, for an investment of any kind?"

"No, Carrie. But thanks for worrying."

"You're in love with him."

"Probably." She took a deep breath as her stomach flut-

tered. "I'll think about that later. Right now I'm in the middle of something that's exciting, sensitive and very likely dangerous."

"Now you're scaring me, Tia."

"I mean to." She thought of Cleo's friend. "Because it's vital you don't tell anyone what I've said to you. You don't mention Malachi's name." She reached in her purse and took out a slip of paper. "If you call me about anything that has to do with this discussion, use this number. My phones are tapped."

"For God's sake, Tia, what's this guy dragged you into?"

"I dragged myself. That's the wonder of it. And I need you to do me a favor that might be somewhat unethical. It could be illegal, I'm not sure."

"I can't even think of a response to that."

"Anita Gaye." Tia leaned forward. "Morningside Antiquities. I need to know how much she's worth, personally and with the business. I need to know how much liquid cash she can get her hands on, quickly. And she can't know you're looking. That's essential. Is there a way to get the information without it coming back to you?"

As if to anchor herself, Carrie braced her hands on the arms of her chair. "You want me to look into someone's financials and pass that data on to you?"

"I do, but only if you can do it without anyone knowing you're involved."

"You're not going to tell me why?"

"I'm going to tell you there's a great deal at stake, and I'm going to use the information you give me to try to do something important. And right. I'm also going to tell you that Anita Gaye is dangerous, and likely responsible for at least one death."

"Holy God, Tia. I can't believe I'm having this conversation. Not with you. If you believe this about her, why aren't you talking to the police?"

"It's complicated."

"I want to meet this Sullivan character. Judge for myself."

“As soon as I can manage it. I promise. I know what I’m asking you, and if you can’t do it, I’ll understand.”

“I need to think about it.” Carrie let out a long breath. “I need to really think about it.”

“Okay. Use the number I gave you when you call.” Tia got to her feet. “She’s hurt people, Carrie. I’m going to see she pays for it.”

“Damn it, Tia, you be careful.”

“No,” she stated as she walked to the door. “Not anymore.”

“GIVE HER A few more minutes,” Gideon urged. “What good will it do for you to go running around the city looking for her?”

“She’s been gone over two hours.” For more than half that time, Malachi had been sick with worry. “I should never have let her go out alone. How did the woman get so hard-headed so fast? When I met her she was pliable as putty.”

“You want a doormat, go buy one.”

Malachi spun around, burned Cleo with one hot look. “Don’t piss me off.”

“Well, stop pacing around like an overprotective daddy whose little girl is past curfew. Tia’s not stupid. She’ll handle herself.”

“I never said she was stupid, but as for handling herself, she’s no experience doing that, has she? If she’d answer her bloody mobile, I wouldn’t have to pace.”

“We agreed not to use the mobile except for emergencies,” Gideon reminded him. “They’re like radios, aren’t they?”

“This is a fucking emergency. I’m going to find her.” He strode to the door, wrenched it open. Tia all but spilled into his arms.

“Where have you been? Are you all right?” He nearly lifted her and the bags she carried off the ground.

“Worrywart here was about to call out the Marines. Is that food?” Cleo demanded, and strolled over to snag one of the bags. “Hot damn! Lunch.”

"I stopped at the deli," Tia began.

"I'm not having it. I'm just not having it." Malachi pulled the other bag out of her hands and shoved it at Gideon. "How much money have you got?" he asked his brother.

"About twenty American."

"Let's have it." Malachi dug into his own pocket. "We're not living off you this way, like a bunch of leeches."

"Malachi, the money doesn't matter. It's just—" Tia stopped when he cut her off.

"So far it's mostly been yours, hasn't it? Well, that stops. We'll have to get in touch with Ma, have her wire some funds over."

"You will not."

When Tia set her jaw, planted her feet, Gideon wagged a thumb toward the kitchen. Both he and Cleo slid silently out of the range of fire.

"I'm not living off a woman under any circumstances, but I'm damned if I'll live off one I'm sleeping with."

"We agreed you'll pay me back. And if you're so sensitive about me fronting the money while we're sleeping together, then we can just stop sleeping together."

"You think so?" Riding on fury, he grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the bedroom.

"You stop it. Stop it right now." She tripped, came right out of her left shoe. "What's wrong with you? You're acting like a maniac."

"I feel like one." He slammed the bedroom door behind them, shoved her back against it. "I'm not giving you up, and that's that." He crushed his mouth down on hers, and she could all but taste frustration and wounded pride. "And I'm not having you pay for every crust of bread I swallow."

She managed to catch a breath. "I bought potato salad, smoked turkey and cannolis. I forgot to pick up a crust of bread."

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then just laid his brow on hers. "This isn't a joke to me."

"It should be. There's a lot more at stake than a grocery bill, Malachi. If you have your mother wire money, it might be traced. It's just foolish."

She ran her hands over his back, kneading the tense muscles through his shirt. "I have money. I've always had money. What I've never had is someone who cares enough about me to be embarrassed to take it."

"I couldn't stand it if you thought I take you for granted."

"I don't." Wanting him to see, to know, she framed his face with her hands, lifted it. "You make me feel special."

"You were gone so long, I was half mad with worry."

"I'm sorry. It's all so strange. All so strange and wonderful." She touched her lips to his, lightly, then again when she felt his heart leap against hers.

Power, she thought, was a lovely thing. She slid her arms around his neck, walked him backward toward the bed.

"I'm going to seduce you." She nipped lightly at his jaw. "It's my first attempt, so you'll have to forgive any missteps." She angled her head, rubbing her lips teasingly over his. "How'm I doing so far?"

"Spot on."

She nudged him down to sit on the bed, then straddled his lap. "About the money," she whispered as she unbuttoned his shirt.

"What money?"

She laughed, spread his shirt open, then ran her hands possessively over his chest. "I can always charge you interest."

"All right. Whatever."

"And penalties," she said, then scraped her teeth over his shoulder. She eased back, peeled off her jacket, but when he reached for the buttons of her blouse, she brushed his hands away.

"No, let me. You just watch."

"I want to touch you."

"I know." She loosened the blouse slowly. "I love knowing it."

She shrugged off the blouse, rose onto her knees to unhook her trousers. "Lie back," she urged, nibbling at his lips once more.

She let her mouth roam, imagining his body as a lovely, private feast. When her tongue slicked over his belly, she felt his muscles tremble.

He was already hard, already desperate. And he knew she wanted to lead the way. He struggled to lie passive as she undressed him, not to simply grab and take as she slowly stripped him.

When she used her mouth, he choked back a groan and fisted his hands in the bedspread.

His mind emptied, then filled with her.

Soft skin, hot mouth, eager hands, and that subtle, quiet scent he would always associate with her; the combination flooded him with need for her.

At the sounds of pleasure that purred out of her throat as she nibbled on him, heat washed into his blood, dewed his skin. She slid over him, around him.

He was drenched in her. Drowning.

She could feel his heart galloping. Almost taste the frenzied beat as she skimmed her lips over his chest. It was a marvel to see how his body quivered even as he clung to control, as he held himself back so she could do the taking.

It was a revelation to know she could take what she wanted, as she wanted. As long as she wanted.

She could hear his breath going ragged, feel the tension in his muscles as she touched and tasted, teased and tortured. All the while she felt so fluid, so agile. So . . . potent.

When he gasped out her name, she rose over him, then leaned down to pleasure them both with a deep and drug-ging kiss.

"No one ever wanted me like this, or made me want, like this."

A sound, almost a purr, rippled in her throat as she lowered, took him inside her. When his hands came to her hips, fingers digging in, she shuddered.

She rocked, moaning when the pressure built inside her, then rolled through her in a glorious rising swell that

gushed heat and light and need. She took him, took herself, slowly, savoring each ripple of pleasure.

When their eyes met, she smiled and, smiling, watched his go blind. On a long sigh of triumph, she let her head fall back, let her body rule, and slid silkily under.

PART THREE

Cutting

*We are spinning our own
fates, good or evil, and
never to be undone.
Every smallest stroke of
virtue or of vice leaves its
never so little scar.*

WILLIAM JAMES

Twenty-one

“THAT’s him.” Cleo stared at the photocopy image. “He was one of the guys in Prague. The shorter one,” she said, glancing up at Gideon for confirmation. “The second guy was taller, broader, and he came after us on foot while this guy went for their car. The bigger guy was the one who I spotted tailing me after I met with Anita.”

She took a deep breath to relieve the pressure in her chest as she studied the bland black-and-white photo. “This is the one who must’ve gone after Mikey. This is the one who killed him.”

Gideon laid a hand on her shoulder, left it there in a light, comforting weight. “We got a pretty good look at them in Prague.”

“We’ll have Bob run his known associates, see if we get a line on the second man.” Jack took the photo, pinned it to a board he’d set up.

They were in his building, on what he thought of as the business level. “His name’s Carl Dubrowsky. Most of his accomplishments run to assault and larceny. Hired muscle, low on brains. He was found in an empty warehouse in New Jersey, the unhappy recipient of four twenty-five-caliber bullets.”

“Do you think his partner killed him?” Tia asked.

“Not with a twenty-five. A guy carries a gun like that, he’s going to get laughed out of the KneeCappers Union.”

“Anita.” Malachi walked over to the board. Jack had a photo of Anita pinned there as well. “She wouldn’t have been pleased he stirred up the air by killing Cleo’s friend and getting nothing out of it. I didn’t realize until now that I believed her capable of murder—by her own hand. But, of course, she is, isn’t she?”

“I’d say.” The man was cool, Jack decided as he studied Malachi. And steady. Someone he could work with. “The warehouse had just been sold by Morningside. My friend on the force will be having a talk with Anita shortly. What do you think her reaction will be to that?”

“It’ll piss her off,” Malachi said, then dipped his hands in his pockets and rocked lightly on his heels. “Then it’ll please her. Add a bit of spice to the game. She’d never believe herself vulnerable.”

“It stops being a game when people die.” Rebecca waited until her brother looked at her. “Cleo’s lost a friend, and the man responsible for that is dead as well. Are any of us here willing to go that far, willing to kill over a few pounds of silver?”

“That’s not what it’s about, Becca.” Gideon left his hand on Cleo’s shoulder. “It’s long since gone beyond being about the value of the thing.”

“For you,” she agreed. “For Mal. For you, Cleo?” she asked.

“I want her to pay. I want her to lose. I want her to hurt.”

Rebecca crouched in front of Cleo’s chair, stared hard into her eyes. “How far will you go for it?”

“He was a sweet, harmless man. I loved him. How far will I go? All the way.”

Rebecca let out a breath and got to her feet, turned to Tia. “And you? You’ve been scooped up into this thing, had your life tumbled around. If we move forward from here, there’s no going back. But you could walk away now and pick up your life as it was before we charged into it.”

Could she? Tia wondered. Could she go back to tiptoe-

ing through her life, afraid someone might notice her? Could she bury herself again in the deeds of gods and never have the courage to do? To be?

Oh, she hoped not.

"I've never done anything special in my life. Nothing that really mattered. I've never stood up for myself, not really, not when it became uncomfortable or easier to fade back into a corner again. No one who knows me expects me to. Except the people in this room. She has our property," she said, nodding at Malachi. "Yours and mine, and she doesn't deserve it. The Three Fates belong together, and I . . ." She trailed off, flushing a bit when she realized everyone was looking at her.

"No." Malachi watched her. "Go on. Finish it out."

"All right." She steadied herself as she'd learned to do before a public lecture. "Everyone here has a connection to the Fates and, because of them, to each other. It's like a tapestry. The Fates spun, measured, cut the threads of Henry Wyley, Felix Greenfield, the Cunninghams, even the White-Smythes. The design, the pattern they made is already begun."

"You're saying it's all been ordained," Jack began, but she shook her head.

"It's not as simple as that. Fate isn't black or white, right or left. People aren't just plopped down and made to follow one route in life on the whims of the gods. If that were true, we'd have to say Hitler was only a victim of his own destiny, and therefore blameless. I'm getting off track."

"Uh-uh," Cleo disagreed. "You're going under it. It's cool."

"Well. I suppose what I'm trying to say is we have decisions to make, actions to take, good ones and bad ones that make up the texture of our lives. Everything we do or don't do matters," she said to Jack. "Everything counts at the end of the day. But the tapestry that started with the people who came before us isn't finished."

"Now we're the threads," Malachi said.

"Yes. We've begun to choose the pattern, at least individually, that we hope to make. We've still to agree on, to

decide the pattern we want to make together. I believe there's a reason we've come together like this, a reason we have a pattern to make. We have to see it through, try to find a way to complete it. I believe we're meant to try. However foolish that sounds."

"It doesn't sound foolish." Malachi stepped toward her, kissed her brow. "Here we have the heart of the thing," he said. "No one cups the heart of the thing in her hand quite like you do."

"You didn't ask me what I'd do," Jack commented, and Rebecca turned to him.

"I'll speak to this one, Tia. You've set your sights on the goal, and that's it for you. You're a single-minded man, Jack. That's how you've gotten where you are in the world."

"Good call. Now that we've got that settled, we can move on to how we intend to reach that goal."

"That wasn't meant to be an actual compliment."

"I got that, too," he said to Rebecca. "These are photographs of Morningside, and Anita's house. Burdett handled security upgrades on both locations."

"That's handy, isn't it?" Interested, Malachi moved over to study the photos. "That's quite the place she's got there."

"Marry a rich fool old enough to be your grandfather, wait it out till he keels over, and pull in the big pot." Jack shrugged. "Paul Morningside was a good man, but he was deaf, dumb and blind when it came to Anita. And to give her credit, she played the role perfectly. You don't want to underestimate her. She's a smart woman. Her weakness is greed. Whatever she has, it's never going to be enough—"

"That's not her biggest one." Tia nearly jumped when she realized she'd interrupted. "I'm sorry. I was thinking out loud."

Jack angled away from the board. "What's her biggest weakness?"

"Vanity. Well, ego, really, of which her vanity plays a large part. She sees herself as smarter, more clever, more ruthless. More everything than other people. She stole the first Fate from Malachi. She didn't have to. She could have bought it from him. She could have doctored an

analysis to convince him the piece was of little value, or some variation of that. She stole it because it was more fun, and it fed her ego. ‘Look, I can take this right out of your hand, and there’s nothing you can do about it.’ She gets what she wants, and she hurts and embarrasses someone. That adds a shine for her.”

“That’s an excellent psychological profile for a mythologist,” Jack commented.

“You spend your life getting walked on, you learn to recognize the tread. Greed is a flaw, but her ego is her true Achilles’ heel. Notch the arrow, aim for the ego, and she’ll stumble.”

“Isn’t she a marvel?” Grinning, Malachi grabbed Tia’s hand, kissed it lavishly.

“Snatching the Fate from under her nose ought to hit her ego dead center,” Jack agreed. “There are a number of steps we have to take before going there. First is to determine whether she’s keeping it here”—he tapped the photo of Morningside’s entrance—“or here.” And the front-on view of her town house.

“Since we can’t be sure, at least at the moment, we’ll have to work out how to get to it in either place.” Gideon moved over to give the board a closer look. “None of us has any experience breaking into a place.”

“You’re forgetting the time we broke into the basement of Hurlihy’s Pub and tapped into that keg of Harp,” Malachi reminded him.

“I’ve worked to forget it for more than ten years, as I came out of it with a head big as the moon.”

“And when Ma found out,” Rebecca put in, “she knocked your big, stupid heads together, dragged you by the ears to the priest for confession.”

“Then we spent the whole of that summer at Hurlihy’s beck and call,” Malachi finished. “We paid for that lager ten times over.” He sent Jack an easy smile. “Not a very good foundation for thievery, I’m afraid.”

“That’s all right, I’ll teach you.” At Rebecca’s steely stare, he sat, stretched out his long legs. “When you make your living putting up obstacles for thieves, you have to understand the criminal mind, and have a certain amount

of respect for it. We'll need to break into both places," he added with a nod to Gideon. "To set her up for the full fall, we'll need to do both."

"Dupe her," Malachi concurred. "Set her up, then put a nice pretty frame around her." With his fingers he traced a box around Anita's photo. "I like the sound of it."

"It sounds awfully complicated," Tia put in.

"Who wants a bland tapestry? We'll have to plan each level," Jack went on. "And connect them. To start, there are four safes in the town house. Double that at Morningside. It'll take some time and effort to circumvent the security, get in, open each safe—if necessary—get the Fate, get out and reestablish the security. I've got some ideas on how to use Morningside to narrow the field. But when we go for the gold, we'll need a little more time and space. If we can get her out of the way for a few days, we minimize the risk."

"I, um, think she might go to Athens." Tia cleared her throat and they all turned to her. "I asked my father if he might casually mention the Athens connection to her. He doesn't know what's going on, but I think he'll do it for me. He seemed sort of intrigued that I asked."

Jack sat back. "Good thinking. And when I give her my report, and tell her one Cleopatra Toliver booked a flight to Athens, that should nail it. We've got a lot to do before we hammer that home. We're going to want to be ready to move on the Fate as soon as she's at cruising level."

"She didn't go to Prague after Cleo," Rebecca reminded him. "Why would she go to Athens? She could send one of her pie-faced goons."

"They failed." Malachi sat on the arm of Tia's chair. "And if she's the one who killed the guy in the warehouse, she's upped the stakes considerably. She won't send an underling this time. At least not if she's convinced she may be able to scoop up both remaining Fates in one go."

"All right, that's logical." Rebecca pursed her lips, studying the board. "We want to have her keep the Fate in her home, I'd think. Far too many places to hide something in a place like Morningside, and I'd have to assume the security would be tighter there?"

“It is.” It pleased Jack that their thoughts aligned.

“We’d want her to have a concern, then, that Morningside isn’t safe enough.” Gideon angled his head. “Do we lift something from there?”

“Think of it as a dress rehearsal,” Jack told him.

THERE WAS CONSIDERABLE discussion, some argument. There were diagrams and schematics and more printouts to be pinned to the board. Tia absorbed it all. They were planning to break into one of New York’s cultural landmarks, and they were planning to do so for the sole purpose of misdirection.

It was fascinating.

“If we get into the bloody place, why don’t we just look for the bloody statue?” Frustration honed Rebecca’s voice to an edge.

“We won’t get that far. Not without a lot more time and preparation. We can take the time and the prep,” he added. “But if we do a simple B and E, snag the statue, we won’t be hanging anything on her.”

“Rephrase.” Cleo spoke coolly. “Hanging her.”

“If we work it right,” Jack agreed, “the house is doable on short notice. Morningside isn’t. Not with amateurs.”

“Oh, now we’re amateurs.”

“Well, Bec.” Gideon put his hands on her shoulders, gave her a little shake. “We are that.”

“Why don’t you speak for yourself—”

“I could use some tea.” Tia spoke up, got to her feet. “Is it all right if I use the kitchen?”

“Help yourself,” Jack told her. “Wouldn’t mind some coffee while you’re at it.”

“There are better facilities upstairs,” Rebecca suggested after catching Tia’s annoyed expression. “Why don’t we go up and put something together?”

“Cleo?”

Even as Cleo started to protest, she caught Tia jerking her head toward the door. “All right, but we take shifts on the domestic duties.”

When they were safely in the elevator heading up, Re-

becca turned to Tia. "You wanted to get away from that lot?"

"For a few minutes. It occurs to me that this is new territory for all of us. We hardly know each other."

"I just don't like their superior attitude."

"You mean Jack's superior attitude," Cleo said as Rebecca jabbed in the code and strode out of the elevator into the apartment.

"In particular. He didn't even tell me he had that place down there."

"Before we talk about them, let's talk about us." Cleo dropped into a chair, swung her legs over the arm and settled in. "Any wine around here?" she added.

"There is," Rebecca answered. "But put a hold on that tea and coffee. Let's have a drink and see what the three of us think of each other before we go on with this business."

"WE REALLY SHOULD go back down." Tia bit her lip as Rebecca topped off all three glasses. Again.

"They don't need us at the moment." Rebecca bit into a pretzel, studied it consideringly. "Let them huddle over their blueprints and diagrams for a bit. I can take a look at them later. Those deal with technicalities and are easily refined."

"That's if you know one end of a blueprint from another." Tia sipped. "I don't."

"You won't have to. It'll be put into words for you, and those you understand very well. Malachi thinks you're brilliant."

"Oh well, he's . . ."

"Toast," Cleo said and scooped up dip with a ridged potato chip. "Guy's nuts about you, but he's not a moron. You are brilliant. I never got along with brains before. Your kind of brains," she explained. "The academic sort. I spent most of my school time figuring out what kind of trouble I could get into next, and disliking girls just like the two of you." She grinned as she popped another chip in her mouth. "Funny how things work out."

"Gideon wouldn't be wasting time with you if you

didn't have a brain. He'd have gone for the package," Rebecca added. "But once he'd unwrapped it, he'd have lost interest quickly enough if all you had to offer were nice breasts and long legs."

"Gee thanks, Sis."

"Well, after all, he saw you unwrapped—so to speak—straight off, didn't he? And while we're on that subject, what's it like?"

Cleo only picked up her wineglass, sipped.

"Oh, be a sport," Rebecca complained. "It's a natural curiosity, isn't it? Tia, aren't you wondering what it's like to strip down bare-assed in front of a roomful of men?"

"I never thought about . . ." She trailed off, pinned by a smirking look from Rebecca. "Maybe," she admitted. "But I don't mean to offend you, Cleo."

"You don't. She's a lot nicer than you are," Cleo said to Rebecca.

"She is that. But I wasn't after offending you either. Don't you think that at some point in her life, a woman fantasizes about being built and beautiful and tormenting a lot of men by sliding out of her clothes in public? Knowing they want her but can't have her. It's powerful."

"It can be. It can be powerful, or demeaning and exploitive. It can be fun, or it can be humiliating. Depends on how you look at it."

"How did you look at it?" Tia asked.

"As a paycheck. Bottom line." Cleo shrugged and dug into the chips again. "Modesty's not a big issue for me. Most of the men, they don't see you anyway. They just see tits and ass. For me, it paid the rent and gave me a chance to choreograph and dance. I had some pretty sharp numbers."

"I'd love to see sometime. Not the stripping part," Tia said, going beet red when Cleo laughed. "The dancing."

"See, she's really nice. You know what I think? That stuff you said before, about all of us being meant to come together. That rings for me. The three of us would never be sitting here like this otherwise. That's cool. Now I've got a question for you," she said to Rebecca. "You banging Jack yet, or what?"

"Cleo."

“Oh, like you don’t wonder,” she tossed back, dismissing Tia’s appalled whisper.

“Not yet.” Rebecca lifted her glass. “But I’m thinking about it. And now that we’ve brought up sex, I’d like to continue that area as pertains to Anita Gaye. The boys downstairs, they can play with the toys, study the maps and make manly noises over the technology of the thing. But they don’t understand what she is, inside. It takes a woman for that. It takes a woman to really see that sort of female ruthlessness. No matter what they say, a man’s always going to imagine a woman’s just a bit weaker, softer, easier than he is. We’re not. She’s not.”

“She’s cold,” Tia said quietly. “All the way through, I think. It makes her more dangerous because she doesn’t care—not on any level—about anyone but herself. She wouldn’t hesitate to hurt someone to get what she wants. She probably thinks she deserves it. I’m getting analytical again,” she apologized. “All those years in therapy, and suddenly I’m a psychologist.”

“I think you make sterling sense,” Rebecca agreed. “And I haven’t met the woman as yet. I’m getting a clearer picture of her from you than I did from Malachi. His description was colored with his own embarrassment, I think, and his anger. Once she knows we’ve outwitted her—as, by God, we will—what do you think she’ll do?”

“She’ll try to take it out on at least one of us. Your family,” Tia said. “Because it started with Malachi.”

“Cleo? You agree with that?”

“Yeah.” She blew out a breath. “Yeah, I do.”

“As do I. So, we have to make certain she can’t reach us. Whatever happens, we have to expose her for what she is. And take away her power.”

“I’ve sort of started working on that.” Tia rose, walked into the kitchen to finally start the coffee. “Money gives her power, and if you look at her marriage, you have to conclude money is vital to her. I thought it might be helpful to find out how much she has. Then we’d have an idea how much we need to . . . what’s the word?” She stopped with the coffee scoop in one hand. “Hose her for. Is that right?” she asked Cleo.

“Isn’t she great? Amateur, my ass. Tia honey, I think you could make a living out of this.”

Downstairs Gideon jiggled the loose change in his pocket. “They’re taking a lot of time putting together coffee and tea.”

Jack glanced at his computer clock, shrugged. “They went up there to huddle. But . . .” He turned to his monitors, danced his fingers over a keyboard and engaged the apartment cameras.

When the women appeared on-screen, Malachi let out a low whistle. “You’ve spy cameras in your own flat? Does the word *paranoia* have any personal meaning for you?”

“I prefer to think of it as thorough.”

“They’ve crisps up there,” Gideon pointed out. “Should’ve known Cleo would nose out crisps. Almost looks like a party. Christ, they make a pretty picture, don’t they?”

“Classy blonde, gorgeous redhead, sexy brunette.” Jack scanned the screen. “Covers all the bases. Take a good look because we’re going to have to decide how far into this we’re going to take them.”

“I don’t see as we have much choice,” Gideon commented.

“There’s always a choice.”

“You’re meaning we can hold things back from them.” Malachi had leaned closer to the screen and now straightened. “Keep certain parts of the plan from them, tucking them up, as it were, to protect them from Anita.”

“She’s responsible for two deaths so far. She’s got no reason to quibble about a third.”

“It won’t do, Jack.” Malachi watched Tia pour milk into a small pitcher. “They’d figure it out in any case. Rebecca would, I can guarantee that.”

“Too right,” Gideon agreed.

“Moreover, I started this thing lying to Tia. I don’t want to lie to her again. They deserve the full truth of the matter. We’ll just have to find a way to protect them despite it.”

“I could keep them in that apartment for a week. Locked in, cut off. A week’s about all we need if we move

fast and move right. They'd be pissed off when they got out, but they'd be safe."

"Are you serious about my sister?"

Jack shifted his gaze from the screen, from Rebecca, and looked at Malachi. "Down to the ground serious."

"Then take my advice and put thoughts like that out of your head. She'd peel the skin off your face for it, and when she was done . . . Gideon?"

"She'd walk away, erase you from her life the way you do letters on a chalkboard. And as for me, I won't cut Cleo out. She lost a friend and deserves taking part in avenging him."

"If we make a mistake, even one mistake, someone could get hurt." Jack tapped a finger on the screen. "It might be one of them."

"Then we won't make a mistake," Malachi said. "They're coming back down. I'd turn off those monitors if I were you, unless you want your coffee poured down your crotch."

"Good point." He blanked the screen, then swiveled in his chair. "So, it's the Musketeers' thing?"

"All for one," Malachi began.

"And one for all," Gideon finished.

Jack nodded, then disengaged the locks so the women could get in. As he did, the phone rang. He glanced at the light blinking on his multiline unit. "Upstairs, office line."

Behind him, Tia nearly bobbed the coffee when she walked in to the sound of Anita's voice.

"Jack, Anita Gaye. I expected to hear from you by now." The answering machine picked up the irritation in her voice. "It's urgent. This Toliver woman is harassing me, and I want it to stop. I'm counting on you, Jack." There was a pause, then the tone of her voice changed, became soft, shaky. "You're the only one I can count on. I feel very alone, very . . . vulnerable. Please, call me as soon as you can. I'd feel so much better if I knew you were looking out for me."

"And the Oscar goes to . . ." Cleo dropped into a chair. "What a load of bullshit. Oh, Jack." She hitched up her voice, fluttered her lashes. "I feel very alone, very vulnera-

ble.” She stretched out, gave Jack a considering look. “Did you ever do her?”

“Cleo! You can’t—”

“No.” Rebecca waved off Tia’s flustered protest. “I’d be interested in the answer to that.”

Both Malachi and Gideon became extremely busy with the coffeepot. So much, Jack thought sourly, for all for one.

“Thought about it. For about five seconds. Kept getting this image of one of the vegetable slicers. You know.” He made quick, chopping motions with his hand. “And her running my dick through it. Not real appealing,” he added as both other men winced.

“Why do you work for her?”

“First, I don’t work for her. Her husband hired my company as security consultants. I liked him. Second, a job’s a job. Do you only take people on your tour boat who you approve of?”

“Fair enough,” Rebecca decided, and offered him the bowl of chips as a peace offering.

“Are you going to call her back?” Tia asked him.

“Eventually. We’ll let her stew and steam awhile. I figure my pal Bob will pay her a visit tomorrow. That’ll give her more to stew and steam about. She won’t like being questioned by the police. Then tomorrow night we’ll give her the first real kick in the teeth with the break-in at Morningside.”

“Tomorrow?” Tia sat down heavily. “So soon? How can we be ready?”

“We’ll be ready,” Jack assured her. “Since we’re going to fail—or at least, it’ll look like we did on first glance. You’re going to take the first step tomorrow morning.”

“I am?”

Tia listened, stupefied, as her assignment was explained to her.

“Why Tia?” Rebecca demanded. “Of the six of us, I’m the only one Anita or one of her monkeys hasn’t seen.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Jack corrected. “It’s very likely she’s seen photos of you. Besides, we need you here. Next to me, you’re the best tech.”

“Tia knows how to think on her feet,” Malachi added, and had the woman in question gaping at him.

“I do?”

“And best,” he said, taking her hand, “she doesn’t even know she’s doing it. She’s a way of making herself invisible and seeing what’s around her. Remembering what’s around her. And if she’s seen and recognized, no one will think too much of it.”

He squeezed her hand. “I’m the one who suggested you for this part,” Malachi told her. “I know you can do it. But you have to agree. If you don’t want to take it on, we’ll find another way.”

“You think I can do this?”

“Darling, I know you can. But you have to know it as well.”

It was the strangest thing, Tia realized. For the first time in her life she was the object of someone’s complete confidence. It wasn’t scary at all. It was lovely.

“Yes. Yes, I can do it.”

“Okay.” Jack rose. “Let’s go over the steps.”

IT WAS AFTER midnight when Jack and Rebecca stepped into his apartment again. He knew she wasn’t completely satisfied by the developing plan. He’d have been disappointed in her if she had been.

“Why do you and Cleo get to be cat burglars?”

He knew that was one of the sticking points for her and was pleased to detect the faintest hint of what he liked to think was jealousy in her voice. Or maybe it was wishful thinking on his part.

“First, to make it look like a genuine attempt at a break-in, I need more than two hands. Want a drink?”

“No, I don’t. Why Cleo’s hands and not Mal’s or Gideon’s?”

“They’ll be patrolling the area, watching out for cops or bystanders and so on. Sure you don’t want a brandy?” he asked as he poured himself a snifter.

“Yes. That doesn’t explain—”

“Not finished yet.” He swirled, sipped, watched with deep affection as her eyes heated at his interruption. “Despite great strides in equality, a woman wandering the

streets of New York in the middle of the night is more likely to get hassled than a guy. So, your brothers take the street watch, you run tech in the van with Tia, and Cleo and I do the job.”

It was too sensible to argue with, so she picked another angle. “Tia’s nervous about the morning.”

“Tia’s nervous about her shoe size. It’s part of her makeup. She’ll be fine. When push comes to shove, she comes through. Besides, she’ll make it work because Mal believes she’ll make it work, and she’s in love with him.”

“Do you think she is?” Something softened inside her. “In love with him.”

“Yeah. It’s going around.”

She kept her eyes on his as she stepped forward, took the snifter from him for one short sip. “Well then, we’ve a busy day ahead of us. I’m going to bed.”

“Good idea.” He set the brandy down, took her arms and backed her slowly against the wall.

“Alone.”

“Okay.” He kept his eyes open and on hers as he lowered his mouth to hers, as he took the kiss from a teasing brush of lips into quiet urgency.

When her eyes began to blur, when her hands gripped his hips, he shot them both into turbulent heat. He felt the tremor run through her, through himself, heard the strangled moan that caught in her throat.

And still, he knew, she held back.

“Why?” He jerked her back. “Tell me why.”

The ache for him was almost a pain. “Because it matters. Because it matters, Jack.” She laid her cheek on his. “And that scares me.” She turned her head, just enough to trace her lips over his cheek, then, easing away, walked down the hall and into her room.

Twenty-two

IT was a perfectly beautiful September morning with the first hint of fall brisk in the air.

At least Al Roker had said so during one of his cheerful reports outside 50 Rock. But when you were caught in the vicious war of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, had already stepped on gum and were on your way behind enemy lines, sparkling air wasn't a major concern.

She felt guilty. Worse, Tia was certain she *looked* guilty. At any moment she expected the people who crowded the sidewalk and street to stop and point their fingers at her.

She stopped at the corner, stared hard at the DON'T WALK signal just to keep herself focused. She had a desperate urge for her inhaler, but was afraid to dig in her purse for it. There was so much else in there.

So much illegal else.

Instead, she counted her own breaths—in out, in out—as she joined the flood that poured across the intersection an instant before the signal changed.

“Half a block more,” she said to herself, then flushed when she remembered she was wired. Tia Marsh, she thought incredulously, was wearing a wire. And everything she said, or that was said to her, was being picked up

on the equipment in the van that was even now parked in a lot two blocks south of Morningside.

She resisted clearing her throat. Malachi would hear her and know she was nervous. If he knew, then she'd be *more* nervous.

It was like a dream. No, no, it was like sliding into a television show. Her scene was coming up, and for once in her life, she was going to hit her cue and remember her lines.

"Okay." She said it quietly and purposefully this time. "Here we go."

She opened the door of Morningside's main showroom and stepped inside.

It was more formal than Wyley's, and lacked, if she did say so herself, Wyley's quiet charm.

She was aware that security cameras were recording her now. She knew precisely where they were located, since Jack had gone over the diagram with her, again and again.

She walked over to stare blindly at a display of Minton China until she calmed herself.

"May I help you, madam?"

Tia considered it the height of willpower that she didn't simply leap out of her shoes and cling by her fingernails to the ornately plastered ceiling at the inquiring voice.

Reminding herself there wasn't a flashing GUILTY sign on her forehead, she turned to the clerk. "No, thank you. I'd like to look around a bit."

"Of course. I'm Janine. Please let me know if you need any help or have any questions."

"Thank you."

Janine, Tia noted as the clerk slipped discreetly away, was dressed sharply in a black suit that made her look skinny as a snake and nearly as exotic. And quick as that snake, she'd summed up and dismissed Tia as beneath notice.

It stung a bit, even though Tia reminded herself that was the point. She'd worn a dull brown suit and a cream-colored blouse—both of which she intended to throw out as soon as she got home—because they helped her fade into the woodwork.

She wandered to a rosewood secretary and saw out of

the corner of her eye that the other clerk, male this time, was as disinterested in her as Janine.

There were other clerks, of course. She had the layout of Morningside flipping through her mind as she wandered. Each showroom on each floor would be manned by at least two eagle-eyed clerks. And each floor would have a security guard.

They would all be trained, just as they were at Wyley's, to separate the customers from the browsers, and to recognize the signs of a possible shoplifter.

She remembered enough of her own training to have geared her wardrobe and her mannerisms for the job at hand.

The expensive and unflattering suit. The good, practical shoes. The simple brown purse, too small for serious pilfering. They gave her the look of a woman with money but no particular style.

She didn't linger long at any display, but moved from spot to spot with the vague and abstracted air of a browser killing time.

Neither the clerks nor the guards were likely to pay more than minimal attention to her.

Two women came in—a mother and daughter by the look of them, Tia decided. Janine pounced. Tia gave her points for speed and smoothness, as she'd scooped up the two potentials before the male clerk had gotten off the mark.

While attention was focused across the room, Tia slipped the first listening device out of her purse and stuck it under the front lip of a secretary.

She waited for alarms to sound, for men with guns to burst through the door. When the blood stopped pounding in her ears, she heard the women discussing dining room tables with Janine.

She continued around the room, giving a pate-de-verre paperweight in the shape of a frog a long study. And attaching another bug to the underside of the George III refectory table on which it sat.

By the time she'd worked the first floor she felt so competent she began to hum. She plugged another bug under

the railing as she walked up to the second level. She brought Jack's diagram back into her mind, located the cameras and did her job.

Each time a clerk approached, she smiled wispily and declined their help. When she reached the third floor, she saw Janine showing her customers a Duncan Phyfe dining room table, seating for twenty.

None of them so much as glanced at her.

She had one bug left, contemplated where it would do the most good. The Louis XIV sideboard, she decided. Angling her body away from the camera, she opened her purse.

"Tia? It's Tia Marsh, isn't it?"

The word *EEK* sounded clearly in her head, nearly fell off her tongue as she spun around and stared at Anita.

"I, um, oh. Hello."

"Casing the joint?"

The blood that was pounding between Tia's ears drained into her toes. "Excuse me?"

"Well, you are the daughter of a competitor." Anita chuckled, but her eyes were sharp as sabers as she slid an arm around Tia's waist. "I don't believe I've ever seen you in Morningside before."

In the van, Malachi had to be forcibly restrained from charging out the door. "Hold on," Jack snapped. "She's fine. She'll handle it. She knows this was a possibility."

"I haven't been," Tia managed and felt a smile try to wobble onto her face. Use it, she ordered herself. Use your fumbling ineptitude. "It seems so odd, you know, never having been inside. I had an appointment a few blocks away, so—"

"Oh, where?"

"With my holistic therapist." The lie brought a blush to her cheeks and gave the claim perfect credence. "I know a lot of people think alternative medicine is hoodoo, but honestly, I've had such good results. Would you like her name? I think I have a card."

She started to open her purse again, but Anita cut her off. "That's all right. I'll just call you if I have a need for . . . hoodoo."

"Actually, well, that was just an excuse. I came in be-

cause I thought I might run into you. I had such a nice time at our lunch the other day, and I . . . I hoped we might be able to do it again.”

“How sweet. I’ll check my calendar and give you a call.”

“I’d really like that. I’m free most any time. I usually try to schedule my medical appointments in the morning so I can . . .” She trailed off, cleared her throat, took a couple of labored breaths. “Oh dear. Do you have a cat?”

“A cat? No.”

“Reaction. Something.” She began to wheeze until customers and clerks looked nervously in her direction. “Allergies. Asthma.”

The wheezing and gulping air made her light-headed so that her stumble was genuine, and effective. She dragged the inhaler out of her purse, used it noisily.

“Come on. Come with me. For heaven’s sake.” Anita dragged her into the elevator, jabbed the button for the fourth floor. “You’ll upset the customers.”

“Sorry. Sorry.” She continued to suck on the inhaler while the thrill of success jolted through her system. “If I could sit down. Minute. Glass of water.”

“Yes, yes.” She dragged Tia through the office suites. “Bring Dr. Marsh a glass of water,” she called out, then all but tossed Tia into a chair. “Put your head between your knees or something.”

Tia obeyed, and grinned. In Anita’s manner was all the impatience and irritation the sturdily healthy feel for the sickly. “Water.” She croaked it, then watched Anita’s gorgeous shoes march across the gorgeous carpet.

“Bring me a damn glass of water. Now!”

By the time she spun back into the room, Tia had the last bug firmly attached to the bottom of her chair.

“I’m sorry. So sorry.” Easing up, Tia let her head fall back weakly. “Such a bother. Such a nuisance. Are you sure you don’t have a cat?”

“I ought to know if I have a goddamn cat.” She grabbed the water from her assistant’s hand and thrust it on Tia.

“Of course you would. It’s just usually cats that cause that quick and violent a reaction.” She sipped the water slowly. “Then again, it could be pollen. From the flower

arrangements, which are lovely by the way. My holistic therapist is putting me on a program that combines herbs, meditation, subliminal reinforcement and weekly purges. I'm very hopeful."

"Great." Anita looked meaningfully at her watch. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, very. Oh, you're busy, and I've taken up so much of your time. My father hates his workday interrupted, and I'm sure you're the same. I hope you'll call about lunch soon. I . . . my treat," she added and knew she sounded pathetic. "To thank you for your help today."

"I'll be in touch. Let me walk you to the elevator."

"I hope I didn't disrupt your day," Tia began, then stopped as Anita's assistant got to her feet.

"Ms. Gaye, this is Detective Robbins, NYPD. He'd like to speak with you."

Tia controlled a hysterical urge to laugh. "Oh. My. Well. I should get out of your way. Thank you so much. Thank you for the water," she said to the assistant and hurried to the elevator. She bit the inside of her cheek until it hurt, kept right on biting until she'd gotten to the main show-room and out the door.

New Yorkers were too used to lunatics to pay any attention to a drably dressed blonde giggling hysterically as she ran down the sidewalk.

"YOU WERE BRILLIANT." Malachi all but hoisted her into the back of the van, then caught her in a rib-crushing hug. "Bloody brilliant."

"I was." She couldn't stop the giggles. "I really was. Even though I nearly wet my pants when Anita spoke to me. Then I thought, if I can just get into her office for a minute, I can put the last little mike there. But I kept wanting to laugh. Nervous reaction, I suppose. I just . . . somebody shut me up."

"Happy to." Malachi closed her mouth with his.

"If you kids would settle down, you might want to hear this."

Jack switched the audio on, took off his headphones.

“. . . understand what a police detective might want with me. Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thanks, Ms. Gaye, and we appreciate your time. It concerns a property you owned, a warehouse just off Route Nineteen, south of Linden, New Jersey.”

“Detective, my husband owned a number of properties, which I inherited . . . Oh, you said ‘owned.’ I recently sold a New Jersey property. My lawyers and accountants handle most of those details. Is there some problem with the sale? I haven’t heard anything to indicate it, and I know the deal was finalized earlier this month.”

“No, ma’am. No problem that I’m aware of.” There was a slight rustling sound, a pause. “Do you know this man?”

“He doesn’t look familiar to me. I do meet a lot of people, but . . . no, I don’t recognize him. Should I?”

“Ms. Gaye, this man was found inside the warehouse in question. He was murdered.”

“Oh my God.” There was a creak as Anita sat. “When?”

“Time of death is often hard to determine. We believe he died very close to the date you sold the warehouse.”

“I don’t know what to say. That property hasn’t been in use for . . . I’m not completely sure. Six months, perhaps eight. This should have been brought to my attention. I’ll have to contact the buyers. This is dreadful.”

“Ms. Gaye, did you have access to the building?”

“I did, of course. My representative was given all the keys and security codes, which would have been turned over to the purchasers. You’ll want to contact my real estate representative, of course. Let me have my assistant get you his information.”

“I’d appreciate it. Ms. Gaye, do you own a gun?”

“Yes. Three. My husband . . . Detective.” Another pause, longer. “Am I a suspect?”

“These are just routine questions, Ms. Gaye. I assume your three guns are registered.”

“Yes, of course they are. I have two at home, one in my office, one in my bedroom. And I keep one here.”

“It would help if you’d turn the guns over to us, for elimination. We’ll issue a receipt.”

“I’ll arrange for it.” Her voice was stiff now, and frigid.

“Could you tell us where you were on September eighth and September ninth?”

“Detective, it’s beginning to sound as if I should contact my lawyer.”

“That’s your right, Ms. Gaye. If you want to exercise that right, I’ll be happy to interview you, with your attorney, down at the station. The fact is, I’d just like to cross my t’s here and let you get back to work.”

“I’m hardly going to be dragged into the police station to be questioned about the murder of a man I don’t even know.” There was the slapping sound of paper against paper as she flipped through her desk calendar.

She rattled off times, appointments, business and personal time. “You can verify most of this with my assistant or, if need be, my domestic staff.”

“I appreciate that, ma’am, and I’m sorry to bother you. I know it’s upsetting.”

“I’m not used to being questioned by the police.”

“No, ma’am. Case like this, you’ve got to look at all the angles. It’s a puzzler why this guy would go all the way out to New Jersey to get shot. And in that building. Well. Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Gaye. Some place you got here. First time I’ve been inside. Some place,” he reiterated.

“My assistant will show you out, Detective.”

“Right. Thanks.”

There were footsteps, the sound of a door closing. Then, for several long seconds, nothing but silence.

“Asshole.” It was a vicious whisper and made Jack grin. “Stupid bastard. Idiot. The nerve, the fucking nerve of him coming here to question me like a common criminal. Do I have a gun? Do I have a gun?”

Something fragile broke with a sad tinkling of glass.

“Didn’t I leave the goddamn murder weapon behind where a ten-year-old could find it? But he comes here interrupting my day, insulting me.”

“Bingo,” Jack shouted, then sat back.

“She did it.” Tia shuddered as she lowered herself into one of two chairs bolted into the van’s floor. On audio, she could hear Anita snap at her assistant to call her lawyer. “I

know we believed she did, even knew it on some level. But to hear her say it, just like that, annoyed because she's being inconvenienced. It's horrible."

They listened as Anita swore at her assistant when she reported the lawyer was in a meeting.

"Our Anita's having a bad day." Jack turned in his chair. "And we're going to make it worse. You still in?" he asked Tia.

"Yes." She was pale, but the hand she lifted to Malachi's was steady. "More than ever."

GIDEON WATCHED AS Cleo bundled her hair under a black watch cap, as she stepped back, turned in the mirror to study herself.

"What do you think?" She did a quick pirouette. "It's the latest in nighttime B and E fashion."

"You've plenty of time yet."

"Yeah, but I wanted to check out the look." Dressed in black jeans, black sweater, black sneakers, she gave her reflection one more hard stare. "It works on me. The Gap. Who'd have thought it?"

"You're not nervous."

"Not particularly. How hard can it be *not* to break into a place?" She did a couple of deep pliés to check the give of the jeans. "Too bad there wasn't time to hunt up a cat suit." When he didn't respond, she straightened. "What's up, Slick?"

"Come here a minute."

Willing to oblige, she crossed to him and was surprised when he drew her into his arms, hard.

"Wow. What's this about?"

"There's always a chance something will go wrong."

"There's always a chance a satellite will fall out of the sky and land on my head. Doesn't keep me hiding in the basement."

"When I dragged you into this, I didn't know you."

"Nobody drags me anywhere. Got it?"

"I didn't care about you then. I care about you now."

“That’s nice. Don’t start making me all squishy.”

“Cleo, you don’t have to do this. Wait,” he said when she started to pull away. “Let me finish. Tonight’s not such a big step until you look at the whole. If things work, we’ll be taking it up a level. A very big level. The next time you put on that cap, it’ll be to break into Anita’s house, to take something from her she’ll kill to keep.”

“Something that doesn’t belong to her.”

“That’s not the point. You heard her on that tape. She killed a man, and she won’t hesitate to kill another. She knows who you are.”

“She knows who I am anyway.”

“Listen to me.” His fingers tightened on her arms. “Jack could get you out of this. He’d know the way—people, papers. You could disappear, with the money he’d give you for the statue. She’d never find you.”

“Is that what you think of me? The rat who deserts the ship even before it starts to sink?” She pushed away. “Thanks a lot.”

“I don’t want her to touch you. I won’t have her touching you.”

The restrained violence in his tone, the bubbling frustration under it, defused her own temper.

“Why?”

“I care about you, damn it. Didn’t I say so?”

“Give me another four-letter word.”

He opened his mouth. His tongue felt thick. “Hell.”

She made a buzzing sound, snapped her fingers. “Wrong answer. Care to try again? You can still win the trip for two to San Juan and the complete set of Samsonite luggage.”

“This isn’t easy for me. I don’t like being in this position.” He jammed his hands in his pockets, paced restlessly in the confined space of Tia’s little office. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it. A man doesn’t have time to think under these conditions.”

“Yeah, yeah, blah, blah.” She pulled off the cap, shook out her hair. “I think I’ll grab a snack before we head out.”

He stopped her by snagging her hair, wrapping it

around his hand and using it as a rope to yank her back. “Goddamn it, Cleo, I love you, and you’re going to have to deal with that.”

“Okay.” And that slow, liquid warmth inside her became a fast flood as she put her arms around him. “Okay,” she repeated, nesting into him. “Okay.”

Here, she thought. At last.

“Okay? If that’s the best you can do—”

“Shh.” She wrapped her arms tighter. “Quiet. This is like a Hallmark moment here.”

He let out a sigh. “I don’t know what you’re talking about half the time.”

“I’ll make it easy for you. I love you back.” She eased away so their eyes could meet. “You get that?”

“Yeah.” His grip on her hair gentled until his fingers were stroking through it. “That I got.” He brought his lips to hers, slid them both into a long, sumptuous kiss. “We’ll need to talk about this, eventually.”

“You bet,” she said and locked her mouth to his again.

“I want to tell the others we need to find another way.”

“No.” Now she pulled free. “No, Gideon. I do my part, just like Tia did hers this morning. Just like we’re all doing. I owe Mikey that. And it’s more,” she continued before he could speak. “I’m going to be straight with you. I’m a bust.”

“What the devil does that mean?”

“As a dancer. I’m a bust.”

“That’s not true. I’ve seen you.”

“You saw me strip,” she corrected. “A three-minute number where I shake it, peel it and sell it to the crowd. Big fucking deal.” She dragged her hair back, huffed out a breath. “I’m a good dancer, but so is every second kid who ever took dance class. I’m not great and never will be. I liked being part of the company when I could get the gig. I liked being part of something. I never had that with my family.”

“Cleo.”

“This isn’t some deep philosophical confession of my unhappy childhood. I’m just saying, I like to dance. I liked being with other dancers because we could make something together. Sort of like that tapestry Tia was talking about before, you know?”

“Yes.” He thought of his world in Cobh—family, the business, and the need to hold both together. “I know.”

“I spent nearly ten years as a gypsy, and the only real friend I made was Mikey. I gotta figure one of the reasons for that is I was never involved enough. I’d get bored. Same show, same routines, same faces, night after night and twice on Wednesday.”

He traced a finger along her eyebrow, over the little mole at its tip. “You needed more.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I do know that when you’re a good dancer with a mediocre singing voice, you better have plenty of drive and ambition if you expect to make a living onstage. I didn’t. So when that bastard dangled the idea of the theater in Prague, the chance to choreograph, I jumped. Look where I landed. I had a lot of time to think when I was scraping bottom in Prague. Kept focused on getting back to New York, even though I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do once I did. I guess I know now.”

She picked up the watch cap, twirled it. “I’m part of something now. I’ve got friends. Tia, especially Tia. I guess I’ve got family, and I’m not walking away from it.”

She blew out a long breath. “And that concludes the True Confessions portion of our entertainment.”

He said nothing for a moment, then took her cap, snugged it down over her head. “It looks good on you.”

The back of her eyes stung, but her voice was cocky. “You got that backwards, Slick. I make *it* look good.”

THEY TOOK SHIFTS monitoring Morningside. After seven, when the place locked down for the night, it was a boring, thankless job. But they would continue monitoring, listening for any change, any sound, until the job was finished.

At three, Malachi had heard Anita’s assistant, whom they’d dubbed Whipping Girl, remind her boss of a salon appointment and her evening’s dinner engagement.

Anita had left ten minutes later, after haranguing her attorney over the phone, and hadn’t come back.

At midnight, Rebecca was manning the listening post,

from the rear of the van. When Jack climbed in the back, all she could drum up was a scowl.

"My brains are going to start leaking out of my ears if I have to do this much longer."

"We leave in an hour." He leaned down, his head close to hers, to study the readouts. Then sniffed the side of her neck. "What's the perfume for?"

"To drive you mad with frustrated desire."

"Could work." He turned his head so his lips skimmed over hers, came back to linger. "Definitely could work. Do the run for me. Sector by sector."

Could work, she realized, both ways. "I've done it for you, five hundred times already. I know what I'm doing, Jack."

"You've never worked this equipment before. Practice makes perfect, Irish."

She muttered curses, but obeyed. "I like the way you kiss me."

"That's handy because I plan on spending fifty years or so at it."

"When I give a man an inch, that doesn't entitle him to run the mile. Sector one. Alarms—silent and audible—up, motion detectors up, infrared up." She keyed in codes she knew by heart now and scanned the readouts on her monitors. "Exterior and interior doors, secured and on-line."

She continued through the sixteen sectors that comprised Jack's security system for Morningside.

"Shut down alarms in sector five."

"Shut them down?"

"Practice, baby. Take sector five down for ten seconds."

She let out a breath, rolled her shoulders. "Shutting down sector five."

He watched her fingers moving smoothly, briskly, over the keyboard. "There's a beeping inside the sector. Should I—"

"That's normal. Keep going."

"Sector's down." She watched the clock now, counting off the seconds. At ten, she keyed in another sequence and watched the system come back up. "Alarm's up in sector five."

"I told you ten seconds."

"It was ten."

"No, it took four to bring the system back up fully. So that's fourteen seconds."

"Then you should've said—"

"I said ten, so ten's what I needed." He patted her head. "Success is in the details."

She frowned while he opened his bag to give his portable equipment a final check. "If the whole place was shut down, how long to bring security back on-line?"

"Now there's a question. Standard alarms, exterior doors and windows, are instantaneous. Motion, infrared, interiors come on level by level. Four minutes, twelve seconds to bring it up to full scope and capacity. It's a complicated system, with multi-layers."

"That's too long, you know. There's a way to shave it."

"Probably."

"I wager I could shave a full minute off that four-twelve, had I access to the entire system and the time to play with it."

"Looking for a job, Irish?"

"Just saying," she replied as she angled her chair away from him, "timing matters, after all. In all manner of things."

"Is that your way of saying my timing's been off with you?"

"It's my way of saying I like picking my own time."

"Wouldn't hurt my feelings if you shaved some of that off. I'm going to get the others."

Twenty-three

“A parking place, on the street. Upper East Side.” Jack shook his head. He was driving the van, with Cleo riding shotgun. “We’ll have to take it as an omen.”

He maneuvered the van between a late-model sedan and an aging SUV.

She ducked down to look through the windshield at the streetlight. “Kinda in the spotlight here, aren’t we?”

“Your city taxes at work.”

“Yours, maybe. I’m not getting a paycheck these days.” Her eyes widened when he pulled a gun from under his seat. “Whoa, big guy, you didn’t say anything about armed B and E.”

“In for a penny,” he said. “Sit tight.” He climbed out, walked casually down the sidewalk, then, turning, shot out the streetlight with a muffled pop and a musical tinkle of glass.

“BB gun,” he told her when he slid back into the van. He reached behind him, knocked three times on the partition that separated the cab from the back of the vehicle.

Seconds later the van shifted and the rear door opened. Closed. In her side-view mirror, Cleo watched Gideon and Malachi step onto the sidewalk. Gideon headed east, Malachi west.

“And they’re off,” she mumbled.

They waited three long minutes, in the dark, in silence, before Jack’s walkie-talkie hissed. “For a city that never sleeps,” Malachi said, “it’s damn quiet out here.”

“Clear on the east as well,” Gideon reported.

“Stay on this channel.” Jack knocked twice on the partition, looked at Cleo when he heard the answering rap from the back. “Ready?”

“As canned ham.”

They got out on opposite sides. Jack slung his bag over his shoulder and, when he reached Cleo, slung his arm over her shoulders. “Just a couple of urbanites out for a stroll.”

“Cops tend to do a lot of drive-bys in tony neighborhoods like this,” she commented. “Just how many years in the pen can you get for what you’re carrying in that man-purse?”

“It’s a bag. Just a bag. Three to five,” he decided, “if the judge is a hardcase. Suspended. I’ve got connections.”

He palmed his walkie-talkie. “Crossing Madison at Eighty-eighth.”

“Good to go.” From Malachi.

“And here.” From Gideon.

“Base copies that,” Rebecca reported.

Jack took her hand as they walked by the entrance of Morningside, turned the corner. They worked their way around to the delivery entrance.

As rehearsed, Cleo took out her walkie-talkie while Jack opened his bag. “B and E Central,” she said quietly. “James Bond here’s breaking out his toys.”

“I’m at, what is it, Eighty-ninth between Fifth and Madison,” Malachi said. “Looks to be a party in a flat here. A number of people, fairly well pissed, are coming out.”

“I’m heading back from Park Avenue,” Gideon checked in. “Saw a few street people in doorways, and a goodly amount of traffic for this time of night. No problems.”

“Ready to go up?” Jack asked.

She nodded, craned her head to study the four stories. “There’s this really good door here. I just want to point that out.”

“Odds are she has the Fate in her office safe. It’ll make

her more nervous if the break-in targets the upper floors.”

He aimed what Cleo thought of as a harpoon, shot out a three-pronged hook and length of rope. “Harness,” he said, and shot the second line while she shrugged into her harness. He clicked the safety, attaching her, then repeated the steps with his own.

“On three,” he told her. “You were square with me about your weight, weren’t you?”

“Just count, pal. One, two.”

“Three,” Jack said, and pressed the mechanism on his harness.

They went up smoothly, and a bit more quickly than Cleo had anticipated. “Jesus! What a rush.”

“Keep your eyes on the roof.”

“If that’s like telling me don’t look down, it’s exactly the wrong . . . Oh shit,” she whispered as she did, indeed, look down. Teeth gritted, stomach flopping, she fumbled for the ledge, skidding a little as her palms had sprung with sweat, and heaved herself over with no grace whatsoever.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. It just threw me for a minute. Four stories looks a lot higher when you’re up there, without a floor under you. I’m cool.” She remembered her next step and pulled out her two-way. “Base. We’re on the roof.”

“Copy that,” Rebecca answered. “Shutting down alarms in sector twelve in sixty seconds. Mark.”

“Mark,” Cleo echoed as Jack depressed the timer on his watch, nodded.

He tucked the two-way back in his bag, fixed on a headset. “All units copy?” He nodded again when he got affirmative responses. “Got your breath back?” Jack asked Cleo.

“Yeah. I’m solid.”

He gave his line, then hers, a last testing tug.

She eased off the ledge, took one huge breath, then let herself slide into the air.

The breath rushed out of her lungs, but she steadied the bag for him as they dangled. Following his directions, she braced her feet on the wall of the building, relaxed her knees.

Jack's watch beeped quietly, and Rebecca's voice came through his headset. "Sector's down. Five minutes. Mark."

A cab drove by on the street below, turned at the corner and headed up Madison.

He attached a portable scrambler to the window glass, punched in a code and waited while the numbers ran. When the display glowed green, he detached it, handed it off to Cleo.

"Window backup system off-line, silent alarm killed." He fixed suction cups to the window, held out his hand like a surgeon. Cleo slapped the glass cutter into his hand. Despite the chill, a line of sweat dribbled down her back.

"Four minutes, thirty," she announced while he meticulously cut through the reinforced glass.

The wail of a siren had her choking back a startled yelp.

"You steady?"

"As Gibraltar."

"Take your end."

She gripped the wire from the suction cup in her gloved hands while Jack mirrored the gesture with the second. At his nod, they lowered the pane inch by inch inside the building until it rested on the floor.

"Going in," he said quietly, and boosted himself inside the window.

"Three minutes, thirty," Rebecca warned him.

He unhooked his harness, stepped carefully around the glass, then moved fast through the office area. Cleo rolled in after him and sprinted in the opposite direction.

Crouched at Anita's office door, Jack took out a lock pick. It took him nearly as long to make what would appear to be a botched attempt at picking the lock as it would have to succeed.

At the top of the steps, Cleo debated briefly between a Baccarat wafer dish and a Lalique vase. With no regret, she tipped over the vase, stepping clear as it shattered on the floor.

"Two minutes, Jack, Cleo. Move out now."

"Copy." They met back at the window, but this time Jack brought his heel down deliberately on the edge of the

windowpane to crack it. He attached his line, backed through the opening behind her.

“Down,” he said to Cleo. “Use your feet, keep your knees loose. Everybody back to base,” he said into his headset.

On the descent, he dropped a spare jammer, attached to a torn belt loop.

“Why, it’s a clue!” Cleo said breathlessly as her feet hit the ground. “We got one minute.”

“Start back.”

“No. I leave with the guy I came with.” She unhooked her line, shrugged out of her harness and stuffed it back in the bag as Jack did the same. Then she glanced at the dangling rope.

“Bet that stuff’s expensive.”

“But not that hard to come by.” Once again he draped an arm over her shoulders. They walked. Just a bit faster than a stroll. “It’ll look like the thieves ran into security trouble and had to abort, and fast.”

“Five-minute mark,” Rebecca announced. “System’s rebooting. You’ve got thirty seconds. What did you break?”

“Some vase. Scattered a few whatnots around for good measure.”

“Thief’s in a hurry, drops loot. Works for me.”

“One question,” Cleo asked him. “You didn’t need a sidekick for tonight. Why’d you bring me?”

“The point was to make it look like no less than two involved. I couldn’t have gotten to opposite ends of the fourth floor in the allotted time. Knowing there were two should make Anita a little more nervous.”

“One would’ve made her nervous enough.”

“Yeah. But it’ll take two to get into the house, into the safe and get out again without any hitch. I needed to see how you held up.”

“So, this was like an audition.”

“There you go. And you got the part.”

“Wait till I tell my agent.”

They were a full block away, walking easily now, hand in hand, when the alarms went wild.

* * *

IT WAS JUST past two A.M. when Jack popped the cork on a bottle of champagne.

"I can't believe the whole thing took less than an hour." Tia dropped into a chair. "I'm exhausted, and I didn't do anything."

"We're the tech crew," Rebecca reminded her. "That's essential personnel. And we were superb."

"It's a bit early for back-patting and celebration." Malachi lifted his glass. "But what the hell. Just knowing Anita's going to be wakened by the police is cause enough for a round. We've a lot of work ahead of us yet."

"Don't bring me down." Cleo gulped down the first glass of champagne. "I'm still flying. You think Anita'll drag her ass out of bed and go down there?"

"Count on it. The cops'll notify her, she'll get there quick, fast and in a hurry. First thing she'll do, check her office safe. Or she will if that's where she's stashed the Fate. Once she reassures herself it's where she left it, she'll do a dance with the cops, then she'll start calling me. She's going to be seriously pissed with Burdett Securities."

"But you'll fix that," Malachi said.

"Yep, because the system held. That's number one. They got in, but didn't have time to do the job because the backup system clicked into place, as advertised. Then I'll give her my report on Cleo."

"I bet it's terribly hot in Athens this time of year," Tia mused. "Do you think she'll leave soon?"

"If we have two days to put this all together, I'll be satisfied." He winked at Cleo. "My partner's a natural."

"I think we could've gone all the way tonight." Cleo held out her glass for a second round. "Into her office, into the safe and away with the prize."

"Maybe," Jack agreed. "Be a damn shame if we'd gone to all that trouble and it wasn't there."

"Yeah, yeah, practicalities. But all in all, you know how to show a girl a good time."

"That's what they all say. You should go get some sleep.

All of you. I'll man the recorder. She's going to be calling me in an hour or so anyway."

"I could make you some coffee and sandwiches," Tia offered.

"You're a jewel, you are."

AND SO, TWO hours later almost to the minute, while he polished off a ham and cheese on rye, Jack's home line rang. He smiled, let it ring three times. He'd already heard Anita curse him from her office.

Just as he'd heard her open her office safe, breathe a long sigh of relief.

"Burdett."

"Jack. Goddamn it, Jack. I'm at Morningside. There's been a break-in."

"Anita? When?"

"Tonight. The police are here now. I want you in here, Jack, and I want you in here now."

"Give me twenty minutes," he said. He hung up, and finished his coffee.

BY THE TIME he arrived, the Crime Scene Unit was busily at work. He figured he'd left them enough to keep them that way. He got a minor hassle from one of the uniforms blocking the entrance of the building, and had to flag down a familiar face, then wait to be cleared.

Normally the delay would have been mildly irritating, but in this case he figured it only gave Anita more time to stew. He found her in her office, verbally skinning one of the investigators who'd been unlucky enough to catch the case.

"I want to know what you're doing to find the people who violated my property."

"Ma'am, we're doing everything possible to—"

"If you were doing everything possible, someone couldn't have broken a window and climbed into this building. I'd like to know where the police were when

thieves damaged my property and waltzed into this building. That's what I'd like to know."

"Ms. Gaye, the first unit responded within two minutes after the alarm—"

"Two minutes is too late." She bared her teeth, and it occurred to Jack that if she worked herself up much higher, she'd use them to bite someone's throat out. "I expect the police to protect my property. Do you have any conception of the taxes I pay in this area? I'm not funneling thousands of dollars into this city so the police force can sit on their asses eating doughnuts while thieves walk off with priceless antiques."

"Ms. Gaye, at this time, we can't be sure if any of your inventory was stolen. If you'd—"

"Through no help of the New York Police Department. Now you and your clumsy, fat-fingered *colleagues* are stomping around my building, making a mess of things, and you refuse to tell me the status of the investigation. Would you prefer I called the mayor—a personal acquaintance of mine—and ask him to speak to your superior?"

"Ma'am, you can call God almighty and I'm still not going to be able to tell you any more than I have. This investigation is just over two hours old. I'd be moving that investigation along a lot faster if you'd give me information instead of slinging abuse and threats."

Jack figured she hadn't painted and polished herself as carefully as usual, and with the furious color staining her cheeks, it was hardly surprising Anita wasn't looking her best.

"I want your name and your badge number, and I want you *off* my property."

"Detective Lewis Gilbert."

Lew was already taking one of his cards out of his wallet. Jack decided to give him a break and distract Anita. He put what he hoped was concern on his face and stepped into the room.

"Lew."

"Jack." Lew laid the card on Anita's desk. "Got the word the security was Burdett."

“Yeah.” Jack’s mouth went grim. “Where did they breach?”

“Fourth-floor window, rear, far east corner.”

“Did they get inside?”

“Yep. Tripped up somewhere, though, sprang the alarm. Left some toys behind.”

“They get anything?”

Lew slid a baleful glance in Anita’s direction. “Undetermined.”

“I’d like to speak with Mr. Burdett. Privately,” Anita said coldly.

Knowing it was likely to make her choke on her own bile, Jack held up a finger and continued talking to Lew. “If I could take a look at the breach, I might be able to give you something on it.”

“Appreciate that.”

“I will not be ignored while you—”

“Just hold on.” Jack interrupted Anita’s newest tirade and walked out with Lew, leaving her vibrating with fury.

“Piece of work, that one,” Lew began.

“Tell me about it. The shit she was dumping on you won’t come close to what she’ll dump on me.”

They walked to the east corner, where the office area opened into an alcove. The chilly early morning air came through the empty window. Crime-scene people were measuring, dusting, picking at the window frame for trace evidence.

“Must’ve counted on the upper window being most vulnerable,” Jack began. “That glass is reinforced and wired. They had to circumvent the primary alarm system to get this far. Serious tech capabilities required for that. How’d they get up here?”

“Rappel lines. Looks like the alarm went, and they took off in a quick hurry. Left the lines behind.”

“Huh.” Jack frowned, tucked his thumbs in his pockets. “Might be they didn’t count on the secondary system.” He explained the setup as he and Lew walked downstairs and into the utility area, where the main security panels were installed.

“I should be able to do a run, see how long the system

was down—maybe how it came to be put down—once you guys are finished doing what you do. But I can tell you just from what I’ve already seen, they didn’t do it from down here.”

“Who knows the system? This particular one?”

“My team. You know how I screen my people, Lew. Nobody who works for me had a part in this. If they did, and were stupid enough not to take out the secondary, hell, I’d have to fire them for it.”

Lew gave a snort, scratched his jaw. “Need the names anyhow, you know how it goes.”

“Yeah, part of the job description.” He blew out a breath. “I’ll have to check, see who worked with me on this job. Original system was put in for the old man, Paul Morningside. I’ve done some upgrading since. The widow insists on the latest, and not just in her designer shoes.”

He opened his mouth, then shook his head, shut it again.

“Spill,” Lew demanded.

“I don’t want to influence the angle of your investigation.” As if reluctant, Jack dragged a hand through his hair, glanced toward the stairway. “I just want to point out that the client knows the system—or its basic makeup.”

Lew looked decidedly cheered at the notion. “Guess she would, wouldn’t she?”

“Now I’m going to have to go up and let her bust my balls.”

“Got a next of kin I should notify?”

Jack spared Lew a sour smile, then headed back up.

Anita was just slamming down the phone when Jack walked into her office again. He wondered, fleetingly, who she’d called to berate at five in the morning. Then saw the insurance file open on her desk.

The lady didn’t waste any time.

“Have you decided you can spare a moment for me?” Her voice dripped, like sugar laced with strychnine.

“I won’t do you any good unless I know what happened. I can’t figure out what happened until I see the system and the breach.”

“I’ll tell you what happened. You were paid to design

and install a security system to protect my business from vandals and thieves. You're paid a monthly retainer to maintain, evaluate and oversee that system, with additional fees for upgrading as the technology becomes available."

"I see you read your contract," he said mildly.

"You think you're dealing with a bimbo here?" Her voice spiked as she stalked around her desk. "You think because I have tits I don't have a fucking brain?"

"I never underestimated your brain, Anita. Or commented on your tits. Why don't you sit down?"

"Don't tell me to sit down." She jabbed a finger into his chest, and her eyes widened in shock when he closed his hand over her wrist.

"Watch it." His voice remained level. "A cop might have to tolerate a civilian's bullshit, but I don't have to tolerate a client's. Pull yourself together."

"Do you think you can speak to me that way?"

And he saw, by her expression and the tone of her voice, that she liked it. Go figure, he thought in disgust. "Slap at me, I slap back. I didn't roll out of bed at four in the morning because you snapped your fingers. I'm here because I stand by my work. Now sit down, and calm down."

He could almost see the instant she decided to change gears, the moment she opted to turn on the tears. "I've been violated. I feel so exposed, so helpless."

My ass, he thought, but played the game with her. "I know you're upset, and scared. Sit down now." He led her to a chair. "Do you want me to get you anything? Some water?"

"No, no." She waved a hand, then dabbed delicately at her cheek with the side of her finger. "It's just so difficult. And the police . . . I can't tell you what it's like. They're so cold, so callous. You understand what Morningside is to me. This break-in, Jack, it's a kind of rape. You let me down. I depended on you to protect what's mine."

"And I have."

"How can you say that? The system failed."

"No, it didn't. It worked. If it hadn't, you'd be filing a

claim for a lot more than a pane of glass. The secondary system kicked in, just as designed.”

“I don’t know what they’ve taken,” she insisted. “I’ve been too upset to start checking inventory.”

“Then we’ll deal with it. I’ll be working with the police as closely as possible. Burdett will inspect, evaluate, repair and replace any and all parts of the system as necessary. At our expense. I’ll have a team here as soon as the cops clear the crime scene. The secondary would have taken over five minutes after the primary went off-line. Odds of anyone getting much of anything out in that space of time are pretty low. I’d concentrate on checking this floor, and it’s mostly office space.”

He paused, deliberately scanned her office. “You’ve got some valuables in here, and in the waiting areas outside. How about your office door. Was it secured?”

She drew a breath, let it out shakily. “Yes. I locked it and set the alarm on it before I left. The police . . . they think someone tried to pick the lock.”

He frowned, walked over and stooped to study the lock himself. “Yeah, looks like an attempt. Not a very good one.” He straightened. “I can’t see why they’d waste time stripping down an office with what’s laid out in the showrooms. A few goodies lying around, but nothing worth the time and trouble.”

He was watching her as he spoke, and he saw her gaze toward the purse that sat on her desk.

“They’d hardly break into Morningside looking for office equipment,” she began. And rose.

In a casual move, he beat her to the purse by two strides. She froze. “I’m going to go over the system, chip by chip,” he promised, picking up the elegant and heavy snakeskin bag. “I’m sorry you have to go through this, Anita, but trust me, Morningside is as secure as possible. Now, why don’t you fix your face.” He handed her the purse, saw her fingers dig possessively into the supple leather. “And I’ll drive you home so you can get some sleep before you have to face all this.”

“I couldn’t possibly sleep,” she began, then reconsidered. “No, you’re right. I should go home, clear my head.”

She tucked the bag and its contents firmly under her arm. "And I'd feel safer with you taking me home."

HE WAS BANKING on catching a couple hours' sleep himself and was surprised to see Rebecca in the living room when he came in.

"I heard the elevator," she said. "I was restless. You've been out?"

"Yeah." He shrugged off his jacket. "She called, on cue. It went so much as expected, I could've written the script. She's locked the Fate in her home safe by now."

"You're sure of that."

"As death and taxes." He filled her in, short and spare, as he walked into the kitchen, pulled out orange juice and drank straight from the carton.

Rebecca was too fascinated to scold him for it. "You were so close to it. I don't know if I could have stopped myself from just planting a fist in her face and walking away with it."

"It's a thought. I've never hit a woman before, but she'd be a satisfying first. It's nearly as satisfying knowing we've messed with her head." He replaced the juice. "Or as satisfying as what's coming next. We'll go back over in a while. Me and my top tech," he added with a wink, "to run a system check personally."

She took the carton back out of the fridge, shook it to show him it was empty, then tossed it in the trash. "And what's my hourly wage?"

"Contingent on performance. How'd you know that was empty?"

"The juice? Because you're a man and I was reared with two of your kind. And after I've completed my brilliance with the security system?"

"I give Anita a report. Then I'll remember about the other little task she asked me to do."

He yawned, rubbed his hands over his face. "But now I'm going to grab a shower, and some sleep."

"You're working awfully hard for this," Rebecca com-

mented as he walked toward the bath. "Risking a great deal as well."

He stopped, turned. "When something matters, you work for it. And the risks don't count."

Alone, Rebecca let out the breath she'd barely been aware she'd been holding. So much mattered, she realized. So much it was almost too much. And the fear of that had held her back.

That was foolish, she thought. You could never have too much that mattered. And a woman who continued to step back from love was wasting valuable time.

In the shower, Jack turned the water to near blistering, braced his hands on the tile and let the pumping spray beat on his head. The adrenaline that had kept him going for a straight twenty-four hours was used up.

His brain felt dull. He couldn't afford to go up against Anita again until he'd had a little time to recharge. Couldn't afford it especially since he was taking Rebecca in with him. He closed his eyes and let his mind empty.

Nearly asleep on his feet, he didn't hear the bathroom door open, or close again with a quiet click. He didn't hear the soft slither of her robe sliding to the floor.

But an instant before she opened the glass panel, an instant before she stepped into the heat and steam with him, he smelled her.

His head snapped up, his body jerked to alert. And her arms slid sinuously around him, her breasts pressed, firm and wet, into his back.

"You looked so tired." Rebecca trailed her tongue up the line of his spine. "I thought I'd offer to wash your back."

"We're naked in the shower because I'm tired? What was that you said earlier about timing?"

"I thought the timing perfect." She slithered around him, slicking her hair back as the spray soaked it, then sliding her gaze down his body. Her lips quirked. "And from where I'm standing, you don't look so very tired after all."

"I think I'm getting my second wind."

“Let’s not waste it.” She rose on her toes, then sank her teeth delicately into his bottom lip. “I want your hands all over me, Jack. And your mouth. I want mine all over you. I have from the first minute.”

He fisted a hand in her streaming hair. “Why did we wait?”

“Because I wanted you from the first minute.” She laid her palms on his chest, spread her fingers.

“Your brothers mentioned you were perverse.”

“And they should know. Do you want to discuss that now, or do you want to have me?”

“Guess,” he said and, lowering his head, savaged her mouth with his.

She was breathless, laughing when he let her breathe again. “Why don’t you give me another little hint?”

“Sure.” He pressed her back against the tile wall, took her mouth again while steam billowed and water pulsed, almost brutally hot over them.

Then it was just as she’d demanded. Hands and mouths frantic and fast. Flesh sliding wetly against flesh as each of them tried to reach more, take more.

There was a volcano of need in him, bubbling, boiling just under the surface. Recklessly she wrapped herself around him. Clung to him, shuddered and let herself burn.

“This is what I want, Jack.” With her bones already melting, she bowed back as his teeth nipped down to close over her breast.

It was everything. Beyond all. Having her reach for him, seeing her surrender. Feeling her body quake with passion was everything and more.

And he could take her now, give to her now. When he ravished her mouth, she met the assault with equal urgency. Desperate for the heat, he plunged his fingers into her, and her hips pumped to match the frantic rhythm.

She came with a fast and frenzied violence that left them both weak.

He felt the long, lean muscles of her legs tremble and tense as he gripped her thighs and hauled her higher. The pure ivory skin flushed with rose and sheened with water

against the slick white tiles. And water darkened her hair so it lay like fired gold ropes over her shoulders.

She looked, he thought, like a mermaid rising up out of a white sea.

“You’re beautiful.” He cupped her hips, lifted them. “So beautiful. Belong to me.”

She sighed once long and deep. “I already do.”

He slid inside her, filled her. And, with the savage edge dulled, loved her slowly. Long, deep thrusts that thrilled. As she crested, she said his name, lifted her mouth to his. Offered.

Then she wrapped herself around him, cradled his head on her shoulder, and rode the thunder of her own heart as he emptied himself into her.

Twenty-four

THEY tumbled into bed, still damp, still breathless. “I have to dry my hair. In a minute. You catch a chill going to bed with wet hair.” But she yawned and snuggled against him.

Not only sated, not only satisfied, she realized. But saturated.

“You’ve a wonderful build, Jack. Next time, I’d like to feel it on top of me. But you get some sleep first.”

He tangled his fingers in her wet hair. “Why now?”

She lifted her head. “You’re tired. And even such a fierce lover needs a bit of rest.”

“Why now?” he repeated so she couldn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“All right then.” She got up, fetched a towel from the bathroom and, sitting beside him, began to dry her hair.

“In the shower you looked like a mermaid. You still do.”

“You don’t look like a man who’d think or say such poetic and romantic things.” She reached out, traced a fingertip over the scar, over the tough lines of his face. “But you do. I never thought I had a weakness for the poetic and romantic. But I do.”

She eased back, continued to dry her hair. “I had a

dream,” she said. “I was in a boat. Not a grand ship like the *Lusitania*, nor one of our tour boats. But a white boat, sleek and simple. It slid without a sound over blue water. It was lovely. Peaceful and warm. And inside my head I knew I could pilot that boat anywhere I wanted.”

She shook back her damp hair and used the towel to blot water drops from his chest and shoulders.

“I had the freedom for that, and the skill. I could see little storms here and there, blurred on the horizon. There were eddies and currents in the water. But they didn’t worry me. If a sail’s nothing but smooth, I thought in my dream, it gets tedious. And in my dream, there were three women who appeared in the bow of my boat. This, I decided, is interesting.”

She got up again, went to his dresser, opened the top drawer and took out a white T-shirt. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Help yourself.”

“I know where you keep your things,” she said as she pulled the shirt over her head. “As I’ve had no respect for your privacy. Now, where was I?”

“You were in your boat, with the Fates.”

“Ah yes.” She grinned, pleased he’d understood. “The first, who held a spindle, spoke. ‘I spin the thread, but you make it what you will.’ The second held a silver tape for measuring, and said, ‘I mark the length, but you use the time.’ And the third, with her silver scissors, told me this. ‘I cut the thread, for nothing should last forever. Don’t waste what you’re given.’”

She sat again, curled up her legs. “And in the way of dream creatures, they faded away and left me alone in that pretty white boat. So I said to myself, well now, Rebecca Sullivan, here’s your life spread all around you like blue water with its storms and its peaceful times, its eddies and its currents. And where do you want to go with it, what do you want in the time you’ll have? Do you know what the answer was?”

“What?”

She laughed, leaned over, kissed him lightly. “Jack.

That was the answer, and I don't mind saying I wasn't entirely pleased with it. Do you know when I had that dream?"

"When?"

"The night I met you." She took the hand he'd lifted for hers and rubbed his knuckles over her cheek. "Hardly surprising it gave me a bad moment or two. I'm a cautious woman, Jack. I don't grab for something just because it looks appealing. I've been with three men in my life. The first time, it was hot blood and a raging need to find out what it was all about. The second was a boy I had deep affection for, one I hoped I might spend my life with. But as it happened, he was just one of those eddies in the sea. You're the third. I don't give myself lightly."

He sat up, cupped her face in his hands. "Rebecca—"

"Don't tell me you love me." Her voice shook a bit. "Not yet. My heart went for you so fast, I swear it left me breathless. I needed to let my head catch up. Lie down, won't you. Let me snuggle up."

He drew her down with him, settled her head on his shoulder.

"I won't mind traveling," she said, and the hand he'd lifted to stroke her hair froze.

"Good."

She smiled, pleased that he'd tensed. Some things, some right things, might come easy, but they should never come without impact. "I've always wanted to. And I'll expect to know a great deal more about this business of yours. I'm not a sit-at-home-and-iron-your-shirts sort."

"I send mine out anyway."

"That's fine, then. I can't leave Ireland altogether. My mother . . . I miss Ma." Her voice went thick, and she pressed her face against his neck. "Something fierce. Especially now, when I'm in love and can't tell her about it. Ah well, soon enough." She sniffled, brushed a tear away. "Anyway, you can expect me to get my hands into your company."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. I want you in my life, Rebecca. I want in yours."

"I have to ask you a question. Why didn't your marriage work?"

"A lot of reasons."

"That's an evasion, Jack."

"Bottom line? We wanted different things." Different directions, he thought, different goals.

"What did you want that she didn't?"

He was silent for so long, her nerves began to stretch.

"Kids."

With those words she all but melted into a puddle of love and relief. "Oh? How many do you have in mind?"

"I don't know. A couple anyway."

"Only two?" She made a snorting sound. "Piker. We can do better than that. Four should suit me." She tucked the sheet under her chin, shifted, sighed. "You can tell me you love me now."

"I love you, Rebecca."

"I love you, Jack. Go to sleep awhile. I already set your alarm clock for nine-thirty."

She slid into sleep, and into dreams, into the white boat gliding over a blue sea. And this time Jack stood at the wheel beside her.

TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE Jack's alarm rang, Gideon brewed the first pot of coffee of the day. He rooted through Tia's cupboards and found the poppy seed bagels. He was beginning to appreciate the Americans' fondness for bagels. While the others slept, he tucked a bagel into his jacket pocket, poured an oversized mug of black coffee and headed to the door.

He'd have his breakfast, and a morning smoke, up on the roof.

He opened the door and stared at the attractive black woman who had her finger poised to ring the buzzer.

She jumped; he tensed. And when she let out a quick, nervous giggle, he shifted gears smoothly.

"Gave us both a jolt, didn't it?" He offered her a broad smile. "Something I can help you with?"

"I'm Carrie Wilson, a friend of Tia's." She shifted her

gears as skillfully as he, and studied him carefully now. "You must be Malachi."

"Actually, I'm Gideon. Tia's mentioned you. Are you coming in?"

Her measuring gaze narrowed. "Gideon who?"

"Sullivan." He stepped back in invitation just as Malachi came out of the bedroom. "That would be Mal. We're just starting to stir. We had a late night."

Still on the edge of the threshold, Carrie goggled at both men. "Good God, she's got two of you? I don't know whether to be impressed or . . . I'll stick with impressed."

"Actually, one of them's mine." Cleo, wearing nothing but a man's T-shirt, strolled out of the spare room. "Great shoes," she said after giving Carrie the once-over. "Who are you?"

"Rewind." Jaw set, Carrie marched in, shut the door. "Who are *you*? And where's Tia?"

"She's sleeping yet." Malachi aimed a smile that was every bit as potent as Gideon's—and, in Carrie's opinion, just as suspicious. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch the name."

"I'm Carrie Wilson. And I want to see Tia right this minute." She set her briefcase down, pushed up the sleeves of her Donna Karan jacket. "Or I start kicking some ass."

"Start with one of them," Cleo requested. "I haven't had my coffee yet."

"Why don't you pour some for everyone?" Malachi said. "Tia's just sleeping in a bit. We were up late."

"Move aside." Carrie took a meaningful step closer. "Now."

"Suit yourself." He moved out of her path and watched her stride into the bedroom. "I think we're going to need that coffee."

The drapes were drawn. All Carrie saw in the dim light was a lump in the middle of the bed. A tongue of fear licked over her annoyance as she thought of all the things a trio of strangers might have done to her trusting, vulnerable friend.

There'd been a bulge in the dark-haired man's jacket

pocket. A gun, she thought. They were drugging Tia, holding her at gunpoint. Terrified at what she'd find, Carrie tore the sheets away.

There was Tia, buck naked and curled in a cozy ball. She blinked sleepily, started to stretch, then let out a thin scream.

"Carrie!"

"What's going on here? Who are those people? Are you all right?"

"What? What?" With a blush rising from her toes, Tia crossed her arms modestly over her breasts. "What time is it?"

"What the hell difference does that make? Tia, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me, except . . . Jesus, Carrie, I'm naked. Give me the sheet."

"Let me see your arms."

"My what?"

"I want to check for needle marks."

"Needle—Carrie, I'm not on drugs." Keeping one arm tight over her breasts, she held out the other. "I'm perfectly fine. I told you about Malachi."

"More or less. You didn't mention the other two. And when my best friend, whose toes would fall off if she considered jaywalking, asks me to break the law, she's *not* perfectly fine."

"I'm naked," was all Tia could think of. "I can't talk to you when I'm naked. I have to get dressed."

"Christ." Impatiently, Carrie stomped to the closet, yanked it open. She sniffed, audibly, when she spotted the men's shirts hanging beside Tia's clothes. Then she pulled out a robe, tossed it on the bed. "Put that on, then start talking."

"I can't tell you everything."

"Why?"

"Because I love you." Tia stuck her arms in the robe, dragged it around her. And immediately felt better.

"Tia, if those people are pressuring you into something—"

"They're not. I promise. I'm doing something I need to do, something I want to do. For them, yes, but for me, too. Carrie, I bought a red sweater."

The lecture on the tip of Carrie's tongue fell away. "Red?"

"Cashmere. I don't seem to be allergic to wool after all. I've missed my last two standing appointments with Dr. Lowenstein, and I canceled my monthly appointment with my allergist. I haven't used my inhaler in over a week. Well, once," she corrected. "But that was pretend, so it doesn't count. And I've never felt better in my life."

Carrie sat on the side of the bed. "A red sweater?"

"Really red. I'm thinking about getting a Wonderbra to go under it. And it doesn't matter to him. He likes me when I wear dirt brown and dull underwear. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Yeah. Tia, are you doing what you're doing because you're in love with him?"

"No. I started doing it before I fell in love with him. All the way in love anyway. It's connected, Carrie, but it's not the why. I shouldn't have asked you to get that information on Anita Gaye. I'm sorry I did. Let's forget it."

"I've already got the data." With a sigh, Carrie got to her feet. "You get dressed. I'm going to have some coffee and decide if I'm going to give the data to you." She crossed to the door, turned back. "I love you, too, Tia," she said, then closed the door behind her.

And scanned the trio in the living room.

The woman with the legs was sprawled on the sofa, sipping coffee with her feet propped on the thigh of the hunk who'd opened the front door.

Hunk number two was leaning against the opening into the kitchen.

"You." She pointed at Gideon. "What's the bulge in your pocket?"

"Bulge." Cleo gave a wicked laugh, then poked Gideon's ribs with her toes. "You happy to see me, Slick?"

"It's nothing." Vaguely embarrassed, he dug into his pocket. "Just a bagel."

"Is that the last poppy seed?" Cleo straightened, snatched it out of his hand. "You were sneaking off with the last poppy seed bagel. That's low." She unfolded herself. "Just for that, I'm eating it. No weapons," she added for Carrie's benefit, then strolled into the kitchen.

"Would you like coffee?" Malachi offered.

"Cream, no sugar."

"Cleo, be a pal. Cream, no sugar for Miss Wilson here."

"Work, work, work," came the mutter from the kitchen.

"First question," Carrie began. "Tia claims she can't tell me what she's involved in. Is she protecting you?"

"No. She's protecting you. You don't have to ask the second question, I'll just answer it. She matters very much to me, and I'll do whatever needs to be done to keep her from being hurt. She's the most amazing woman I've ever known."

"Just for that," Cleo said from behind him, "you get half my bagel. You're a friend of Tia's," she continued, nodding at Carrie. "So am I. You've got seniority, but that doesn't mean I'm less of a friend."

Considering, Carrie looked at Gideon. "And you?"

"I love her," he said simply, then grinned a little at the looks he got from Cleo and Malachi. "In a warm and brotherly fashion. Do I get the other half of the bagel?"

"No."

"I'm under constant abuse." He got to his feet. "I'm going up and having a smoke. If Becca or Jack call, let me know."

"Becca? Jack?" Carrie turned to Malachi as Gideon walked out of the apartment.

"Rebecca's our sister. Jack's another friend of Tia's."

"She certainly stockpiled a lot of friends in a short time."

"I guess I was saving up," Tia said as she came out of the bedroom.

Carrie glanced over, sighed again. "I told you red would look great on you."

"Yes." With a little smile, Tia brushed a hand over her new sweater. "You always did."

Carrie went to her, took both Tia's hands, looked hard

into her eyes. "You wouldn't have asked me to do this if it wasn't important. Really important."

"No, I wouldn't have."

"When you can, you're going to explain everything."

"You'll be the first."

She nodded, then turned to Malachi. "If whatever's going on here hurts her, in any way, shape or form, I'm coming after you. And I'm taking you down."

"I'll hold your coat," Cleo offered and bit into her bagel. "Sorry, Mal, we girls have to stick together."

"I'm probably going to like you," Carrie decided. "All three of you. I sure as hell hope so, since I broke several federal laws acquiring the information I'm about to give you."

"For that, you get a whole bagel. We've got cinnamon, plain and onion."

Carrie offered Cleo her first smile. "I'll live recklessly and go for the cinnamon."

ABOUT THE TIME Carrie was polishing off her bagel and explaining the details of Anita Gaye and Morningside Antiquities' financial picture, Anita was having breakfast in bed.

Now that she'd had time to think, and a bit more rest, she wasn't so upset about the attempted break-in. She'd just consider it a wake-up call.

Nobody and nothing was to be trusted.

It was true that the security had held. But as far as she knew that might have been dumb luck or due to some foolish mistake by the thieves. She'd have Jack Burdett and company go over the system, inch by inch. And when they were done, she'd call in another consultant, have them evaluate the system.

One doctor tells you something's wrong with your body, a smart woman gets a second opinion. Morningside was every bit as vital to her as her own health. Without it, her business and social contacts would start to dry up, and her income would suffer a serious shortfall.

Anita Gaye took care of Anita Gaye.

She sat back against the pillows, sipped her coffee and glanced toward the doors of her walk-in closet. Behind the side panel where her day-wear suits hung in a meticulous, color-coordinated row was a safe even the household staff knew nothing about.

The Fate was tucked away now. She was glad the break-in had jolted her into bringing it here. She'd long since stopped thinking of it as an asset for Morningside, but as a personal belonging.

For the right price, of course, she'd sell it without a moment's sentimental hesitation. But when she had all three, she would wallow in it for a while. Her little secret. And she was considering keeping them for a short time. Perhaps putting them on loan—briefly—and reaping the publicity.

Anita Gaye, the skinny girl from Queens, would have made the biggest find, successfully executed the splashiest coup of the century. You couldn't buy that kind of respect and power, she mused. You couldn't inherit it from your rich, elderly and conveniently deceased husband.

It was going to be hers, she thought. Whatever it took. Whoever had to pay.

After pouring the second cup of coffee from her favorite Derby pot, she picked up the portable phone on her bed tray and called Jack's cell phone.

"Burdett." He was drinking coffee himself, and nibbling on Rebecca's fingers.

"Jack, Anita." She worked tears into her voice. "I want to apologize for my behavior this morning. I had no right to take things out on you the way I did."

Jack winked at Rebecca. "No need to apologize, Anita. You'd had a bad shock, were understandably upset."

"Regardless, you were there for me, just as your system was there for Morningside. I feel dreadful about it."

"It's forgotten," he said while Rebecca mimed strangling herself and gagging. "I'm on my way back to Morningside right now," he began.

"Pants on fire," Rebecca whispered and got a light bop on the head.

"I'm going over the system personally. I've already

called in my best tech to do an analysis. We'll both be there within the hour. Whatever vulnerabilities allowed the system to be breached as far as it was will be corrected. You have my word."

"I know I can count on you. I'll meet you there, if you don't mind. I'd feel better knowing more of what's involved."

"I'll take you through it."

"I'm so grateful. Jack, I wonder if you've had any time to work on that other matter we discussed."

"Cleo Toliver, right?" He gave Rebecca the thumbs-up sign. "As a matter of fact, I got some data just last night. I intended to write up a report for you today. Slipped my mind with the trouble this morning."

"Oh, I don't need anything as formal as a written report. Anything you can tell me—"

"I'll fill you in when I see you. How's that? I'm glad you're sounding more yourself, Anita. I'll see you at Morningside." He clicked off before she could answer.

"Butter wouldn't melt," he commented, and pulled Rebecca into his lap. "What do you want to bet she's figured out a way to scam the insurance claim?"

"I don't take sucker bets." She touched her lips to his, then just sank in.

"We gotta go," he murmured.

"Mmm. I think we've gotten caught in terrible traffic."

His hands slid under her shirt. "It's a jungle out there," he agreed. "What's five more minutes?"

It was fifteen, but he wasn't counting.

By the time Anita arrived, he had Rebecca suited up in coveralls and a gimme cap, running a system check, with a few finesses. He'd measured and ordered the replacement glass for the window and was outside on the sidewalk studying the delivery entrance.

"My assistant said you'd be out here." She looked delicately pale. "I thought the staff would be nervous," she began. "But they seem to be more excited."

"A lot of people react that way, especially when it's not their property that's been violated. How you holding up?"

"I'm fine now. Really. I've got so much paperwork to

do over this, it'll keep my mind busy. Why are you out here?"

"Wanted to take a look. I have to figure they did a study of the building, the neighborhood. Traffic patterns, patrols, angle of vision from residential buildings nearby. And they picked the best spot. Upper window. Calculated risk that would be most vulnerable. Replacement glass will be installed by five. Guaranteed."

"Thank you, Jack." She laid a hand on his arm. "Morningside was Paul's life." She let out a shaky breath. "And he entrusted it to me. I couldn't bear letting him down."

Spare me, Jack thought, but laid a hand over hers. "We'll take care of it for him. That's a promise."

"I feel better knowing that. Let's walk around to the front. I could use the time to clear my head a bit more."

"Fine. I'll go over the system with you. My tech's in there now. If there's a hole, we'll plug it."

"I know. Paul considered you the best. So do I. I trust you, Jack. That's why I asked for your help regarding this Toliver woman. You said you found out something?"

"It was tricky." He gave her hand a quick squeeze. "But I don't like to disappoint a client. Or a friend." He ran through basic information he was sure she already knew, listened to her feign surprise as he mentioned Cleo's parents' names.

"For heaven's sake, I know Andrew Toliver. Slightly, strictly socially, but . . . This woman who threatened me is his daughter? What a world."

"Classic black sheep. Troublemaker," he added, knowing Cleo would grin wickedly at the rundown. "Problems in school, minor brushes with juvie. Hasn't had much luck landing permanent jobs as a dancer. Looks like she's just back in New York from Eastern Europe. I'm still digging into that. It's not a simple matter to get information from that area."

"I appreciate your trying. Did you find an address for her?"

"Address on record's the apartment she had before she took off for Europe. Moved out about eight months ago. She's not living there now. In fact, she's not in New York at all."

Anita stopped dead. "What do you mean she's not in New York? She has to be. She contacted me. I met her here."

"That was then, this is now. Cleopatra Toliver, the one who matches your description and the passport number I was able to finesse, left for Greece this morning. Athens."

"Athens." She turned, and her fingers dug into his arm. "You're sure about that?"

"I've got the airline, flight and ticket number back at my place. Since I figured you'd want to know, I called and confirmed the flight after I talked to you this morning. She's been in the air about an hour." He reached for the door of Morningside. "She's headed several thousand miles away, Anita. You don't have to worry about her now."

"What?" She pulled herself back. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Athens," Anita repeated. "She's gone to Athens."

Twenty-five

WITH her feet propped on the counter while she paged through one of a stack of computer magazines she'd stockpiled, Rebecca manned the listening post. She paused in the middle of an article, ears pricking as she heard Anita's voice snapping out orders.

Smiling, Rebecca swiveled the chair, picked up the phone. "The rat's taken the cheese," she said. "Tell Tia she's on. Then somebody come relieve me. I'm bored half to death."

"We'll be along." Malachi hung up the secured line. "It's your cue, darling," he said to Tia. "Are you set?"

"I didn't think she'd move so fast." Tia pressed a hand to her nervous stomach and felt the soft nap of her new red sweater. "I'm set. I'll meet you all back at Jack's."

"I could go with you as far as the police station."

"No. I'm fine. Being a little nervous will just make it all the more credible." She slipped on a jacket, then for an extra boost, draped the boldly patterned scarf she'd bought on one of her new shopping sprees over her shoulders. "I think I'm getting good at all this."

"Sweetheart." He wrapped his fingers around the scarf and used it to tug her to him for a kiss. "You're a natural."

She held on to that—the confidence and the kiss—all

the way into the Detectives Bureau at the Sixty-first Precinct.

She asked for Detective Robbins, stood twisting the strap of her handbag, then managed a shy smile when he came to get her.

“Dr. Marsh?”

“Detective Robbins, thanks so much for seeing me. I feel so foolish coming in here, bothering you.”

“Don’t give it a thought.” His face remained polite and blank as he studied her. “I saw you outside Anita Gaye’s office. Morningside Antiquities.”

“Yes.” She tried a slightly embarrassed, slightly fuddled look in response. “I got so flustered when I heard your name and recognized it. I couldn’t think how to introduce myself in front of Anita without it all being so awkward and complicated. And I didn’t think you’d remember the name, from when I called you about Jack Burdett.”

“I remembered. You and Ms. Gaye friends?”

“Oh no.” She flushed now. “Not really what you’d call friends. We did have lunch once, and I invited her to lunch again, at her convenience. But she . . . Well, this is all very complicated after all.”

“You want some coffee?”

“Well, I . . .”

“I could use some.” He gestured, then led her into the tiny break area. “Cream, sugar?”

“Do you have decaf?”

“Sorry, strictly high-test around here.”

“Oh, well . . . Actually, if I could just have some water.”

“No problem.” He poured a cup from the spigot of a tiny sink, and Tia tried not to think of the horrors of city tap water. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“It’s probably nothing.” She lifted the cup, but couldn’t quite make herself risk a sip. “I feel like an idiot.” She glanced around the boxy coffee room with its cluttered counters, crowded corkboard and water-stained ceiling.

“Just tell me what’s on your mind.” He brought his coffee to the table, sat across from her.

“All right. Well . . . I thought of you, Detective, because

I'd written down your information when Mr. Burdett came to see me that day. That was the oddest thing."

He gave her an encouraging nod. "Jack has a talent for odd things."

She bit her lip. "You . . . you did vouch for him, right? I mean you know him and believe he's honest and responsible."

"Absolutely. Jack and I go way back. He's unorthodox at times, Dr. Marsh, but you can trust him right down the line."

"Good. That's good. I feel more confident knowing that. It's just that that day when he told me my phones were tapped—"

"Did he?" He shifted in his seat, straightened.

"Yes. Didn't he mention that to you? You see, he'd tried to call me about something, apparently, and when he did he detected something about the line. I don't really understand how all that works. And I have to admit, Detective, even with you reassuring me about him, I didn't believe him. Why should my phones be tapped, after all? That's just silly. Don't you think?"

"Any reason you can think of why anyone would want to listen to your phone calls?"

"None at all. I live a very quiet sort of life. Most of my calls involve my research or my family. Nothing of particular interest to anyone but another mythologist. But it did unnerve me a little. Even so, I more or less dismissed it until . . . Do you know anything about the Three Fates?"

"Can't say I do."

"They're characters in Greek myth. Three sisters who spin, measure and cut the thread of life. They're also statues. Small, precious silver statues. Another kind of myth in antique and art circles. One of my ancestors owned one, and it was lost with him and his wife on the *Lusitania*. The other two . . ." She spread her hands. "Who can say? They're reasonably valuable separately, but would be priceless as a complete set. Mr. Burdett contacted me because he's a collector, and he'd learned of the connection with my family. My father owns Wyley's. The antique and auction house."

“Okay. So Jack was hoping for a line on these statues through you.”

“That’s right. In any case, I told him what little I knew about the art pieces. But the conversation sparked an idea for another book. I’ve started researching. Phone calls,” she said. “Collecting data and so on. Then the other day, I was talking with someone, someone I know primarily through my family. I was surprised when she seemed eager to spend some time with me and, I admit, flattered.”

Tia lowered her eyes to her glass, turned it around and around with her fingertips. “I didn’t think she’d be bothered with me, socially. It wasn’t until I was back home again, after we’d talked, that I realized she’d not only brought up the Fates, but . . .”

She breathed deeply, looked at him again. “Detective Robbins, there were a couple of things she said that related directly to my research, to phone calls I’ve made and conversations I’ve had. I know it’s probably just a coincidence, but it seems very odd. Odder when I put it all together with her inviting me to lunch, with her steering the conversation toward the statues and knowing things she shouldn’t have known about my research. And I learned she’d asked both my parents about Clotho.”

“Who’s Clotho?”

“Oh sorry. The first Fate. The statue my ancestor owned was of Clotho. I don’t know what to think. She even let it slip about the third Fate, that would be Atropus, being in Athens.”

“Greece.”

“Yes, I’d only just tracked down that rumor myself the day before we had lunch, had discussed it with a colleague in a phone conversation. I suppose she could be following the same trail as I am, but it just feels so strange. And when I think of what Mr. Burdett said about my phones . . . I’m very uneasy.”

“Why don’t we have someone take a look at your phones?”

“Could you?” She sent him a thankful look. “I’d be so grateful. It really would relieve my mind.”

“I’ll take care of it. The woman you mentioned, Dr. Marsh. Would that be Anita Gaye?”

Tia gasped—hoped it wasn’t overdone. “How did you guess?”

“Just one of the tricks they teach us in cop school.”

“Detective Robbins, I feel so odd about all this. I don’t want to get Anita in any trouble if I’m just imagining things. And I probably am. I probably am because I’m not the type of person this sort of thing happens to. You won’t tell her I said anything, will you? I’d be horribly embarrassed if she knew I’d spoken to the police about her. And my parents—”

“We’ll keep your name out of it. Like you said, it’s probably coincidence.”

“You’re right.” She beamed a relieved smile. “It’s probably just coincidence.”

IT WAS A lot like planting seeds, Tia imagined. Not that she’d ever, literally, planted seeds, but it just seemed much the same. You stirred up the ground a bit, scattered around what you wanted to grow, then gave it a little boost of fertilizer.

Or in this case, bullshit.

She liked the fact that her team trusted her enough to do so much of the planting.

If, as expected, those seeds sprouted quickly, there was a great deal to do in a short amount of time. She swung into Wyley’s with a spring in her step, and the clock ticking in her head.

Before she could ask if her father was available, she heard her mother’s voice. Tia winced, and hated herself for it. Guilt had her moving through the showroom to where Alma was haranguing a clerk.

“Mother, I didn’t expect to see you here.” She laid her lips lightly on Alma’s cheek. “What a gorgeous vase,” she commented, studying the delicate pansy motif on the vase the clerk was guarding. “Grueby?”

“Yes.” The clerk slanted Alma a dubious look. “Circa 1905. It’s a particularly fine piece.”

"I want it boxed up, gift-wrapped and messengered to my home."

"Mrs. Marsh," the clerk began.

"I don't want to hear any more about it." Alma waved the protest aside. "Ellen Foster's daughter Magda is getting married next month," she said to Tia. "I asked your father repeatedly to bring home an appropriate wedding gift, but has he bothered? No. So I'm forced to come all the way down here to take care of it myself. The man's in here every day. The least he could do is take care of one little thing for me."

"I'm sure he—"

"And now," Alma continued, rolling over Tia, "this young woman refuses to do what she's told."

"Mr. Marsh has given the staff very specific instructions. We aren't permitted to allow you to take any merchandise valued at more than one thousand dollars. This piece is priced at six thousand, Mrs. Marsh."

"I've never heard such nonsense. I'm getting palpitations. I'm sure my blood pressure is spiking."

"Mother." Tia's voice, sharper than either of them expected, had Alma blinking. "This vase isn't an appropriate gift for the daughter of an acquaintance."

"Ellen is a dear friend—"

"Whom you see perhaps six times a year at social functions," Tia finished briskly. "Your taste, as always, is impeccable, but this isn't the right gift. Would you mind telling my father we're here?" she asked the clerk.

"Not at all." Obviously relieved to have reinforcements, the clerk left them alone.

"I don't know what's gotten into you." Alma's pretty face shifted from angry to unhappy lines. "You're so unsympathetic, so harsh."

"I don't mean to be."

"It's that man you're involved with. That foreigner."

"No, it's not. You've let yourself get upset over nothing."

"Nothing? That woman—"

"Was only doing her job. Mother, you can't come into Wyley's and pluck something off a shelf because it's

pretty. Now, I'm going to help you find just the right wedding present."

"I have a headache."

"You'll feel better when we take care of your errand." She put an arm over her mother's stiff shoulders and guided her away. "Look at this lovely teapot."

"I want a vase," Alma said stubbornly.

"All right." She led Alma along, and though she was tempted to signal another clerk for help, ordered herself to tough it out. "Oh, this is beautiful." She spotted a footed vase, and prayed her shaky expertise was in gear. If she missed and picked out something even more valuable, the ordeal would snowball. "It's so stunning and classic. I think it's Stourbridge."

Carefully, she angled it, tipped it so she could check the tiny price tag. And breathed a quiet sigh of relief. "What a wonderful gift this would be," she went on quickly as she saw the sulk folding into her mother's face. "You know, if you gave the other as a gift, they wouldn't know what they had, so they wouldn't appreciate the gesture for what it was worth. But something as gorgeous as this, at just the right price, will get full marks."

"Well . . ."

"Why don't I take care of having it boxed and wrapped for you? Then we'll see if Father has time to have some tea. It's been a long time since we've been in Wyley's together."

"I suppose." Alma studied the vase more carefully. "It is very elegant."

"Gorgeous." And at less than four hundred, right in the ballpark.

"You always had good taste, Tia. I never had to worry about that."

"You don't have to worry about me at all."

"Then what would I do with my time?" Alma said, with just a hint of petulance.

"We'll think of something. I love you." Even as Alma teared up, Tia heard her father's footsteps. And saw he looked very harassed, very displeased. Without thinking,

she instinctively stepped between him and her flustered mother.

“You’ve been invaded,” Tia said cheerfully. “I dropped by to see you and got the bonus of running into Mother. She needs the footed Stourbridge vase boxed and wrapped as a wedding gift.”

“Which?” His gaze narrowed as he followed Tia’s gesture. After a brief study of the selection, he nodded. “I’ll take care of it. Alma, I’ve told you to check with me before you pick out anything.”

“She didn’t want to bother you.” Determined, Tia kept her voice bright. “But I couldn’t resist. Are you terribly busy?”

“As a matter of fact, it’s been a distressing morning. Morningside Antiquities was broken into last night.”

Alma pressed a hand on her heart. “Burglarized? I live in fear of that happening here. I won’t get a wink of sleep tonight worrying about it.”

“Alma, it didn’t happen here.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” she predicted. “Crime is running rampant. Why, a person isn’t safe walking out of her own home. She isn’t safe *in* her home.”

“Thank goodness Father’s seen you have such excellent security here, and at home,” Tia commented. “Mother, you should sit down, catch your breath. I know with your empathic nature, hearing of someone else’s misfortune upsets you. What you need is a nice calming cup of chamomile,” Tia continued, soothing as she helped her mother to a chair across the showroom.

She got her settled, asked a clerk to see to the tea, then went back to her father.

“When did you learn to do that?” he wanted to know. “Handle your mother?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I realized you could use a little help in that area, and I haven’t been any. I haven’t been a very good daughter, to either of you. I’d like that to change.”

“It seems to me a lot of things are changing.” He touched her cheek in a rare outward gesture of affection. “I don’t know when I’ve seen you look better, Tia.”

“Oh, it’s a new sweater and—”

He kept his hand on her cheek. “It’s not just the sweater.”

“No.” And she did something she rarely did. She lifted her hand and covered his. “It’s not.”

“Maybe it’s time we took a break in routine. Why don’t I take you and your mother out to lunch?”

“I’d love that, but I can’t today. I’m already running behind. Can I take a rain check?”

“Of course.”

“Well . . . Ah . . . it’s terrible about Morningside. Was anything stolen?”

“I’m not sure. Apparently they did get into the building, but only briefly, as the alarms went off. Anita hasn’t completed her inventory check.”

“Oh, you’ve spoken to her.”

“I went over this morning, to offer my help and concern. And,” he added with a faint smile, “to see if I could pry out more details. It also seemed like the perfect opportunity to mention I’d heard rumors about one of the Fates, and Athens. She seemed very interested. So much so I embellished and told her I remembered something, vaguely, being passed down through the family about Henry Wyley planning on going on to Athens after his trip to London.”

“Oh! I didn’t think of that.”

“I wouldn’t imagine. You’ve never been good at embellishment. Though that, too, might have changed.”

“I appreciate what you did,” Tia said, evading. “I know it was an odd request. I wonder why you agreed to do it.”

“You’ve never asked me for anything before,” he said simply.

“Then I’ll ask for something else. Stay away from Anita Gaye. She’s not what she seems. I have to go. I’m very late.” She brushed her lips over his cheek. “I’ll call you soon.”

She rushed off in such a hurry, she all but collided with a tall, dark-suited man as he came in. She nearly overbalanced, flushed scarlet, then sidestepped clumsily.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“No problem.” Marvin Jasper watched her dash down

the sidewalk. He took a detour, backtracking until he was away from the entrance of Wyley's. Keeping his eye on Tia's retreating back, he made a call on his cell phone.

"Jasper. Just ran into the Marsh woman coming out of Wyley's."

"Alma? Marsh's wife?" Anita demanded.

"No, the young one. The daughter. In a big hurry. Looked guilty. I can catch up and tail her if you want."

"No. She always looks guilty about something. Do what I told you to do and don't bother me again until you have something."

With a shrug, Jasper pocketed the phone. He'd follow orders and keep the bitch happy. He knew she'd done Dubrowsky but it didn't worry him. Jasper figured he could handle himself, and the Gaye woman, better than his unfortunate former associate.

So much better that when everything shook down, he'd arrange a little accident for the ice bitch. A fatal one. He'd probably have to take care of the Marsh woman, too. And her old man. But once the slate was clean, he'd be the one walking off with those three statues.

Thinking Rio might be a nice retirement spot, he walked back to Wyley's, to follow orders.

JACK MET BOB Robbins at the bar and grill two blocks from the station house. It was too early for the change or end of shifts, so there was only a scatter of cops and civilian customers. The place smelled of onions and coffee. In a few hours, the scent of beer and whiskey would predominate.

Jack slid into the booth across from Bob. "You called," he said, "you buy." He ordered a Reuben, a side of fries and a draft. "What's up?"

"You tell me. Morningside."

"Lew caught that."

"Tell me anyway."

"The B and E got through the first level of security, gained entrance to the target. Secondary kicked in, as de-

signed, and all hell broke loose. Word is the boys in blue responded within two minutes. That's good hustle."

"How'd they get through, Jack?"

"We're doing a system check, a full analysis." He stretched out his legs. "If you're thinking about hassling any of my people over this, you're wasting your time and you'll piss me off. If any of mine had turned on a client, they wouldn't have missed the second level, would have taken out what they went in for and would even now be sunning themselves on a foreign beach where extradition wouldn't be a weighty issue."

"Maybe they did get what they went in for."

Jack picked up his beer when it was served, watched Bob over the foam as he took his first sip. "Which would be?"

"Again, you tell me."

"As far as I know, the client hasn't completed her inventory check. And I can tell you, all my people are accounted for. Burdett hasn't earned its reputation by hiring thieves. You taking this over from Lew?"

"No. I'm working something that might be connected. Couple of things just don't gel for me. Here's the big one. I go years without anyone saying the name Anita Gaye to me. Now, within a short span of time, you drop it on me in connection with some two-bit muscle who ends up dead in Jersey. I hear it from Lew when he catches a burglary attempt at her place of business, which involves your security. And I get it tossed in my lap again today, from a woman who knows you."

Jack leaned back as his lunch slid in front of him. "I know a lot of women."

"Tia Marsh. Says you told her that her phones are tapped."

"They are."

"Yeah, they are." Bob nodded, picked up his burger. "I just checked it out. Question is, why are they?"

"My guess is somebody wants to know who she's talking to, and about what."

"Yeah, ele-fucking-mentary, Watson. She thinks it might be Anita Gaye."

Jack set his beer down, carefully. "Tia Marsh tell you that?"

"What's going on, Jack?"

"I've got nothing solid. But let me tell you this." He leaned forward, lowered his voice. "Whoever got into that building knew enough about the system to get in. And not enough to stay in and finish. I always see to it the client knows as much as he wants to know about the operation. In this case, with this client, she knew the basics."

"She wants something out of her own place, why doesn't she just walk out with it?"

"How the hell do I know? Five minutes, Bob. The primary was down for five maximum before secondary kicked the alarms. Your guys responded in two. Coming in from that section, I can't see how they got squat out of there in under seven minutes. Even if the thing ran smooth as silk while they were inside, they couldn't have gotten much. I'd be real interested to see what she files on her insurance claim."

"Doesn't sound to me you like your client, Jack."

"Can't say I do." He went back to his sandwich. "That's personal. On another level, I've got nothing on her but speculation."

"How do you connect her to Dubrowsky?"

"Round about." He moved his shoulders. "Another client told me how Anita was hassling her about a certain art piece. Enough high pressure that this client was uneasy, and tells me how she's seen this guy following her. Described him to me, I described him to you, and you tell me he's stiff. She ID'd him from the picture you slipped me."

"I want a name."

"Not without her okay. You know I can't, Bob. Besides, all she knows is Anita spooked her, this guy tailed her, and now he's dead."

"What about the art piece?"

"Pieces, actually. They're called the Three—"

"Fates," Bob finished, and Jack registered surprise.

"You *are* a detective."

"Got the decoder ring to prove it. What do these statues have to do with you?"

"I just happen to have one."

Bob's gaze narrowed like pinpoints. "Which one?"

"Atropus. Third Fate. Came through the family, the Brit side of it. Anita doesn't know that, and I want to keep it that way. She wanted me to get some information on them for her, which got me to thinking and led me to Tia Marsh and my other client."

"Why'd she come to you if she didn't know you had one?"

"She knows I'm a collector, and she knows I've got connections."

"Okay." Satisfied, Bob dipped into Jack's fries. "Keep going."

"The Marsh woman's phones are tapped. My client, who's the lead to Lachesis, or Fate number two, is being tailed. And Anita's been pressuring them both. You do the math."

"Plugging a guy full of bullets is a long way from trying to finesse a couple of statues."

"You talked to her. What did you think?"

Bob said nothing for a moment. "What I think is I'm going to dig deeper."

"While you're at it, look into a homicide on West Fifty-third a few weeks ago. Black guy, dancer. Beat to death in his apartment."

"Goddamn it, Jack. If you know something about an open homicide—"

"I'm giving you information," Jack said evenly. "Check the witness descriptions of the guy who went in and out of the building. It's going to match the hired fist you got from New Jersey. Find a way to get a warrant for Gaye's private line. I bet you'll find some interesting calls on it. I've gotta go."

"Stay out of the police work, Jack."

"Happy to. I've got a hot date with a gorgeous Irish redhead."

"The one you brought into the station? Rebecca," Bob remembered. "She your client?"

"Nope. She's the woman I'm going to marry."

"In your dreams."

“There, too.” He dug in his pocket, pulled out a box and flipped it open. “What do you think?”

Bob’s jaw dropped, nearly bounced off the table as he stared at the ring. “Holy shit, Burdett, you’re serious.”

“First time around, I went to Tiffany’s. But Rebecca, she’ll like the heirloom thing. This was my great-great-grandmother’s.”

“Well, hell.” Bob climbed out of the booth and gave Jack a one-armed hug. “Congratulations. How the hell am I supposed to be pissed off at you?”

“You’ll find a way. You want to give me a wedding present? Take Anita Gaye down.”

Twenty-six

WHEN he was parked, sitting behind the wheel of Jack's SUV, Gideon was happy enough with his assignment. It was just when he actually had to drive that he cursed his luck. It was bad enough to be swallowed up by the intrinsic anger of New York City traffic and its seemingly mad competition between cars, cabs, the ubiquitous delivery trucks, the kamikaze bike messengers and the always-in-a-damn-hurry pedestrians. But he had to contend with it all from the wrong bloody side of the road.

He'd practiced. Even managed to negotiate the viciously jammed cross streets, the wide avenues where everyone drove as if they were on a raceway, without killing anyone. And so had been elected for this task.

As he sat brooding a half block from Anita's posh house, he wondered whether any of them had considered that driving around with a coach and driving alone—with the express purpose of following a car to the airport—were vastly different matters.

Still, he'd been drafted for it, as he and Rebecca were the only ones whose faces Anita wasn't personally familiar with. And Rebecca was needed at the keyboard.

He'd have felt better if Cleo had been there with him.

Egging him on, or giving him grief or . . . just being there. He'd become entirely too used to having her around.

They'd have to work out what they intended to do about that once they'd dealt with the Fates. With Anita. They'd have to work out the single fact that he couldn't live in New York and stay sane. Visit, certainly, but live in a place so crowded you could barely draw one clean breath? No, not even for her.

Christ, he wanted the sea again, and the quiet rain. He wanted the hills and the sound of cathedral bells. Most of all he wanted to wake up in a place where he knew if he walked down to the quay or the boatyard, or just wandered the steep streets, he would come across people who knew him, knew his family.

Who were family.

She'd probably hate it in Cobh, he thought and tapped his fingers restlessly on the wheel. The very things that sustained him would likely drive her mad.

Why should two people who came from such different places, who wanted such different things, have fallen in love?

One of fate's little jokes, he supposed.

In the end, she'd probably go her way and he his, so the rest of the thread of their lives would spin out with an ocean between them. The thought already depressed him. He was so busy chewing over his own misery that he nearly didn't register the long black limo that glided up in front of Anita's town house.

He tucked away his personal troubles and clicked into gear. "Well now," he said aloud. "Travel in style, don't you?"

He watched the uniformed driver get out, walk to the front door and ring the bell. Gideon was too far away to see who answered, but there was a brief conversation, then the driver returned to the car.

They both waited a full ten minutes by Gideon's watch before another man—the butler, Gideon assumed—came out carrying two large suitcases. A young woman trailed behind him rolling another, smaller case.

While the three of them loaded the trunk, Gideon

pressed the buttons of the car phone. "They're loading the car," he told his brother. "A limo big as a whale, and enough luggage for a modeling troupe."

He got his first in-person look at Anita when she stepped through the door. Her hair was copper bright and sleekly styled around a face that looked to be soft to the touch. Her body—and he could easily see what had appealed to his brother there—was very female with its generous curves.

He wondered, studying her, what had twisted inside her to make her what she was. He wondered, too, why others couldn't see how out of place she was with her polish and gloss in that fine, dignified old house.

Perhaps she saw it, Gideon mused, whenever she looked in the mirror. That might be one more thing that drove her.

And he'd leave the philosophizing to Tia.

"Here's the woman of the hour, just coming out."

"Remember, if you lose them, you've just to go to the airport and pick her up again there."

"I'm not going to lose them. I can drive better on the wrong side of the road than most of the people in this city can on the right side. They're pulling away now. I'll get back to you from the airport."

Malachi hung up, turned to Tia. "They're moving."

"I feel a little queasy." She pressed a hand to her stomach. "But I'm starting to like it. I don't know what I'm going to do when my life gets back to normal."

He took her hand, pressed his lips to her fingers. "We'll have to see it doesn't."

Flustered, Tia pressed the intercom and contacted the garage. "She's on her way to the airport. Gideon's behind her."

"Then let's move out." Jack clicked off.

Tia pushed away from the console, rose.

"Steady?" Malachi asked her.

"Steady enough. Have you ever planted anything?"

"Like a tree?" He stepped into the elevator with her.

"I was thinking more like seeds. Different seeds in different places." She took a deep breath. "It's going to be a very interesting garden when we're done."

“Any regrets?”

“Not so far. And I don’t intend to have any.” She stepped out into the garage, looked over to where Cleo, Rebecca and Jack were already beside the van. These people, she thought, these fascinating people were her friends.

No, she didn’t have any regrets.

“Let’s rock and roll,” Cleo said.

On this leg, Tia manned the keyboard and Malachi communication. With Jack and Rebecca in the cab, Cleo chilled out with Queen blasting through her headphones.

“I don’t know how she can do that,” Tia commented. “Relax that way.”

Malachi flipped a glance over his shoulder to where Cleo sat back, body swaying to her music. “Storing energy. She’ll need plenty of it later.” He hit a switch and spoke to Rebecca on her two-way. “Gideon says there’s heavy traffic on something called the Van Wyck. He still has them, but they’re moving slowly just now.”

“That’s fine. We’re nearly at the parking lot.”

“You be careful, darling.”

“Oh, I’ll be better than careful. I’ll be good. Over and out.”

Rebecca tucked the two-way back into the holster on her belt. She stored energy her own way as Jack pulled the van into the parking lot. She went over every step of her assignment in her head.

When she got out of the van, walked around to Jack, he held out a hand. “Holding hands as we return to the scene of the crime.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “It’s so bloody romantic.”

“Nervous?” he said as they walked.

“More revved up, I’d say. That’s a good thing.”

“Don’t rush. We want to move through this stage quickly, but we’ve got the time to do it right.”

“Do your part. I’ll do mine.”

Together they walked directly to the front entrance of Morningside. Casually, Jack keyed in the new code he’d programmed into his palm converter, then took out the keys he’d had made as the security system shut down.

“We’re clear,” he said softly, then unlocked the door. After they slipped inside, he relocked the door, reengaged the outer alarms. “And we’re in. Go,” he ordered, but Rebecca was already dashing for the stairs.

Guided by the beam of her flashlight, she raced up to Anita’s office. She took the key out of her pocket and, trusting she and Jack had succeeded in realigning the security, unlocked the door.

After closing the drapes over the window facing Madison, she switched on the desk light, then sat down at Anita’s computer. And rubbed her hands together.

“All right, handsome, let’s make love.”

Downstairs, Jack reconfigured the security system. It would go back on-line, complete and better than ever, after he and Rebecca were clear. While he worked, he listened to Malachi through his headset.

“They’re at the airport. She’s been dropped off at the curb. Gideon’s finding a place to park. He’ll pick her up again inside the terminal. What’s your status there?”

“Coming along. Put Tia on. I want to run the first checklist.”

“You’re up.” Malachi handed her a headset.

“Jack?”

“I’m giving you the first encryption. Key it in.”

Behind her, Cleo yawned. She lifted one earpiece so the muffled sound of bass and drums beat into the air. “Everything cool?”

AT THE KEYBOARD, Rebecca hacked her way through Anita’s computer security. It was, she thought with some glee, pathetic. No more than a simple password lock and easily dispatched. She found the insurance file in her first document search. Opening it, she searched out the inventory list and claim form Anita had generated that day.

“Tsk-tsk. Padded the claim already, didn’t you? But so conservatively. We’re going to improve on that.” Out of her pocket she took the short list Jack and Tia had made. And got to work.

As she doctored the claim form, she heard her brother’s

voice in her ear. "He's caught up with her. She's just walked into the first-class lounge. There's an hour and fifteen before her flight."

"I'm into the file. I wonder what the devil the Nara period is, and why some plaque from it's worth so flaming much money. Jack, you can check that piece, and the Chiparus figure. Are you going to get to the earbobs?"

"I'll get them. Log them in."

"Don't forget the bugs Tia planted."

"Working on it. Be quiet. Tia, set to run next encryption."

Within fifty minutes, Rebecca finished listing and detailing the items Tia had selected on her wanderings through Morningside, had adjusted the computer's date and time to stamp the work for earlier in the day. At a time, thanks to the little mic under the chair, they knew Anita had been alone in her office.

After printing out the claim, she wiggled her fingers, then signed the bottom of the form with a fine—if she did say so herself—forgery of Anita's signature. She dated it, then typed up a detailed instruction list for the assistant.

She had the clock reset, the computer shut down, the mic Tia had put under the chair in her bag and the drapes open again when she heard Jack coming up the stairs.

"We're set here."

"Check again," he ordered.

"Yes, Mr. Anal-Retentive Sir. Drapes, computer, lamp, flashlight, mic and articles suitable for framing," she added, waving the file in her hand.

She relocked the office door before strolling over to lay the file on Anita's assistant's desk. "Being an efficient soul, the girl will likely have this sent off first thing in the morning. I should tell you she'd already added a couple of things to the claim. Some sort of plate that's apparently worth some twenty-eight thousand American dollars."

"Added to this . . ." Jack tapped the bag on his shoulder. "That takes her claim over two million. She'll sure have a lot of explaining to do. Security's reset. We'll bring it back on-line when we're clear."

"Then our work here is done. Let's go."

“There’s one more thing.” He dug in his pocket, took out the ring box. When he flipped open the top, Rebecca leaned in to study it in the beam of her flashlight.

“That’s a lovely sparkler. Did you steal that from here?”

“No. I brought it in with me. Want it?”

She looked back up at him, cocked her head. “You’re asking me to marry you here, in a building we’ve burglarized?”

“I’ve already asked you to marry me,” he reminded her. “I’m giving you the ring here, in a building we’ve *technically* burglarized. It belonged to my great-great-grandmother. She was wearing it when your great-great-grandfather saved her life.”

“That’s lovely. That’s all-around lovely, Jack. I’ll take it.” She tugged off her glove, held out her hand. “And you.”

He slid it onto her finger, dipped his head for a kiss to seal the bargain.

“That’s a very sweet moment,” Malachi said through the headpieces. “Congratulations and best wishes to you both. Now would you mind getting your asses out of there?”

“Oh, stuff it, Mal.” Rebecca leaned up for one more kiss. “We’re on our way.”

When they got back to the van, Cleo slid the partition open so she and Rebecca could change places. “Let’s see the bauble,” Cleo demanded. Impatient, she tugged off Rebecca’s glove. “Whoa. Some rock.”

“Save the girl stuff for later.” Jack strapped into his seat. “Bring the system on-line.”

“Now that we’re engaged, he’s full of orders.” Rebecca stepped through and took over the controls from Tia. “Booting it up.”

As she worked, Malachi bent over her, pressed his lips to the top of her head and made her smile. “I’m going to get all gooey and sentimental in just a bit.”

“Me, too.”

“It’s a beautiful ring.” Unable to resist, Tia leaned down to get a closer look. The diamond flashed as Rebecca’s fingers raced over the keyboard. “I’m so happy for you.”

“We’ll have a party tonight, won’t we? For all sorts of

reasons. Primary's up, backup booting," she announced. "And there we are. All neat and tidy." She leaned back, took the bottle of water Malachi offered. "We've done it."

"Time for Act Two." Cleo propped her feet on the dash. "We got time to grab a pizza?"

GIDEON SAT IN Kennedy Airport, reading a paperback copy of Bradbury's *Something Wicked*. He'd settled into a gate area where he could easily observe the first-class lounge.

The flight to Athens was on time and had already started to board. He was beginning to feel a bit twitchy, yearned for a cigarette.

He shifted in his seat, turned a page without reading as Anita strolled out of the lounge. He let her get another gate down before he rose and wandered after her.

Like dozens of other travelers, he pulled out a cell phone. "She's queuing up to board," he said quietly. "Flight's on schedule."

"Let us know when it, and she, are in the air. Oh, by the way, Becca and Jack got engaged."

"Did they?" Though he kept his attention on the back of Anita's head, Gideon grinned at his brother's news. "Official and all?"

"She's wearing a ring with a diamond fit to blind you. We're heading toward the second target now. If all goes well, we'll meet you back at base on schedule. You can see it for yourself."

"Good thing I've got me sunglasses. She's just going down the jetway. Thirty minutes to takeoff. I'm sitting down here, going back to my book. I'll ring you back."

THEY PARKED THREE blocks away, and waited.

"See, I told you we had time for pizza."

Jack slanted Cleo a look. "Why aren't you fat as a cow?"

"Metabolism." She took a Hershey's Big Block out of her bag, unwrapped one end. "It's the one useful thing my

mother passed on to me. So, are you and Rebecca going to live here, or over on the Emerald Isle?"

"Some of both, I imagine, and here and there. We'll work it out."

"Yeah. It's handy you've got a gig where you bounce around a lot."

"What about you? You going back to dancing when this is over? With your cut, you could buy a chunk of the Rockettes."

"Dunno. Probably hang loose awhile." She munched on chocolate. "Maybe I'll open my own club or a dance school. Something that doesn't keep me hauling butt from audition to audition. Right now, I can't think further than making Anita pay for Mikey."

"We've got a good start on that."

"Man. He'd get such a rush out of all this shit. Jack?"

"Yeah."

"What if it's not in there? What if she took it with her or something?"

"Then we go to Plan B."

"What's Plan B?"

"I'll let you know when we get there." He looked at her as Malachi's signal came through his headset. "She's in the air."

"Curtain up," Cleo said, and stepped nimbly out of the van.

"You want to go over anything again? Floor plan, hand signals?"

"No, I got it."

"We've got two people in the building this time," he reminded her. "Two live-in servants. We have to do this quietly."

"I'm a fucking cat. Don't worry. Do you think this is some kind of record?"

"What's that?"

"Breaking into two places, for a total of three B and E's in twenty-four hours, without actually stealing anything."

"We're taking the Fate."

"Yeah, but it already belongs to Mal, and Tia, I guess.

So that doesn't count. I think we could get into the Guinness guy's record book for this."

"A lifelong dream of mine."

They walked by the house once. The lights were off on the second floor. "Looks like they've settled in for the evening. Servants' quarters there, south corner of the house."

"Housekeeper and butler, check. You think they get it on while the boss is away?"

Jack scratched his jaw. "I'd rather not get that image stuck in my head just now. We go up the east side to the bedroom terrace. We'll be exposed about fifteen seconds."

"Takes more than that to shake a former stripper, pal."

"Maybe you could do a number for my bachelor party." He grinned as Rebecca's pithy comment came through his headphones. "Or maybe not. Love of my life? Shut down the alarms."

He ignored the stream of cabs that drove by, and the radio car. At Rebecca's signal, he clamped a hand on Cleo's and pulled her off the sidewalk and into the shadows of the house.

They hooked lines to harnesses and were rising up the side of the building, rolling over the stone rail and crouched on the terrace before another word was spoken.

He gestured for Cleo to stow the gear while he crabwalked to the terrace doors. "Take out the locks, east terrace, second level," he said quietly into his headphones. He waited until he heard them snick, then rose, exposing himself again to deal with the manual locks.

From his jacket pocket, he pulled out a small case, chose his lock pick from it.

"Bet they didn't teach you that in security school," Cleo mentioned in a low voice.

"You'd be surprised."

He dealt with the dead bolt, then, easing the door open, waited for Cleo to slip inside before he relocked it.

A good crime-scene investigator would spot the job, he knew. But he didn't think that was going to come up.

"Obsession." Cleo sniffed the air. "Her perfume. Fits, doesn't it?"

“Lock the doors. Hallway, straight ahead. Master bath on the left.”

She moved through the shadowed light to oblige, and continued to whisper. “Should I ask how come you know so much about her bedroom setup?”

“Professional knowledge only.” When the doors were locked, he moved directly to the closet.

“Holy shit, this is bigger than my old apartment.” She fingered the sleeve of a jacket as she moved inside. “Not bad, either. Think she’d notice if I copped a couple things? I’m rebuilding my wardrobe.”

“We’re not here to shop.”

“Hey, shopping’s the only merit badge I ever earned.” She snagged one of a pair of snakeskin pumps off a wall of shelves. “My size. It’s fate.”

“You’ve got a job to do here, Cleo.”

“Okay, okay.” But she stuffed the shoes into her bag before she crouched to unroll his tools.

Jack opened the panel to the safe and exposed the security pad. He interfaced his portable computer, engaged the search.

“Sooner or later, she’s bound to figure out you’re the only one who could pull this off,” Cleo commented. “She’s going to be really pissed off at you.”

“Yeah. I’m shaking.” He watched the readout as the first two numbers of the combination of seven locked into place. “What’s our time?”

“Four minutes, twenty seconds. We’re skating right along.” While she waited, Cleo pushed through a rack of suits. “I don’t go for the lady-suit look. But hey, this one’s cashmere. Bet it’ll look sharp on Tia.”

She rolled it up, added it to her booty.

“Combination’s locked,” Jack told her. “Cross your fingers, gorgeous.”

She did, on both hands, then stepped behind him. “Son of a bitch.” She breathed out audibly when he opened the door. Clotho glinted like a star. “There she is. You copy that, you guys? We’ve got her.” She held out the padded bag for Jack. “Rebecca? I’m giving your man a big, sloppy kiss. So deal with it.”

When she was done, she reached for her bag again. "Don't close it yet, Jack. I got a little present for Anita."

"We don't leave anything behind," he began, then stared at what Cleo pulled out of her bag. "What is that? Is that Barbie?"

"Yeah. To replace the statue. I picked out the wardrobe on a quick trip to FAO Schwarz." Gently, Cleo stood the black-leather-clad, buxom blond doll in the safe. "I call her Cat Burglar Barbie. See, she's got a little goody bag. It's got lock picks in it I made out of little safety pins, and this tiny plastic doll, pretty much to scale, I painted silver to represent the Fate."

"Cleo, you're a regular Martha Stewart."

"I got hidden talents, all right. Bye-bye, Barbie," she added, and blew a kiss as Jack closed the safe.

They shut the panel, gathered the tools.

"Okay, once we leave this room, no talking. Hand signals only. Out the door, to the right. Down the steps, to the left. Stay close."

"I'm practically riding piggyback."

"This part's trickier," he reminded her. "We get caught in here, it's all for nothing."

"Just lead the way."

They slipped out of the bedroom. As they couldn't risk flashlights now, they waited for their eyes to adjust to the dark of the second-level hallway. The house was silent, so silent Cleo could hear the ticking of her own heart. And wondered how it had managed to rise up into her throat.

At Jack's signal, they moved forward, footsteps soft over the Karastan runner.

At the base of the stairs Cleo began to think the place was more tomb than house. The air was cool, the rooms soundless, and the street sounds muffled by drape-covered windows.

Then she heard it, the instant before Jack froze and she bumped into his back. The sound of a door opening, a spill of light from the far end of the first-floor hallway and the shuffle of footsteps.

She and Jack moved as one into the cover of the first doorway. There were distant voices, almost a tunnel ef-

fect. It took her several sweaty seconds to realize the house wasn't full of people. Television, she decided, then had to swallow a nervous chuckle when she recognized the obnoxious, thrumming music from *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

Perfect, she thought. Dead-on perfect.

When the light went off again, a door closed, she counted to ten until she felt Jack relax beside her. Just as she counted the steps they took down the hall, in case she had to make a dash back to cover.

They melted like shadows into the library and secured the door at their backs.

They moved fast now, and without words.

Penlights guided them to the glass-fronted bookshelves. There was a quiet rattle and creak that sounded like cannon fire in the silence as he opened a case. He cleared a section, passing her volume after volume of a leather-bound collection of Shakespeare. When the safe was exposed, he drew out his portable.

He tapped his watch. Cleo flashed the twenty-minute sign before she crouched, unzipped his bag and carefully took out the items chosen from Morningside.

He placed them in the far reaches of the small vault, behind an impressive stack of fifties, leather files and numerous jewelry cases.

When the safe was closed again, they changed places, with Cleo reshelving the books and Jack stowing all the gear. They both jumped like rabbits when the phone rang.

He gave her the hurry-up sign, then bolted to the door to unlock it, crack it open. Cleo was breathing down his neck when light flooded the hallway. With one bag clutched at her breast like a baby, Cleo dived behind a hunter-green leather winged-back chair. With another bag slung over his shoulder, Jack angled himself behind the door and tried not to breathe as the footsteps came briskly down the hall.

"One thing then another," an irritated female voice uttered. "As if I've got nothing better to do this time of night than take messages."

She shoved open the door. Jack caught the knob with

his hand before it slammed into his crotch and held it there as he pressed himself into the shielding triangle.

Light poured into the room when the woman hit the switch for the overheads.

Rebecca spoke into his ear, warning him they were going overtime.

He heard the housekeeper march to the desk, slap something on the polished wood. "Hope she stays away for a month. Give us some breathing room."

Footsteps, shuffling now, headed back to the door. There was a pause, a soft snort that might have been approval or derision, then the lights went out.

Jack stayed just as he was, willed Cleo to do the same, as the footsteps retreated. He didn't move an inch until he heard the quick slam of a door from down the hallway.

Gently, very gently, he nudged the door open. In the shadowy light he saw Cleo, still huddled behind the chair. Her eyes gleamed in the dark as they met his. She rolled them wildly, then eased to her feet.

They crept out of the library, slipped silently down the hall to the foyer. And walked right out the front door.

"SO I'M PLAYING rabbit behind this chair, and there's Jack doing his Claude Rains impression behind the door, and all I can see are her feet. She's got on fuzzy slippers. Pink ones, and all I can think is I'm gonna get busted by some woman wearing fuzzy pink slippers. It's mortifying."

Because she'd wanted to get horizontal as soon as possible, Cleo had given Rebecca back the shotgun position and was stretched out, as best as possible, on the floor of the van.

"Man. *Man*. I need to take some alcohol internally really soon."

"You were great." Jack glanced in the rearview mirror. "Nerves of steel."

"Yeah, nerves of jelly for a moment there. Oh hey!" She rolled herself over, eased up to a crouched position. "I got you a present, Tia."

“A present?”

“Yeah.” She dug into her bag and pulled out the balled-up suit. “Great color for you. Sorta eggplant, I think. Good texture. Cashmere.”

“Is this . . . is this hers?”

“So what? Have it cleaned, fumigated, whatever.” Cleo shrugged as she dug in the bag again. “It’ll look better on you anyway. Just like these shoes are gonna look better on me.” She set them aside, dug in again. “Snagged you this little evening purse, Rebecca. Judith Leiber. It’s not bad.”

“How the hell did you get all that stuff?” Jack demanded.

“Leftover skill from my shoplifting days. I’m not proud of it, but I was sixteen and rebellious. It’s a cry for attention, right, Tia?”

“Well . . . don’t you think she’ll notice this is missing?”

“Hell, she’s got half the stock from Bergdorf’s in there. What’s one outfit? Besides, she’s going to be too busy to do a wardrobe check once she gets back and our shit hits her fan.”

“You’ve got such a way with words.” Malachi reached down, patted her head.

“Tell me.” And she felt the last of the residual tension fade when they drove into the garage and she saw Jack’s SUV. Gideon was back, and all was right with her world. “So, we can order pizza now, right?”

Twenty-seven

“THERE they are.” Tia circled the table again. On it, the three silver Fates, linked at their bases, glinted in the late-morning sunlight.

“It almost seemed like a dream,” she said quietly. “Like a dream, last night and everything that led up to it. Or a play I somehow stumbled into. But there they are.”

“You never stumbled, Tia.” Standing behind her, Malachi laid his hands on her shoulders. “You’ve been rock-steady, through and through.”

“That’s a dream in itself. They haven’t been together for a century. Perhaps two. We united them. That means something. Eternal and secure. That’s what’s said about them in mythology. We have to see that these symbols of them are just that. Secure.”

“They won’t be divided again.”

“Spin, measure, cut.” She touched each, lightly, in turn. “What’s in a life and what it touches. These are more than art, Malachi, and more than the dollars anyone would pay to own them. They’re a responsibility.”

She shifted the base, lifted Clotho, and thought of Henry W. Wyley. He’d held it the same way, had sought the others. And died in the seeking. “My blood and yours are twined in this. I wonder if they understood, even a lit-

tle, what a long thread she wove for them. It wasn't cut off at their deaths. It's spun out to you and me, and the rest of us. Even Anita."

Still holding the Fate, she turned to him. "Threads spinning out. Two men from opposite arcs of life, starting a circle with this between them. The circle widens with Cleo and Jack, Rebecca and Gideon. And the threads spin on. If we take what these three images represent, if we allow ourselves to believe it, Anita's part in it was meant to be."

"So we give her no responsibility for what she's done?" he demanded. "For the blood she spilled, for nothing more than greed."

"No. The good and bad, the flaws and virtues are woven into the threads. The choices, the responsibilities are hers. And Fate always demands payment." Carefully, Tia set Clotho with her sisters. "And eventually, always collects. I suppose I'm saying she may not be the only one to pay a price."

"You shouldn't be sad today of all days." He drew her into his arms, stroked his fingers through her sunny cap of hair. "We've done most of what we set out to do. And we'll finish it."

"I'm not sad. But I am wondering what happens when we do finish it."

"When we do, the pattern changes again," he said. He rubbed his cheek over the top of her head. "There's something I should have told you before. Something I should've made clear."

She braced, shut her eyes. And the elevator doors opened.

"Okay, break it up. We've got supplies." Cleo, arms loaded with marketing bags, strode into the loft just ahead of Gideon. "Jack and Rebecca are on their way up. He's got word on Anita."

"SHE ARRIVED ON schedule," Jack relayed, "and was driven to the home of Stefan Nikos. Stefan was a friend and client of Paul Morningside, and both he and his wife are known for their art and antique collection, their charitable works. And their hospitality."

"It's olive oil, isn't it?" Rebecca plucked one of the olives from her plate and studied it. "I've read of him in *Money* magazine and *Time* and so on. He's swimming in olive oil. Odd that such a homely little thing could make anyone so rich."

"Olive groves," Jack agreed. "And vineyards, and the various by-products from both. He has homes on Athens, on Corfu, a pied-à-terre in Paris and a château in the Swiss Alps." He plucked one of the olives from Rebecca's plate, popped it into his mouth. "And security by Burdett in each location."

"You've a long reach, Jack," Malachi commented.

"Long enough. I spoke to Stefan last week after Tia planted the Athens seed."

"You might have told the rest of us," Rebecca retorted.

"Didn't know if the seed would sprout. Like I said, he was a friend of Morningside. He's not so fond of the widow. Me," he added with a slow grin, "he likes just fine. Fine enough to do me a favor. He's amused at the idea of stringing Anita along. He'll keep her busy for a couple days with rumors of Lachesis and the tall, sexy brunette who's hunting for the statue."

"Yeah? How am I liking Greece?"

"You're getting around," Jack told Cleo. "Not much time for sight-seeing."

"There's always next time."

"We'll have a week at the outside," Malachi calculated. "For the wheels to turn, to put everything else into play." He paused, scanned the faces around him. "It has to be said, though, and may as well be said now. We could stop where we are. We have the Fates."

Cleo surged up from her slouch. "She hasn't paid."

"Wait now, hear me out. We have what she wants. What she stole, what she's killed for. And we hurt no one. Added to that, we've complicated her life considerably with the insurance claim and in moving those pieces from Morningside into her personal safe."

"She'd already committed insurance fraud," Gideon commented. "We just upped the stakes. There's no guar-

antee that she won't slither out of it." He laid a hand on Cleo's thigh, felt the muscles vibrating.

"There's no guarantee of anything," Malachi returned. "But we can be sure she won't slither easily, not with those pieces tucked away in her library safe. And Jack's put a bug in the ear of his police friend about her. There's a good chance if we sit back, the system will work."

"Lew will bulldog it." Jack forked up some pasta salad. "Security tapes will show the pieces on her claim form were still in place after the break-in. Her life won't be a picnic while he's on her. The insurance investigator's going to take a really dim view of a claim in excess of two million when the client still has the merchandise."

"Maybe she pays a fine, does some community service. I—"

Jack held up his fork to interrupt Cleo's rant. "Just getting a visual of Anita in a soup kitchen. It's not bad. Doesn't play either, not for seven-figure fraud. Still, if we want her going all the way down, Bob has to tie her to Dubrowsky. If he can't connect her, he can't tie her to the murder, or to Cleo's friend."

"And she'd skate," Cleo said bitterly.

"Yeah, but she could skate anyway. That's where Mal's coming from. With what we did, she gets hit with insurance fraud, does a little time, and her glossy society-widow image ends up smeared."

"Sometimes," Tia said as everyone looked at her, "that sort of notoriety adds a sheen of its own."

"Good point," Jack agreed. "If we follow through with the rest, we skin her financially, and maybe," Jack said again, "we push her into making a mistake that locks it all down. There's a lot of ifs in there. Moving forward puts it all back in the mix."

"Um." Tia lifted a hand, then let it fall. "The Moerae, the Fates, prophesied when Meleager was only a week old that he would die when a brand on his mother's hearth burned out. They sang his fate—Clotho, that he would be noble, Lachesis, that he'd be brave. And Atropus, looking

at the infant, that he would live only as long as that brand was not consumed.”

“I don’t get this,” Cleo began.

“Let her finish,” Gideon told her.

“Well, you see, Meleager’s mother, desperate to protect her baby, hid the brand away in a chest. If it didn’t burn out, he’d be safe. So her son grew up, and as a man, Meleager killed his mother’s brothers. In anger and grief at the slaughter, she took the brand out of the chest and burned it. So Meleager died. Avenging her brothers, she lost her son.”

“Fine. Mikey stands for my brother, but that bitch sure as hell doesn’t stand for my kid. So what?”

“The point is,” Tia said gently, “revenge is never free. And it never brings back what was lost. If we move forward only for revenge, the price may be too high.”

Cleo got up. As Tia had done earlier, she walked over, circled the tables where the Fates stood. “Mikey was my friend. Gideon barely knew him, the rest of you didn’t know him at all.”

“We know you, Cleo,” Rebecca said quietly.

“Yeah, well. I’m not going to stand here and pretend I don’t want revenge, and I’m willing to pay the freight for it. But what I said before, the first time we all got together at Tia’s, that still holds. I want justice more. So, we’ve got these, and we’re rich. Big fucking deal.”

She turned her back on them. “If people just step back from what’s right, don’t stand up for a friend when it gets tough, what’s the damn point? Any one of you doesn’t want to get dragged into this, that’s cool. No harm, no foul, especially after all this. But I’m not done. I’m not done till she’s sitting in a cell cursing my name.”

Malachi looked at his brother, nodded. Then he laid a hand over Tia’s. “The story you told, darling. There’s another meaning to it.”

“Yes. Choice determines destiny.” She rose, walked to Cleo. “Lives circle around, intersect. Touch and bounce off each other. All we can do is our best, and follow the thread to the end. I don’t suppose justice is free either. We’ll just have to make it worth the price.”

“Okay.” Cleo’s vision blurred with tears. “I’ve gotta . . .”

She gave a helpless shrug, then walked quickly out of the room.

“No, let me,” Tia said as Gideon started to rise. “I could use a little crying jag myself.”

As Tia hurried before Cleo, Malachi reached for his beer. “Now that that’s settled, and we’re all on the same page more or less, I’m going to bring up other business. Of a more personal sort.” He took a deep drink to wet his throat. “The second part of a conversation we had before,” he said to Jack. “Well then. As head of the family—”

“Head of the family?” Rebecca gave a shout of laughter. “My arse. Ma’s head of the family.”

“She’s not here, is she?” Malachi said evenly and bristled at having his rhythm broken. “And I’m the oldest, so it falls to me to address the matter of this engagement.”

“It’s my engagement, and none of your concern.”

“Shut your mouth for five flaming minutes.”

“I’m getting another beer,” Gideon decided. “This should be entertaining.”

“Don’t you tell me to shut my mouth, you puffed-up, pea-brained monkey.”

“I could’ve done this out of your presence,” Malachi reminded her, and the cool tone warned of rising temper. “And saved myself the insults and abuse. And now, I’m talking to Jack.”

“Oh, talking to Jack, are you. And I’m to sit here with my hands folded and my head demurely bowed?” She threw a pillow at him.

“You wouldn’t know demure if it crawled down your throat and tickled your tonsils.” He threw the pillow back, bouncing it off her head. “And after I say my piece, you can say your own. But by God, I’m saying it.”

“Rebecca.” Jack spoke as she bared her teeth. “Why don’t you wait until he’s finished before you get pissed off?”

“Thank you, Jack. And first I’ll say you have all the pity in my heart for the life you’ll lead with this ill-mannered, bad-tempered, violent-natured female.” Malachi narrowed his eyes as she made a grab for the jade bowl on the coffee table and Jack clamped a hand on her wrist.

“Han dynasty. Stick with the pillows.”

“As I was saying,” Malachi continued. “I’m aware money isn’t an issue with you, but I want it clear my sister doesn’t come to you with empty pockets. She’s a quarter interest in our business, which does well enough. Whether or not she decides to continue to work actively in that business, the quarter interest remains hers. And she’s also entitled to her share of whatever comes out of this enterprise of ours.”

“The money doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to us,” Malachi corrected. “And it matters to Rebecca.” He lifted a brow at his sister.

“Maybe you aren’t a complete pea brain.” And she smiled at him.

“I’ve seen how things are between you, and I’m glad of it. For all her faults—and they are legion—we love her and want her happy. As far as the Sullivan business is concerned, you’re welcome to be as much a part of that as suits you.”

“Nicely done, Mal.” Gideon sat on the arm of his brother’s chair, lifted his glass in toast. “Da would have been pleased with that. And so, Jack, welcome to the family.”

“Thanks. I don’t know much about boats. Wouldn’t mind learning more.”

“Well now.” Rebecca grinned at her brothers. “I’m just the one to teach you.”

“We’ll talk about that.” He gave her knee a friendly pat before getting to his feet. “I’ve got one or two errands to run. I could use a hand,” he said to the other men.

“If the three of you are going gallivanting, so am I. I’m going to drag Cleo and Tia out to look at wedding dresses. Did I mention I’m wanting a big, white wedding?”

That stopped him. “Define ‘big.’”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Gideon advised him. “She’s got that gleam in her eye.”

It was still there three hours later when she came back loaded down with brides’ magazines, a wedding planner book Tia bought her as an engagement gift and the sexy little nightgown that had been Cleo’s gift.

"I still say lilies will make beautiful centerpieces for the reception."

"Right." Cleo winked at Tia. "They're not just for funerals anymore."

"The wildflower nosegays were so charming," Tia put in. "I can't believe I spent all that time in a flower shop and my sinuses stayed clear. I've had an allergy breakthrough."

"What are all those red spots on your face?" Cleo asked her, then roared as Tia made a dash for the Adam mirror in Jack's living area and did a thorough inspection for rashes or hives.

"I don't think that's funny. Not one bit."

"You know how she likes to joke," Rebecca commented, then glanced over toward the archway leading to the bedroom. The bags she held fell to the floor, and she was flying.

"Ma!"

"There's my girl." Eileen caught her, hugged her hard. "There's my pretty girl."

"Ma. What're you doing here? How did you get here? Oh, I missed you."

"What I'm doing is unpacking my things, and I got here on a plane. I missed you, too. Just let me look at you." Eileen pulled her back, studied her face. "Happy, are you?"

"I am, yes. Very happy."

"I knew he was for you when you brought him home for tea." She sighed, pressed her lips to Rebecca's brow while all the years whizzed by in her head. "Now, introduce me to your friends here, who I've already heard so much about from my boys."

"Tia and Cleo, my mother, Eileen Sullivan."

"It's lovely to meet you, Mrs. Sullivan." Malachi's mother, Tia thought, panicked. "I hope you had a pleasant flight."

"I felt like a queen, lolling about in first class."

"Yeah, well, it's a long one though." Uneasy, Cleo tugged on Tia's sleeve. "We'll split and let you rest up. Catch up. All that."

“Indeed you won’t.” Eileen’s smile was friendly, and her mind made up. “We’ll have a nice cozy pot of tea and a chat. The boys are down below doing some devious thing or the other, so we’ll take advantage of the time. Such a fine, big flat this is,” she added, glancing around. “There must be the makings for tea somewhere in it.”

“I’ll make it,” Tia said quickly.

“I’ll help.” Cleo nipped at her heels all the way into the kitchen. “What are we supposed to talk to her about?” she hissed. “Oh, hi, Mrs. Sullivan. We really enjoy sex with your sons when we’re not out breaking into buildings.”

“Oh God. Oh God.” Tia put her head in her hands. “What did we come in here for?”

“Tea.”

“Right. I forgot. Okay.” She opened two cupboards before she remembered where she herself had stored the tea. “Well, she has to know. Oh God!” Tia opened the fridge, found an open bottle of wine. She pulled out the stopper and took a pull straight from the bottle. “She has to know something about the other. Either Malachi or Gideon would call her regularly. We know she knows about the Fates and Anita and at least some portion of the plans. As for the other . . .”

Tia tried to calm down as she measured out tea. “They’re grown men, and she seems like a reasonable woman.”

“Easy for you. She’s probably going to be all right with the idea of her firstborn cozied up with a published author with a Ph.D. and an apartment on the Upper East Side. But I don’t see her doing cheers when she finds out her baby boy is doing it with a stripper.”

“That’s insulting.”

“Well, Jesus, Tia, who could blame her? I—”

“No, not to Mrs. Sullivan, to you.” With the tea canister still in hand, Tia turned. “You’re insulting a friend of mine, and I don’t like it. You’re brave and loyal and smart, and you have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to apologize for.”

“That was well said, Tia.” Eileen stepped into the kitchen and watched both women blanch. “I can see why Malachi’s so taken with you. And as for you,” she said to

Cleo. "It happens I trust my baby boy's judgment and have always admired his taste. And Mal's, as well. I'll start there with the both of you, and we'll see how we get on. See that water boils full before you pour it," she added. "Most Yanks never can get a decent pot of tea made."

When Jack came into the apartment thirty minutes later, he noted three things simultaneously. Tia was flustered, Cleo was stiff. And Rebecca was glowing.

It was Rebecca who rose, slowly, walked to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, brought her mouth to his for a long, lingering kiss.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome." He kept an arm around her waist as he looked over at her mother. "Settling in all right, Eileen?"

"Couldn't be more comfortable, thank you, Jack. Now, I'm hearing from the three girls here that you've all got more plans for this woman who's after hurting my family. I hope we can sit down and find a way I might help you out with them."

"I'm sure we'll think of something. According to my contact, the woman is even now combing Athens in search of a certain silver lady and a brunette." He came over, sat across from Cleo. "She bought a gun. It was the first thing she did. It's clear she's hoping to track you down, and when she does, she plans to play for keeps."

"She's going to be disappointed, isn't she?"

"And we're going to keep her that way." Gideon came in, Malachi behind him. And there was fury in his eyes. "Whatever plans are from this point, we're keeping you well away from her."

"Hey, listen, Slick—"

"The hell I will. She's not planning on having a chat with you. She's planning on getting what she's after, then killing you. Did you tell her where she got the gun?"

"Black market," Jack provided. "Unregistered Glock. She was careful. She didn't try to get a weapon through customs. Odds are she's not planning on bringing it back through either. She hopes to get her money's worth out of it, then ditch it."

“Like I said, she’s going to be disappointed.”

“And you’re on background duty from here out,” Gideon told her. “You help Rebecca with tech, Tia with research. And you stay in this flat or Tia’s. You don’t go out alone for any reason. And if you argue with me, I’ll lock you in a closet until it’s done.”

“Cleo, before you cosh my son, which I’m sure he deserves for any number of reasons, I’d like to say something.” Eileen sat comfortably, as she often did at her own kitchen table. “I’ve had a different view of things, as I haven’t been in the center of it. There’s a weak spot—an Achilles’ heel, you could say. That’d be apt, wouldn’t it,” Eileen said to Tia. “This woman knows your face, Cleo. She believes you’re holding something she’s already killed for. She’s focused on you now. That’ll change and shift a bit after she comes back here. But you’re the one thing she’s sure of. If she manages to get to you, she gets to all. Would that be the case, Mal?”

“It would, in a nutshell. We won’t risk losing you, Cleo, for your own sake. And I don’t think you’ll risk the whole of the matter just for the chance to thumb your nose in her face.”

“Okay, point taken. I’m a risk, so I stay covered.”

“And next time, Gideon,” Eileen said, “you might ask reasonably instead of tossing orders about. You make a fine cup of tea for a Yank, Tia.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Sullivan.”

“Let’s just make it Eileen, why don’t we? From what I gather here you’re a clever girl in other areas.”

“Not really. I’m just good at following directions.”

“Modesty’s very becoming.” Eileen poured another half cup of tea from the pot. “But when it’s misplaced or untrue, then it’s just foolishness. You found a way to get this woman’s financial information.”

“Actually, it was my friend who . . . Yes,” Tia amended at Eileen’s lifted eyebrows. “I found a way.”

“And so you know how much to demand from her for the Fates.”

“We haven’t decided, exactly, but I thought . . .”

“Does the girl always worry about speaking her mind?” Eileen asked Malachi.

“Not as much as she did. You’re making her nervous.”

Though color rose into her cheeks, Tia straightened her shoulders. “She can liquidate up to fifteen million. Twenty, really, but that adds considerable time and complications, so fifteen’s better. So I thought we should ask for ten and give her a buffer. The Fates are worth a great deal more. She’ll know that with a little work and research she can sell them to the right collector for at least double her investment. My father verified that he, as a dealer, would offer ten. As a businesswoman, she’d think the same way.”

“Very sensible,” Eileen said with a nod. “Now all you have to do is figure out how to have her turn over that kind of money without giving her the Fates. Have her charged with the insurance fraud and end it all with her being arrested for murder. With that done, we can get down to planning a wedding and get back to running Sullivan Tours. Your cousins are doing a fine job with the day-to-day of it,” she told Malachi, “but we need to have our hands back in it again.”

“It’ll hold a bit longer, Ma,” Malachi assured her.

“If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be here. Just as I believe the lot of you will come up with the solution to the whole of it. You’ve gotten this far, after all. And speaking of that, isn’t it time someone offered to show me the Fates?”

“I LIKE YOUR mother.”

Malachi’s lips twitched as he watched Tia neatly turn down the bed. “She terrifies you.”

“Just a little.” Out of habit, she switched on the white-noise maker on the bedside table.

When she moved away to adjust her bedroom air filter, Malachi switched it back off as he did every night. She never noticed.

“Rebecca was so happy to see her. It was a lovely thing for Jack to do, bringing her here.” Restless, Tia walked

into the bath, carefully removed her hypoallergenic makeup with hypoallergenic cleanser.

"A nice surprise for you, too," she added when Malachi came to the doorway. "I'm sure you've missed her."

"I have, very much." He loved to watch her this way—the tidiness of her, the pretty sweetness of her face without any trace of cosmetics. "You know what they say about Irish men."

"No, what do they say?"

"They may be drunks or rebels, brawlers or poets. But to a man, they love their mothers."

She laughed a little, stood there opening and closing the top of her moisturizer. "You're not any of those things."

"What an insult. I can drink and brawl with the best of them. Sure I've got some rebel in me. And . . . do you want poetry, Tia?"

"I don't know. I've never had any."

"Do you want it quoted or made up?"

She wanted to smile, was sure she could, but it collapsed on her. "Don't do this."

"What?" Baffled, and a little alarmed, he stepped to her. And she stepped away.

"I'm not going to make it difficult for you."

"That's good to know," he said carefully. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying." She sniffed. "I won't cry. I'll be reasonable and understanding, just like I always am," she said and set the moisturizer on the counter with a snap.

"Maybe you should tell me what you're going to be reasonable and understanding about."

"Don't laugh at me. Knowing people laugh at me doesn't make it any less horrible."

"I'm not laughing at you. Sweetheart . . ." He reached out for her and she smacked his hand aside.

"Don't call me that, and don't touch me," she added as she pushed by him and strode back into the bedroom.

"Don't call you sweetheart, don't touch you. You won't cry and you'll be reasonable and understanding." His head began to throb. "Give me a clue here."

“We’re almost done. I know it, and I’ll finish it out. This is the only important thing I’ve done in my life, and I won’t leave it unfinished.”

“It’s not the only important thing you’ve done.”

“Don’t placate me, Malachi.”

“Damned if I’m placating you, and bloody hell if I’m going to stand here arguing without any idea what I’m arguing about. Christ, I’m getting one of your headaches.” He scrubbed his hands roughly over his face. “Tia, what is it?”

“You said you should have told me before. Maybe you should. Maybe, even though I knew, it would have been better that way.”

“Told you . . . ah.” And he remembered what he’d been about to say before Cleo had interrupted them that morning. He frowned, jammed his hands into his pockets. “You know, and it pisses you off?”

“I’m not allowed to have feelings?” she tossed back. “I’m not allowed to be angry. Just grateful? Grateful that we’ve had these weeks together. Well, I am grateful and I’m angry. I’ll be furious if I want.” She glanced around. “God! There must be something to throw.”

“Don’t think about it,” he advised. “Just grab the first thing and let it fly.”

She snatched up her hairbrush, heaved it. It cracked solidly against the jewel-toned shade of her bedside lamp. “Damn it! Damn it, that was Tiffany. Can’t I even have a successful temper tantrum?”

“You should have thrown it at me.” He grabbed her arms before she could go clean up the mess she’d made.

“Just let me go.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“I’m stupid.” The fight went out of her. “All I’ve done is embarrass myself and break a beautiful lamp shade. I should’ve taken a Xanax.”

“Well, you didn’t, and I prefer fighting with a woman who’s not hazy on some tranquilizer. These are real feelings, Tia, and you’ll have to deal with them. Whether you want mine or not, you’ll have to deal with them.”

“I’ve been dealing with them.” She shoved at him. “I’ve

been dealing with them all along. And it's not fair. I don't care that life doesn't have to be fair, because this is *my* life. And I can't make it easy on you, no matter how often I told myself I would. I want you to go stay at Jack's. You can't be here with me, it's too much."

"You're tossing me out? Before I go, I'll know why," he said and grabbed her.

"It's too much, I said. I'll finish what we started, and I won't let the others down. But I won't, I will *not* be the quiet, unassuming lover who makes it convenient for you when it's over and you walk away, when you go back to Ireland and pick up your life where you left it off. Where you leave me off. For once, I'm doing the ending, and I'm telling you to go."

"Have I ever asked you to be quiet or unassuming?"

"No. You changed my life, thank you very much. There." She tried to twist away and was hauled back. "You want more? Fine. It's very considerate of you to be honest enough to tell me it's all temporary—lives bumping together and moving on. You've got a home and a business to run in Ireland. So good luck."

"You're a confusing woman, Tia, and a great deal of work."

"I'm a very simple woman, and extremely low maintenance."

"Bollocks. You're a maze, and constantly fascinating to me. Let's just back all this up, for clarity's sake. In your opinion, I was about to tell you this morning that it's been nice, it's been fun, and very pleasurable as well. I'd probably add that I'm quite fond of you, and knowing you to be a quiet, unassuming woman—ha ha—I'm sure you'll understand that when this business is done, then so are we."

The image of him was hazed through tears. For the first time she wished, viciously, that he was ordinary—to look at, to speak with. To make love with.

"It doesn't matter what you would have said because I'm saying it now."

"Oh it matters," he disagreed. "I'm thinking it matters. So I'll tell you what it is I realized I should have told you

before. I love you. That's what I should have told you before. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know." A tear spilled over now, but she didn't notice. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course not." He laughed as her mouth fell open, then scooped her off her feet. "What, I'm a liar now as well? I love you, Tia, and if I changed your life, you changed mine right back. If you think I can pick up where I left off before you, then you are stupid."

"Nobody ever said that to me before."

"That you're stupid?"

"No." She touched his face as he sat on the side of the bed with her in his lap. "'I love you.' No one's ever said that to me."

"Then you'll have to make do with me telling you, until you're tired of hearing it."

She shook her head as her heart swelled. "No one's ever said it to me, so I never had the chance to say it back. Now I do. I love you. I love you, Malachi."

Spinning threads, she thought as she pressed her lips to his. Spinning them into yet another pattern. If her thread was cut short, she could look back at this moment and have no regrets.

Twenty-eight

SHE was close. She knew it. She'd spent hours combing trinket shops, more paying calls on antique and art houses with the pretense of doing business. She'd had endless, and so far fruitless, conversations with local collectors she'd tagged thanks to Stefan.

To reward herself Anita enjoyed a long, cold drink at a shady table by the sparkling pool beside the Nikoses' guest house.

Despite his introductions to collectors, Stefan wasn't being as helpful as she'd hoped.

Hospitable enough, she mused as she sipped her frothy mimosa. He and his dull wife had welcomed her with open arms. Another time, she'd have relished the time in the spectacular white house flowing over the hills above Athens, with its acres of gardens, its army of servants and its cool, fragrant courtyards.

It was very satisfying to stretch out here on thick cushions beside a shimmering pool fed by a fountain depicting Aphrodite, to scan the sheltering trees and flowers under a hot blue sky and know that she had only to lift a finger and anything—anything—her appetites craved would be brought to her.

That was the silken shelter of true wealth, true privilege, where there was no need to concern yourself with anything beyond your own immediate desires.

And that was her life's ambition.

In fact, she thought it was time she looked into similar accommodations for herself. Once she had the other statues, and she would have them, she might consider a partial retirement. After all, she'd be hard-pressed to top the coup of acquiring and selling the Three Fates. Morningside would have outlived its purpose for her.

Italy might be more her style, she mused. Some elegant villa in Tuscany where she would live in staggering expatriate style. Of course, she'd keep the house in New York. She'd spend a few months there every year. Shopping, socializing, entertaining and gathering the envy of others like rose petals.

She'd grant interviews. But after the initial flurry of media, she'd slip away. That veil of mystery would be thin, and when she lifted it on her own whim, they'd run scrambling for her.

She would put Morningside up for sale, regretfully. And would reap all the profits due her after the investment of twelve tedious years of marriage.

It was the life she'd been meant for, Anita decided as she eased back on the chaise. One of indulgence, fame and great, great wealth.

God knew she'd earned it.

She'd find that infuriating Cleo Toliver and remove that obstacle from her path. It was only a matter of time. She couldn't hide forever. At least Stefan had been of some help interpreting in a few of the shops, inquiring for her about the brunette and a small silver statue.

The Toliver woman was certainly getting around. And twice now, according to the shopkeepers, Anita had missed her by less than an hour.

It only meant she was closing in, Anita assured herself. Imagine that slut believing she could outwit Anita Gaye.

It was going to be a very costly mistake for Cleo Toliver. "Anita?"

Still floating on the current of her fantasies, Anita tipped down her shaded glasses and looked at Stefan. "Hello. Beautiful out here, isn't it?"

"Perfect. I thought you might enjoy a fresh drink, some refreshment." He gestured to the trays of fruit and cheese a servant arranged on the table, then handed her another mimosa.

"I'd adore it, thanks. I hope you're going to join me."

"I will."

His silver hair glinted in the sun as he took the chair beside her.

His arms were tanned and muscled, his body fit, and his face interestingly craggy. He was worth, at conservative estimates, a hundred and twenty million.

If she'd been in the market for another husband, he'd have been a top contender.

"I want to thank you again, Stefan, for being my guide and liaison. It's bad enough I'm taking advantage of your hospitality by coming into your home on hardly a moment's notice, but I'm taking up so much of your time. I know how busy a man of your stature and position is."

"Please." He gestured her words away as he picked up his own drink. "It's nothing but a pleasure. And exciting as well, this treasure hunt. Such things make me feel young again."

"Oh. As if you're not." She leaned toward him, offering him a deliberate view of lush breasts barely contained by her thin bikini. She may not have been in the market for a husband, but lovers were always a consideration. "You're an attractive, vital man in his prime. Why, if it wasn't for your wife . . ." She trailed off, tapped a finger on the back of his hand in a flirtatious manner. "I'd make a play for you myself."

"You flatter me." Calculating and pitifully obvious woman, he thought. And felt another twinge for his good friend who hadn't seen this creature for what she was.

"Not in the least. Like wine, I prefer men with a certain

age and body to their credit. I hope, one day, I'll be able to repay you for your kindness."

"What I do," he said, "I do for Paul. And, of course, for you, Anita. You deserve all I can do for you, and more. As it happens, I fear I have not been successful in helping you with your treasure hunt. Naturally, as a collector my interest isn't completely altruistic. What a prize it would be, to add the Moerae to my collection. I trust, when the time comes, we can do business."

"How could it be otherwise?" She tapped her glass against his. "To future dealings, business and personal."

"I look forward to it, more than I can say. I should tell you that on the other front, I have had some small success."

He paused, studied the fruit and sliced off a branch of fat purple grapes. "Will you not sample some? From our own arbors."

"Thank you." She took the branch from him. "You were saying?"

"Eh? Oh yes, yes." He took his time, selected a branch of grapes for himself. "Yes, some small success on the matter of the woman you seek. The name of the hotel where she was booked."

"You found her." Anita swung her legs over the chaise so that her feet smacked against the tiles. "Why didn't you say so? Where is this place?"

"In an area of the city I would never recommend for a lady of your delicacies. Cheese?"

"I need a car and driver," she snapped. "Immediately."

"Of course, all is at your disposal." He cut a thin slice of cheese, added it to the small plate that held the grapes she'd yet to taste. "Ah, but you think to go to this hotel to see her. She is not there."

"What are you talking about?"

Obvious, Stefan thought again. Yes, she was obvious. And now the cat peeked out behind the mask, showing its nasty little fangs and ugly temper. "She *was* booked," he explained, "but has checked out only today."

"Where did she go? Where the hell is she?"

"Alas, I was unable to learn this. The clerk said only

that she checked out, shortly after meeting with a young man. British or Irish, the clerk wasn't certain. They left together."

The color that temper and excitement had thrown into her cheeks slid away until her face was white as bone, hard as stone. "That can't be."

"Naturally, there could be some mistake or confusion, but the clerk seemed cooperative enough, and very certain. I can arrange for you to speak with him yourself tomorrow if you like. He has no English, but I will be happy to interpret. Still I must insist you meet him away from this area. I could not, in good conscience, take you there."

"I need to talk to him now. I need to find her *now*. Before . . ." She paced the hot white tiles around the pool, and thought murderously of Malachi Sullivan.

"Calm yourself, Anita." His tone all comfort, Stefan got to his feet. A servant approached and apologized for the interruption.

Stefan took the envelope the servant held out, then dismissed him.

"Anita, you have a telegram."

She whirled back, the heels of her sandals clicking on the tile.

Ordinarily he would have excused himself to give a guest privacy, but he refused to miss the moment and stood nearby, watching as she ripped open the telegram. And read.

Anita. Sorry I didn't have time to come around in person and give you my regards. Strangers in a strange land, and so on. But I finished my business in Athens rather quickly, and am by the time you read this escorting some rather attractive ladies to New York. I suggest you get yourself back there as soon as possible, if you're interested in a fateful reunion.

*I'll be in touch.
Malachi Sullivan*

Stefan had the pleasure of hearing her strangled scream as she balled the telegram in her fist. "I hope this is not bad news."

"I have to get back to New York. Right away." The color was back in her face, and raging.

"Of course. I'll make the arrangements for you. If there's anything I can do—"

"I'll do it," she said between her teeth. "You'd better believe I'll do it."

He waited until she'd stormed away, rushing in the direction of the house. Then he sat, picked up his drink, took out his cell phone.

He enjoyed a grape while he made the call.

"Jack. I'll have a very angry woman on my private jet within two hours. No, no," he said, chuckling as he chose another grape. "It's been, my friend, and continues to be, my very great pleasure."

SHE GOT HOME to a pile of messages, many of which were from the police and only served to irritate her. She'd spent the hours in the air devising ways she would dispose of Malachi—all of which ended in his bloody, painful death.

As satisfying as all of them were, Anita was smart enough, and still controlled enough, to know it was essential to find the right time, the right place and the right method.

She wanted him dead, but she wanted the Fates even more.

She ordered her servants out of the house. She wanted the place empty. She showered, changed, then contacted Jasper. She broke one of her own cardinal rules by ordering him to come to her home.

She was dissatisfied with his work and considered disposing of him. It would, she imagined, be simple enough to make it look like a break-in attempt, mock up signs of a struggle. With her clothes torn a bit, a few handy bruises, no one would question her, a woman alone, de-

fending her home and her person with one of her dead husband's guns.

Remembering how it had felt to pull the trigger, to see Dubrowsky stumble, fall, die, she knew the act would be a great stress reliever.

But she'd had enough of the police for a while. And, added to that, Jasper might yet come in handy. She couldn't afford the luxury of cutting him loose quite yet.

He came, as instructed, to the rear entrance. She gestured him in, then walked directly to the library. Appreciating the value of position, she sat behind the desk. "Close the door," she said coolly.

When his back was turned she took the gun she'd placed in the drawer and set it in her lap. Just in case.

"I'm not pleased with your work, Mr. Jasper." She held up a finger before he could speak. "Nor am I interested in your excuses. I've paid you, and paid you well, for your particular skills and talents. In my opinion, they've been sadly lacking."

"You haven't given me a hell of a lot to go on."

She sat back. After the long flight it was energizing to feel the fury, the violence pumping out of him. Better, she thought, than drugs. He believed he was stronger, more dangerous. And had no idea he was only one finger twitch away from death.

"Are you criticizing me, Mr. Jasper?"

"Look, you don't think I'm doing the job, fire me."

"Oh, I've considered that." She stroked a fingertip over the cold steel of the nine-millimeter in her lap. "I'm a businesswoman, and when an employee does unsatisfactory work, that employee is terminated."

"No skin off my nose."

She saw his body shift. She knew he carried a gun under his suit jacket. Was he considering using it on her? she wondered. To intimidate, to rob, perhaps to rape? Thinking she'd be helpless against him, and unable to go to the police.

The idea was absolutely thrilling.

"However, as a businesswoman I also believe in giving

employees certain incentives in the hopes their work will improve. I'm going to offer you an incentive."

"Yeah." He relaxed his gun arm. "Such as?"

"A twenty-five-thousand-dollar bonus if you find and deliver to me a man named Malachi Sullivan. He's in the city, possibly in the company of Cleo Toliver. You remember Cleo, don't you, Mr. Jasper?" She purred it. "She's managed to slip through your fingers a number of times. If you deliver both of them, I'll double that bonus. I don't care what kind of shape they're in, as long as they're alive. I want to be very clear on that point. They must be alive. Your former associate didn't understand that distinction, which is why he was terminated."

"Fifty for the man, a hundred if I get them both."

She angled her head, then used a finger to nudge a large manila envelope over the desk. "There's a picture of him in here, and two thousand for expenses. I will not give you more than two thousand," she said, "until I have some results. There's an apartment building on West Eighteenth, between Ninth and Tenth. The address is also in the envelope, along with keys. The building is being renovated. Renovations will be put on hold as of today. When you have Mr. Sullivan, and hopefully Miss Toliver, you're to take them there. Use the basement facilities. Employ whatever means necessary to restrain them, then contact me at the number I've already given you. Is that all very clear?"

"I got it."

"You get me the man and the woman, and you'll get the money you've asked for. After that, I don't want to ever see or hear from you again."

He took the envelope. "Figure you want to know. Taps are off the Marsh woman's phone."

Anita pursed her lips. "Doesn't matter," she decided. "She doesn't interest me any longer."

"Her old man got real talky when I went in his place and asked about those statues. Sounded like he'd like to get his hands on them."

“Yes, I’m sure he would. I assume he told you nothing particularly helpful.”

“Said something about how he’d heard maybe one was in Greece. Athens. But said it was just a rumor, and there were others.”

“Athens. Well, that was yesterday.”

“Tried getting information out of me, acting like he was just shooting the breeze, but he was digging.”

“I’m no longer concerned with that. Get me Malachi Sullivan. You can leave the way you came in.”

She figured he didn’t have a brain, Jasper decided as he walked out. Figured he didn’t have the smarts to find out what was what.

He’d find this Sullivan guy, all right, and the woman. But he’d be fucked if he’d turn them over for a lousy hundred grand. If they were the connection to those statues, they’d tell him about it. And when he had the Fates, Anita Gaye would pay, and pay deeply.

Then maybe he’d do her just the way he figured she’d done that asshole Dubrowsky. Right before he hopped a plane to Rio.

ANITA STAYED AT her desk, going through messages. To entertain herself she tore those pertaining to the police into small pieces. Investigations of homicides and burglaries weren’t her job, after all.

She intended to contact the insurance agent very shortly. She expected them to deliver a check for her claim promptly. If they needed to be reminded that she could easily take her hefty annual premiums elsewhere, she would be happy to do so.

The doorbell rang twice. She cursed her miserably inefficient and grossly overpaid staff before remembering she’d dismissed them for the remainder of the day.

Sighing over the annoyance of having to do everything herself, she went to the door. She wasn’t pleased to see the two detectives standing on her stoop, but after weighing the pros and cons of ignoring them, she opened the door.

“Detectives, you just caught me.”

Lew Gilbert nodded. “Ms. Gaye. May we come in?”

“This really isn’t a good time. I’ve just returned from an overseas trip. I’m very tired.”

“But you’re on your way out? You said we just caught you.”

“Just caught me before I lay down,” she said sweetly.

“We’ll make it quick, then.”

“Very well.” She stepped back to let them in. “I didn’t realize you were working with . . . I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Detective Robbins.”

“Of course. I didn’t realize you were working with Detective Robbins on the burglary, Detective Gilbert.”

“Sometimes cases overlap.”

“I imagine. Of course, I’m delighted to have two of New York’s finest looking into my problem. Please sit down. I’m afraid I sent the servants off, as I wanted the house to myself. But I’m sure I could manage coffee if you’d like.”

“Thanks just the same.” Lew sat down, started the rhythm. “You said you’d just gotten back from a trip? Something you planned before the break-in.”

“Something that came up unexpectedly.”

“Overseas?”

“Yes.” She crossed her legs smoothly. “Athens.”

“Must be something. All those old temples. What’s that drink? Ouzo. Had some once at a wedding. Some kick.”

“So I’m told. I’m afraid this trip was business, and I didn’t have time for temples and ouzo.”

“Tough on you, having to take off like that right after the burglary,” Bob put in. “You usually do the business travel?”

“Depending.” She didn’t care for his tone. Not one bit. When this was over, she was going to have a few choice words on the subject with his superiors. “Excuse me, but if we could get to the point?”

“We’ve been trying to contact you. It hampers the investigation when the victim’s incommunicado.”

“As I said, it was necessary and unexpected. In any

case, I gave Detective Gilbert all the information I had. I assumed you and the insurance company would handle the rest of it.”

“You filed your claim.”

“I left the paperwork with my assistant before I left. She assured me it was messengered to my agent. Do you have any leads on my property, or on who broke into my building?”

“The investigation’s ongoing. Ms. Gaye, do you know anything about the Three Fates?”

For a moment all she could do was stare. “Of course. They’re a legend in my line of work and my field of interest. Why?”

“A tip that maybe that’s what the thieves were after. But you didn’t list any silver statue or statues on your claim form.”

“A tip? From whom?”

“Anonymous, but we intend to follow up any and all leads in this case. I didn’t see anything that matches the description of any of these statues on your inventory list.”

“You wouldn’t, as I don’t have one. If I did, Detective, you can be sure I would have had it locked in a vault. The Fates are extremely valuable. Unfortunately, one was certainly lost with its owner on the *Lusitania*. As for the other two . . . No one can substantiate their existence.”

“So you don’t have one of these statues?”

The anger, the insult of being questioned edged into her voice. “I believe I’ve already answered that question. If I did own one of the Fates, you can be sure I’d announce it loud and clear. The publicity would be very beneficial to Morningside.”

“Well, anonymous tips usually turn out to be dead ends.” Lew took the apologetic route. “Just as well. Something like that wouldn’t go through the usual channels and fences. Since you weren’t available, we got photographs and descriptions of the stolen property from the insurance company. We’ve been checking all those usual avenues. Jack Burdett’s cooperated regarding the security.

But I'm going to be honest, Ms. Gaye, we're coming up empty so far."

"It's very upsetting. I'm trying to be grateful we were fully insured. Though, of course, I hope to have the property restored. But it's very upsetting to know that Morningside was vulnerable. You'll have to excuse me." She got to her feet. "I'm really very tired."

"We'll keep you updated." Bob rose. "Oh, on the other matter? That homicide in the warehouse you used to own."

Not just a few choice words, Anita decided. She would see to it this man was fired. "Really, Detective, I think we've established I know nothing about it."

"Just wanted you to know that we've ID'd a suspect. A man the victim was purported to be working with most recently." Pulled a photo out of his inside pocket. "You recognize this man?"

Anita stared at the photograph of Jasper and wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or scream. "No, I don't."

"Didn't think you would, but we've got to follow up the angles. Thanks for your time, Ms. Gaye."

As they walked back to their car, the cops exchanged one brief look. "She's dirty," Lew said.

"Oh yeah. Up to her swanlike neck."

The minute the car pulled away from the curb, Cleo pulled out her phone. "She's primed," she said. "Make the call." Then she tucked the phone away and turned to Gideon in the driver's seat. "Let's just hang a few minutes. I bet we'll be able to hear her scream all the way out here."

"We could do that." He passed her back the oversweet soft drink she'd brought for them to share during the stakeout. "And after, I think we could take a little detour to Tia's. No one's there at the moment."

"Oh." Cleo tucked her tongue in her cheek. "What did you have in mind?"

"Tearing your clothes off, tossing you down on the first handy flat surface and having at you."

"Sounds good to me."

Inside the house, Anita stormed up the stairs. She should have killed Jasper. Killed him when she'd had the

chance, then hired fresh muscle, one with a brain, to track down Malachi. Now she would have to find a way to do it anyway, and before the police found him.

It had to have been Malachi who'd called the cops about the Fates. Who else could it be? But why? Had he been the one who tried to break into Morningside?

She balled her hands into fists as she paced her bedroom. How could some tour captain circumvent that layer of security? He could have hired someone, she supposed. But the man wasn't rolling in money.

It had to go back to him, all of it. And oh, *oh*, would she make him suffer for it.

She snatched up the phone on the first ring and snarled into the receiver. "What?"

"Rough day, darling?"

She bit back the curses on her tongue and all but cooed. "Well, well. Malachi. Isn't this a surprise?"

"The first of many. How did you find Athens?"

"I turned left at Italy."

"Good one. I don't recall you being quick with a joke, but it's nice to see you've your good humor in place. You'll need it. Guess what I'm looking at? Lovely silver ladies. A little birdie told me you were working very hard to find them. Looks as if I beat you to it."

"You want to deal, we'll deal. Where are you? I'd prefer discussing this face-to-face."

"I'll just bet you would. We'll deal, Anita, indeed we will. I'll be in touch with you about the when and where, but I want to give you time to recover from the shock."

"You don't shock me."

"Why don't you go see how your own little silver lady fared while you were turning left at Italy? And stick around the house, won't you? I'll ring you back in thirty minutes. You should be conscious again by then."

When the phone clicked in her ear, she slammed the receiver down. He wasn't going to shake her. So, he had two to her one, but that was all right. All he'd done was save her the trouble of getting them through customs and smuggling them back to New York herself.

She glanced toward the closet and, unable to resist, walked over and inside. Her fingers trembled with fury as she opened the panel, opened the safe.

Cleo was right. At that distance and that angle, they could just hear the scream.

Twenty-nine

NOW that she was naked, facedown on the floor and trying to get her breath back, Cleo figured letting Gideon have at her had been worth the rug burn. In spades.

And since she'd had at him right back, she didn't think she'd hear any complaints from him either.

They had, she thought, a really fine rhythm going between them. The kind she could dance to endlessly.

"Doing okay there?" he asked her.

"I think some of my brains might have leaked out my ears, but I've got more. How about you?"

"Well, I can't see yet, but I'm hopeful the blindness is temporary. Still, ending up blind and brain-damaged doesn't seem like such a high price to pay."

"You sure are a cutie, Slick."

"At such a time, a man prefers being called a tiger or some other sort of wild beast rather than a cutie."

"Okay. You're a regular mastodon."

"That'll have to do. We should get up, put ourselves back together."

"Yeah. We should."

And they lay as they were, a tangled and sweaty heap with clothes scattered around them.

"I heard, through the grapevine, that you're thinking of opening a club or a school or some such."

She managed to move one shoulder in what passed for a shrug. "I'm thinking about it."

"So, you're not set on going back to dancing, spinning around on Broadway and that sort of thing."

"I never did a hell of a lot of spinning on Broadway anyway."

"I think you're a wonderful dancer."

"I'm not bad." She turned her head, rested her cheek on the rug. "But you've got to know when to move on or you end up a blown-out gypsy being bounced from audition to audition."

"So, you're more in mind to stay put."

"You could say."

He trailed his finger up her spine, down again. She had such a lovely, long back. "You know, they have clubs and dance schools in Ireland."

"No kidding? And here I thought all they had were shamrocks and little green fairies."

"You forgot the beer."

She ran her tongue around her teeth. "Could use one right now."

"I'll get us both one, when I can feel my legs again. Cobh's not so big and crowded as New York . . ." Thank the lord. "But it's a good-sized village, and we get lots of tourists. It's not such a ways from Cork City, if there's a need for the urban sort of crowds and traffic. We're very big on dancing in Ireland, whether it's the doing it or the learning it. You know, a dancer's a kind of artist, and we hold our artists as national treasures."

"Is that so?" She could feel her heart begin to thud, but stayed very still. "Maybe I should check it out."

"I think you should." His hand began to rub light, lazy circles on her butt. "So, do you want to get married?"

She closed her eyes a moment, let the honey of it—warm and sweet—slide through her. Then she turned her head, looked him in the eye. "Sure."

Their grins spread, and, laughing, they reached for each other just as the front door opened.

“Oh, Mother of God! My eyes.” Malachi slammed his shut, covered Tia’s with his hand. “Is it so hard to find the bed in this place?”

“We were in a hurry.” Gideon grabbed for jeans and had them nearly to his knees before he realized they were Cleo’s. “Just hold on.”

Cackling with laughter now, Cleo tossed Gideon his pants, then snagged his shirt for herself. “It’s okay. We’re getting married.”

“Married?” Tia shoved Malachi’s hand aside and, caught up in the thrill, rushed over to hug Cleo. “This is wonderful. It’s just wonderful. Oh, oh, you can have a double wedding! You and Gideon and Rebecca and Jack. A double wedding. Wouldn’t that be fabulous?”

“It’s a thought.” Cleo peeked around Tia at Malachi, who was staring hard at the ceiling. “Aren’t you going to congratulate me, welcome me to the bosom of the Sullivans and all that jazz?”

“This isn’t the time to mention bosoms. Put some clothes on. I can’t come over there when you’re naked.”

“I’m only mostly naked.” With Gideon’s shirt skimming her thighs, Cleo got up, walked to him. “Is this cool with you? Mister Head of the Family?”

He looked down and, relieved the shirt was buttoned, took her face in his hands, kissed both her cheeks. “I couldn’t have chosen better for him myself. Now I’m begging you, put some pants on.”

“Thanks, and I will. I really need to talk to Tia a minute.”

“We’ve got a lot to tell you about Anita, and what’s about to happen.”

“Just five minutes,” she whispered. “Please. Take Slick up on the roof for a smoke, a man-to-man or something.”

“Five minutes,” he agreed. “It’s all in the timing now.” He signaled his brother. “Up on the roof.”

“I need my shirt.”

“Well, you’re not having the one she’s wearing and sending me into another heart attack. Your jacket’s good enough.”

Obliging, Gideon pulled his jacket over his bare chest. "I haven't kissed her yet." So he did, warmly enough to have Malachi looking at the ceiling again. "I'll be back."

"I'm counting on it." When the door shut behind them, Cleo sighed. "Wow, who'd've thought?" She walked back to Tia, dropped down on the floor. "Have a seat."

Curious, Tia sat on the rug facing her. "Is anything wrong?"

"No. Definitely not. Don't cry, okay, because I'll get all choked up. I just want to say . . . Okay, I'm going to get choked up anyway. So . . ." She took a deep, cleansing breath. "I've been thinking about stuff. Takes some longer than you to get down there. You're the brainy one."

"No, I'm not."

"Sure you are. Tia, you're like, deep."

"I am?"

"You get stuff. You see the connections and the layers and, hell, all that neat shit. That's part of what I was thinking about. If it wasn't for the Fates, you and me, we wouldn't be sitting here on the floor together right now. We didn't exactly circle the same wheel. Anyway, I think about what happened to Mikey, and that's hard. Part of me feels lousy because I'm so fucking happy. I know that's stupid," she said even before Tia could speak. "I'm working on it. Anyway, it's like the things I've heard you say. Threads, and what is it, lots?"

"The apportioning of lots. Lachesis."

"Yeah, that one was mine. I never figured this would be my lot, you know? Having a friend like you, having somebody like Gideon love me. And the rest of them. Like a family. I never figured that kind of thing was in the cards for me. I'm not going to screw it up."

"Of course you're not."

"I've screwed up plenty before. I guess I could figure I was meant to. It's weird thinking that I swiped a pair of Levi's when I was sixteen, or tanked a history test so I could get here, mostly naked on your living room rug, sniveling because there's this great man up on the roof who loves me."

She shoved her hair behind her shoulders, swallowed back the tears. "I guess I'd better get my pants on before Malachi comes back in and goes ballistic."

She reached for her jeans, stopped. "There is one more thing. I was wondering if you'd stand up for me. Like the maid-of-honor deal when we get married."

"Oh, Cleo." Tia threw her arms around her, hugged tight. And blubbered. "I'd love to. I'm so happy. I'm so happy for you."

"Jeez." Sniffing, Cleo hugged back. "I feel like such a girl."

AT PRECISELY SEVEN-thirty, Anita walked into Jean Georges. Though she had dressed with meticulous care, and in Valentino, she didn't bother with the ploy of keeping her date waiting.

She turned toward the bar, noted that Jasper was in place. And enjoyed the idea of this being Malachi Sullivan's last meal.

The bastard thought he had her by the throat, ordering her to meet him in this upscale and very public restaurant so that he could lay out the terms of the deal. She'd play him through to coffee and dessert, then he was going to find out who held the cards.

She was greeted by name and shown to the window table where Malachi was already waiting. He was wise, she noted, to sit with his back to the wall. Not that it would help him.

He got to his feet, took her hand and brought it to within an inch of his lips. "Anita. You look very well . . . for a hissing viper."

"And you clean up decently for a second-rate tour guide with delusions of grandeur."

"Well, now that the pleasantries are over." He took his seat, gestured so that the waiter poured the champagne waiting on ice. "It seems appropriate that we have this meeting in pleasant surroundings. No need for business dealings to be uncomfortable, after all."

"You didn't bring your little tart."

He sampled the wine, approved it. "Which little tart would that be?"

"Cleo Toliver. I'm surprised at you. I credited you with more taste than that. She's nothing but a professional slut."

"Don't be jealous, darling. In the slut department, she can't hold a candle to you."

The waiter cleared his throat and continued to pretend he'd been born deaf. "Would you care to hear about this evening's specials?"

"Absolutely." Malachi leaned back. He listened and, before the waiter could slip away to give them time to consider, ordered grandly for both of them.

"You take a great deal for granted," Anita said coldly, when they were alone again.

"True enough."

"You broke into my house."

"Someone broke into your house?" He feigned surprise. "Well then, call the garda. I should say, police. And what, I wonder, would you tell them was taken?"

While she steamed, he reached down and lifted an attaché case. "I thought you might like to see all the pretty silver ladies in a row." He handed her a large color print-out of a digital photo his sister had taken only hours before. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

Rage wanted to choke her. Greed trembled straight down to her fingertips. "What do you want?"

"Oh, a great many things. A long, healthy life; a fine, faithful dog. And an embarrassing amount of money. But we don't want to discuss that on an empty stomach. I've individual photos, as well, for you to study. I want you to rest assured you'll get what you pay for."

She studied each photo, and at every new angle she increased the pain level she'd make him suffer before she killed him. She laid the photographs in her lap when their appetizers were served. "How did you get into my house? Into my personal safe?"

"You're giving a lot of credit to a—what was it?—second-rate tour guide. And I must take exception to that estimation, Anita, as you've yet to take a Sullivan tour. We're quite justifiably proud of our little family business."

Anita speared a sautéed mushroom. "Maybe I should have gone after your mother."

Though his blood ran cold, Malachi kept his calm. "She'd fry you up for breakfast, and serve the leftovers to the neighbor's cat. But let's not get personal. You were asking me a question. You want to know how it happened I recovered what it was you stole from me."

"I don't believe you called the police either."

"I made it easy for you, no mistake there. Foolish of me, believing you to be a reputable businesswoman and handing the Fate over to you for, yes, testing and appraisal, it was. Lessons learned." He sampled a bite of crab meat. "You judged that one correctly. How could I go to the authorities accusing the respected owner of the renowned Morningside Antiquities of stealing from a client? And stealing what, by all accounts, was at the bottom of the Atlantic?"

"And now," he said, while the waiter moved in silently to top off their wineglasses, "it seems you're in a similar fix. Tough to make a public complaint about losing what should never have been in your possession in the first place."

"You couldn't have gotten in, not to Morningside or my house, without help."

"Puzzle that one out," he said, "and you'll know I'm not without friends. By the way, Cleo sends her regards. Her very low regards. Just think, if you'd paid her price, made a legitimate deal at that point, our positions might be reversed now."

He leaned closer, and all his fake humor was gone. "The man you had killed, Michael Hicks was his name, and his friends called him Mikey. She grieves for him. You're fortunate, Anita, that I can convince her to deal with you now."

Anita nudged her appetizer aside, picked up her wine. "My employee, former employee, was under instructions to extract information. He got carried away. It's hard to get competent help in some areas."

"And did you get carried away when you put the bullets into your former employee?"

“No.” She watched him over the sparkling edge of the crystal flute. “I pulled the trigger with a steady, easy hand. You’d be wise to remember that, and to understand how I deal with people who disappoint me.”

She picked up the attaché case, slid the photos in as the waiter returned with the salad course. “May I keep this?”

“Of course. I’ll tell you what I understand. You don’t consider two lives too high a price to pay for what you want. I’m sure you won’t find the price I ask out of your reach either.”

“And that would be?”

“Ten million, cash.”

Anita gave a sour laugh, even as her pulse jumped. So little, she thought. The man was a complete fool. At auction she could command double that. More, considerably more, with the right publicity.

“Do you actually think I’m going to pay you ten million dollars?”

“I do, yes. Three for each lady and one for good measure. So you see the price Cleo asked for Lachesis before you had her friend beaten to death was a rare bargain that won’t come ’round again. Oh, and here’s the topper.” Malachi broke apart a roll. “He knew, Mikey did, where the Fate was being kept and had the means to get it. What does that say to you, Anita?”

She laid a hand on her purse, imagined pulling out the pistol she’d put inside it—just in case—and emptying it into Malachi Sullivan’s smug face.

“It says to me that Mr. Dubrowsky deserved what he got. I’ll be handling my own negotiations from now on.”

“Then I should tell you straight off, our asking price isn’t negotiable, so let’s not spoil this lovely meal with wrangling. We considered asking for a great deal more, letting you counter and doing the back-and-forth business. But really, we’ve come too far for such petty behavior, haven’t we? You want them, I have them. That’s the price.”

He bit into the roll he’d buttered. “You’ll parlay them for a tidy profit, reap considerable glory on Morningside and yourself. Everyone wins.”

“Even if I agreed to the price, that much in cash—”

“Cash is the currency. Or I should say electronic cash. Simpler all around, very little paperwork to contend with. I’ll give you two days to make the arrangements.”

“Two days? That’s—”

“Time enough for a canny woman like you. Thursday, eleven o’clock. You transfer the funds to the account I’ll give you at that time. Once it’s done, I give you Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos.”

“And I’m supposed to trust you to hold up your end. Really, Malachi.”

He pursed his lips. “That’s a problem, isn’t it? Still, I’m trusting you to make the arrangements and not have a couple of rottweilers standing by to tear out my throat and take the prize from my cold, dead hand. That’s why we’ll make the exchange in a public and civilized arena. The New York Public Library. I’m sure you’ve heard of it? The one on Fifth Avenue at Fortieth Street. Grand marble lions out front. They have an extensive section on mythology. It seems quite apt to me.”

“I need time to think about it. A way to contact you.”

“You have till eleven on Thursday to think about it. As for contacting me, well, there’s no need. Those are the terms. If they don’t suit you, they’re sure to suit someone else. Say, Wyley’s. The library, the main reading room on the third floor. Excuse me a minute, won’t you, darling? I’m just going to make use of the facilities.”

He strolled out through the doors that led to the rest rooms and the bar. And kept right on walking, leaving Anita stuck with the check.

“That went well,” he said into the mike fixed to the underside of his lapel.

“Well enough,” his sister agreed. “We’re circling back around. We’ll pick you up on the east corner. Cleo wants you to know she’s very disappointed you didn’t hang through it and bring back a doggie bag.”

He chuckled, headed toward the corner. Then felt the honed point of a knife jab at his side, just along his kidney.

“Just keep walking, pal.” Jasper’s voice was low and even as he gripped Malachi’s arm in his free hand. “And

keep in mind, I can jam this into you, slice out a good chunk, and nobody but me's going to know the difference."

"If you're after what's in my wallet, you're going to be very disappointed."

"We're going to get in a car half a block up and go to a nice, quiet place I've got all ready for you. Have a nice, quiet talk."

"Talking works for me. Why don't we find a bar and do it over a friendly drink?"

"I said keep walking."

Malachi bit back a hiss as the knife slid through jacket and shirt and into flesh. "That's going to be hard to do if you keep jabbing at me with that pig-sticker."

"Well now," Gideon said pleasantly as he came up behind them. "This is a dilemma. You push that knife into my brother, and I shoot you dead. Hardly anyone's going to be happy with that eventuality."

"Shoot him anyway. He's fucked up my best suit."

"That doesn't seem quite fair. What do you think, Jack?"

"Spill the guy's guts out over the sidewalk, city employees have to clean it up. That means higher taxes for me." He held out a hand. "But if you don't take that knife out of my friend there and give it to me, hilt first, I'm willing to pay."

This time, when the tip of the steel slid out of his side, Malachi couldn't hold back the hiss. "Fuck me, did you have to take so bloody long?"

"Let's have the hardware, too." Jack moved in, smiling cheerfully and, in a move that looked like a friendly embrace, slid the gun from beneath Jasper's jacket and under his own.

"Are you all right, Mal?"

"Oh, I'm fucking dandy." He pressed a hand to his bleeding side. "What the hell were you going to shoot him dead with?"

Gideon held up Tia's inhaler behind Jasper's back.

"Oh perfect. I owe my flaming life to hypochondria." He spotted the van, turned to Jasper and showed his teeth in a sneering smile. "We'll have that nice, quiet talk now." He wrenched open the cargo doors, hauled himself in.

Tia leaped toward him, sobbing his name, but he held up

a hand. "One minute. First things first." As soon as they'd shoved Jasper in behind him, Malachi plowed a fist into his face.

"Oh that's fine, that's good." Wincing, Malachi flexed his fingers. "A broken hand'll take my mind off the fact that I'm bleeding to death."

Shocked steady, Tia eased him into a chair. "Cleo, drive to Jack's. You keep that horrible man down that end," she ordered Gideon. "Jack, do you have a first-aid kit in here?"

"Glove box."

"Rebecca?"

"I'm getting it."

Despite the pain, and the extra jolt of it when she tugged his jacket off, Malachi grinned up at her. "You're a wonder, you are. Give us a kiss."

"Be quiet. Be still." Though her head spun sickly as she saw the blood spreading low on his shirt, she tore it open. She shot one fulminating look toward Jasper, now cuffed and gagged in the rear corner of the van. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

"HE SHOULD GO to the hospital. He should really go see a doctor, don't you think?" Pacing Jack's living room, Tia wrung her hands. "The cut was awfully deep. If Jack and Gideon hadn't gotten there in time . . . If that man had gotten Malachi into the car . . ."

"If a pig had two heads, he'd have two brains. Here now." Eileen held out a tumbler with three generous fingers of Paddy's. "Drink this."

"Oh. Well. I don't really drink. And whiskey . . . well, I used to—sometimes—take just a little sip of some before one of my lectures. But it's not—"

"Tia. Chill."

At Cleo's order, Tia shuddered, nodded, then took the glass and downed every drop.

"That's a girl," Eileen approved. "Now you sit down."

"I'm too frazzled to sit. Mrs. Sullivan . . . Eileen, don't you think he needs to be seen by a doctor?"

"You patched him up just fine. The boy's had worse

wrestling with his brother. Here now, Rebecca's brought you a nice clean blouse."

"Clean . . ." Baffled, Tia glanced down, saw the blood smeared over her shirt. "Uh-oh," she managed as her eyes started to roll back.

"No, you don't. None of that now." Eileen spoke briskly and pushed her into a chair. "No woman who can mop a man up in a moving van is going to faint away at the sight of a bit of secondhand blood. You're not so silly."

Tia blinked to clear her vision. "Really?"

"You did great," Cleo told her. "I mean, you kicked serious ass."

"She was brilliant," Rebecca agreed. "Here, change your shirt now, Tia darling, and we'll soak your nice blouse and see if we can get the blood out of it."

"Do you think they're going to beat him up?" Tia wondered.

"Ugly Mean Guy?" Cleo passed the stained blouse to Rebecca. "Sure hope so."

IT WAS BEING debated downstairs, with some heat, with Jasper in the unfortunate position of being tied to a chair and listening to the arguments pro and con.

"I say we kick his ass, break a few important bones, then talk to him."

Jack shook his head, took the hammer Malachi was thumping rhythmically on the counter, set it aside. "Three to one. Doesn't seem quite fair."

"Oh, we want fair, do we?" Enjoying himself, Malachi stormed over and kicked Jasper's chair. "And was he being fair, I'd like to know, when he fucking stabbed me, right out on the street?"

"Mal's got a point, Jack." Gideon popped cashews out of a bowl and into his mouth. "Bastard stuck a knife in my brother, who was unarmed at the time. That's just not right. Maybe we should let Mal stab him. Not fatally or anything such as that. Just one good jab, to even the score, so to speak."

"Yeah, look at this." Mal lifted an arm, showing off the

bandage riding just above his waistband. "And what about my suit? That's another factor. The shirt, too. Big gaping holes in both, as well as in my person."

"I know you're upset. Can't blame you. But the guy was just doing his job. Isn't that right?" Jack flipped open the wallet they'd taken off him, as if to check the name again. "Marvin."

Marvin let out a choked sound around his gag.

"Well, his flaming job stinks," Malachi ranted. "And I'd think a good thrashing was just one of the employment risks in the field."

"Let's try this. Let's talk to the poor bastard first. See if he cooperates. If you're not satisfied"—Jack gave Malachi a friendly pat on the back—"we'll beat the shit out of him."

"I get first shot. I want to break the fingers on the hand he used to stab me. One knuckle at a time."

The men looked at each other, back at Jasper, whose eyes were bulging, and were satisfied they'd played their parts well.

Jack walked over, tugged down the gag. "Okay, you got the picture. My associates here want to take some pieces out of you. Me, I'm a fan of democracy, and majority rules. You want to avoid that vote, you'll cooperate. Otherwise, I turn them loose, and when we're done, we dump you on Anita's doorstep. She'll finish you off. Gid? Play back that one part of the tape, you know, where she's telling Mal how she deals with unsatisfactory employees."

Gideon walked over to the recorder, turned on the tape he'd already cued up. Anita's voice, cold as death, filled the room as she spoke about steadily, easily putting bullets into a man.

"We'll make sure she gets the opportunity with you," Jack told him. "The three of us, we might cause you some pain, but we're not cold-blooded killers. We'll leave that part to the expert."

"What the hell do you want?"

"You tell us everything you know. Don't spare the details. And when the time comes, you're going to tell the whole thing to a friend of mine who happens to be a cop."

“You think I’m going to talk to the cops?”

“I’ve seen your sheet, Marvin. It won’t be the first time. Nobody’s got you on murder yet. You want to give her the chance to twist it around so you take the fall for Dubrowsky, for Michael Hicks?” Jack waited a beat. “That’s what she’ll do if you don’t get there first and have us backing you up. Or we just step back and let her do to you what she did to Dubrowsky.”

“Better prison than the morgue,” Malachi put in. “You should know we’ve got our little dance on the sidewalk on tape as well. So we can turn it and you over to the police now and be done with it, and you don’t have the edge of going in with—what is it, Jack?”

“Remorse. Remorse and cooperation.”

“You won’t have that opening with the police. With Anita still free and with money at her fingertips, how long do you think it would take her to hire someone to terminate your employment, on a permanent basis, when you’re behind bars?”

“I want a deal.” Jasper licked his lips. “I want immunity.”

“You’ll have to take that up with my friend with the badge,” Jack told him. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to take your wants and needs into consideration. Now.” Jack signaled Gideon to turn on the video recorder. “Let’s talk about what it’s like to work for Anita Gaye.”

ANITA SOAKED IN the tub, bubbles up to her chin. She imagined, even now, Malachi was being softened up. In the morning, when he’d had plenty of time to think, and to suffer, she’d stop by and see him. He’d tell her exactly where he was keeping the Fates, exactly where to find Cleo Toliver, and he’d confirm if her conclusions were correct and it had been Jack or someone working at Burdett who’d helped him get through her security.

Then she’d deal with all of them. Personally.

The candlelight glowed soothingly over her closed lids and she picked up the phone she’d set on the ledge of the tub and answered her private line.

“Yes?”

“I felt I should apologize for leaving so abruptly.”

The sound of Malachi’s voice had her sitting straight up in the tub. Water and bubbles gushed over the rim and ran a river over the tiles.

“It was very rude of me,” he went on. “But I had what you might call a pressing engagement. In any case, I’m looking forward to seeing you Thursday. Eleven o’clock, remember. Oh, and one other thing. Mr. Jasper asked me to tell you, he quits.”

When the click sounded in her ear, Anita let out a roar of frustration. She heaved the phone across the room, where it smashed into the mirror.

In the morning when the maid came in to tidy up, she would cluck her tongue and think of seven years’ bad luck.

Thirty

IT would be, at its core, like any sort of play, largely dependent on staging, costumes, props and the actors' zest for their roles. Since Cleo was the team expert on stage work, she took over as director.

With Eileen standing in for Anita, Cleo rehearsed her cast mercilessly.

"Timing, people. It's all about the timing. Jack, cue."

He mimed making the phone call that would set the ball rolling, then walked with Gideon to the elevator.

"I don't see why we have to go down again. We could just pretend to go down."

"Look, Slick, I'm directing this show. Get moving."

He stepped into the elevator with Jack.

"Good luck," Tia called out and shrugged. "Well, that's what I'd say to them if this was real."

"See." Cleo folded her arms. "Tia knows how to rehearse. Okay," Cleo began. "We figure it's eight-fifteen, and time passes. Two of the three prongs are being set. The rest of us wait here, enjoying a nutritious breakfast, until Gideon gets back. Clock's ticking, clock's ticking, and where the hell is he?"

"We'd all be pacing around like cats in a cage and drinking too much coffee," Rebecca put in as she flipped a

page in one of her bridal magazines. "Oh, Ma, look at this dress. This may be the one."

"She's not your mother. She's the dreaded and dastardly Anita Gaye. Stay in character," Cleo insisted, then turned as Gideon opened the elevator doors again. "You're late, we were worried, blah blah. And you tell us everything's aces."

"I would, if you'd give me the chance."

"Actors are such children." She grabbed his shirt, jerked him forward for a kiss. "Scene change," she announced. "Library. Interior. Time: ten-thirty. Places, people."

IT WAS RAINING hard when Malachi stepped out of the cab in front of the New York Public Library. The sheets of wet and the traffic it snarled had put them slightly behind schedule.

The weather gave him a little pang of homesickness. It was nearly over now, he thought as he climbed up the stairs between the lions known as Patience and Fortitude. Nearly time to go home again and pick up the threads of his life. The old and the new. He wondered what pattern they would make together.

He stepped inside, into the cathedral-like grandeur and quiet. It was his second visit, as a dress rehearsal sort of business had been demanded of him. He still wondered at the fact that such a huge and stately library should have no books in its entranceway.

He scooped a hand through his hair, scattering wet, then, as planned, took the stairs instead of the elevator to the third floor.

No one seemed to take any particular notice of him. There were those who sat at tables studying or simply browsing through books. Some tapped away at laptops, others scrawled notes on pads, still others roamed the stacks.

As planned, he filled out a call sheet for the book Tia had deemed most appropriate and took it to the proper reference desk.

He liked the smell of the place, of books and wood and

people come in out of the rain. Another time he'd have enjoyed just the being there. And though Gideon was the keenest reader in the family, Malachi would have found pleasure in simply choosing a book and settling down with it in this palace of literature.

He walked by where Gideon was, even now, sitting with his nose in a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Gideon turned a page in Scout's lyrical narrative, signaling the go-ahead.

They'd considered the fact that Anita would have had enough time to hire a replacement for Jasper. And that her temper might have pushed her to find someone willing to kill an unarmed man in a library.

The odds were small enough, as she'd lose her best chance for the Fates. And though it was a risk Malachi was willing to take, the back of his neck prickled as he walked through the stacks.

He found a quiet table, glanced idly around the area, his gaze passing over Rebecca's head as she bent over her laptop nearby.

Within twenty minutes, a pretty young page delivered his requested book. Then, Malachi settled down to wait.

AT MORNINGSIDE, HAVING spent an hour reviewing security tapes provided by Burdett, Detective Lew Gilbert was already interviewing clerks regarding three particular items of inventory that had gone missing.

Downtown, Jasper was angling for a deal with the DA.

At the wheel of a van chugging through the rain and pissy traffic on Fifth, Cleo tapped her fingers to the Bare-naked Ladies and waited to give Tia her cue.

Malachi heard the click of heels, caught the whiff of expensive scent and looked up from his book. "Hello, Anita. I've just been reading about my ladies. Fascinating females. Did you know they sing their prophecies? A kind of mythological girl group."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, safe and sound. I beg your pardon, where are my manners?" He rose, pulled out a chair. "Sit down, won't

you? Such a wet day out, it makes a grand place like this almost cozy.”

“I want to see them.” But she sat, crossed her legs, folded her hands. It would be business, she reminded herself. For now. “You can hardly think I’d pay your exorbitant fee without first examining the merchandise.”

“You examined one of them before, and look where that got us. Right? You sent some very impolite men after my brother. I’m very fond of my brother.”

“I only regret I didn’t send them after you, with less restrained orders.”

“Well, live and learn. There was no need to have that friend of Cleo’s killed. He wasn’t involved.”

“She involved him. It was business, Malachi. Just business.”

“This isn’t *The Godfather*. Business, Anita, would have been meeting Cleo’s price for her Fate. If you had dealt squarely, you’d have it in hand right now. And perhaps even the third one. As it is, you’ve blood on your hands.”

“Spare me the lecture.”

“If you’d dealt squarely with me,” he continued, “instead of letting greed get in the way of good judgment, you’d have all three, for a fraction of what you’ll pay now. You started this thread, Anita, when you stole from me and my family.”

“You wanted to get laid. I let you fuck me, then I fucked you over. No point in whining about it.”

“Right you are. I’m just explaining to you why we’re sitting here as we are. Ten million. Have you made the arrangements?”

“You’ll get the money, but not until I’ve seen the Fates. The transfer’s ready to go. Once I verify you have what you claim to have, I’ll call and put it through to your account.”

“One more item of business before we start. Should you, after we complete the transaction, feel compelled to get some of your own back by bringing harm to any member of my family, to Cleo, to me, for that matter, take into consideration that I’ve documented everything. Everything, Anita, and have that documentation in a safe place.”

"In the event of my untimely death?" She gave a short laugh. "How trite."

"Trite but true. You'll get what you've earned for the money. And that will be that. Agreed?"

A woman who had spent a dozen years married to a man who'd revolted her in bed and bored her out of it knew how to be patient. Patient enough, she thought, to wait years, if need be, to implement just the right sort of tragic accident.

"I'm here, aren't I? Let me see them."

He sat back and, keeping his eyes on hers, lifted a hand. Gideon walked over to the table, set a black briefcase between them.

"I don't believe you've actually met my brother. Gideon, Anita Gaye."

Anita laid a hand on the case, looked up. "So you get to be gofer," she said in a silky tone. "Tell me, don't you mind sharing your whore with your brother?"

"We're very big on sharing in my family. Just as well Mal didn't get around to sharing you with me. You're a bit old for my taste."

"Now, now, let's mind our manners." Malachi gestured at the case.

"This is too public for an examination."

"Here, or not at all."

In a bad-tempered move, Anita tried to open the case. "It's locked."

"So it is." Gideon's tone was cheerful. "Combination is seven, five, fifteen." The date the *Lusitania* sank.

Anita set the combination, clicked the lock, opened the lid. Nestled in foam padding, the Fates looked up, placidly.

Lifting the first, Anita examined it. She remembered well the feel, the weight, the shape of Clotho. The satin texture of her silver skirt, the complicated coil of her hair over her shoulder, the delicacy of the spindle in her hand.

She replaced it and lifted Lachesis. There were subtle differences. This dress had a different drape, leaving the curve of one shoulder bare. The gleaming hair was done up in a kind of crown. Her right hand held the end of a tape

pulled out of the measuring rule she held in her left. There were notches and Greek numerals etched on the tape.

Anita's heart began to thud as she set the second Fate back in its bed and took out the third.

Atropus was slightly, very slightly shorter than her sisters. And so agreed the legend. Her face was softer, somehow kinder. She held her tiny scissors in clasped hands between her breasts. She wore sandals, the strap of the left crisscrossing twice before disappearing under the flow of her skirts.

Every detail agreed with documented descriptions. The workmanship was magnificent. And more, much more, there was a sense of power that pulsed from them. A kind of quiet underbeat that seemed to echo in Anita's head.

She would, at that moment, have paid anything, done anything, to have them.

"Satisfied?" Malachi asked her.

"A visual exam is hardly satisfactory." She continued to hold Atropus. "Certain tests need to be—"

Malachi plucked the Fate from her fingers, set it inside the case with the sisters. "We've gone that route once. Take it or leave it, here and now."

He closed the case even as she tried to reach out and stop him. And locked it. "You can hardly expect me to pay you ten million after a two-minute look."

He kept his voice hushed, as hers was. Reasonable, as hers was. "It's all you had when first I showed you Clotho. And you knew, just as you know now. Transfer the money and you can walk out with them." He took the case off the table as he spoke, put it on the floor at his feet. "Or don't, and I walk out with them and sell them elsewhere. I've a suspicion Wyley's would pay the price, and happily."

She opened her purse. Malachi closed a hand over her wrist as she reached inside. "Slowly, darling," and his hand stayed on her wrist until she'd pulled out her phone.

"Do you really think I'd take out a gun and shoot you in cold blood in a public place?"

"Everything but the public place fits you as perfectly as that lovely suit you're wearing." He closed her handbag himself, then eased back.

"If you think I'm that ruthless, I'm surprised you didn't go to Wyley's in the first place."

"I figure there's fewer questions and explanations, some of which might be sticky, between you and me."

"Tell your brother to stop hulking over me," she snapped, and punched in a number when Gideon faded back. "This is Anita Gaye. I'm ready to transfer the funds."

Malachi took a folded piece of paper from his pocket, spread it on the table in front of her. She relayed the information on it. "No," she said. "I'll call you back."

She laid the phone on the table. "The transfer's being done. I want the Fates."

"And you'll have them." He nudged the case farther out of her reach. "When I've verified the money's in my account."

From a nearby table, Rebecca answered an e-mail from Jack, sent another to Tia, then continued monitoring the numbered account.

"It's a lot of money, Malachi. What do you plan to do with it?"

"We've all manner of plans. You'll have to come to Cobh sometime, see for yourself just how we've put it to use. And you, what will you do? Start right up on turning a tidy profit, or take a bit of time off to enjoy your acquisition?"

"Business first, always."

Now, Gideon thought as he watched his sister lower the screen of her laptop, it was all in the timing. They'd soon see how well Cleo had choreographed the scene. He tucked his thumbs in his belt loops, tapped his fingers on the front pockets of his jeans.

On cue, Malachi glanced over. "Well, for Christ's sake," he said and frowned at Anita. "We've company. Let me handle her."

"Who?"

"Tia." Malachi let the warmth pour into his voice as he got to his feet. "What a happy coincidence."

"Malachi." She stuttered a little, and it was the excitement of the moment as much as the part she was playing

that brought the flush to her cheeks. "I didn't know you were back in New York."

"Only just. I was going to ring you later today; now you've saved me the price of the call." He leaned in, pressed his cheek to hers and lifted his brows at Anita.

"I just came in to do some research on my book." She clutched her briefcase to her breasts. "I never expected to . . ." Tia trailed off, looked startled. "Anita?"

"Of course, you know each other." Malachi's voice lifted, with just enough of a frantic edge to have heads turning irritably in their direction. "I asked Ms. Gaye to meet me here to discuss . . . ah, to discuss a potential purchase for my offices."

"Oh. I see." She looked from one face to the other, her eyes wide and hurt. As if she did see, and very well. "Well, I . . . I don't mean to interrupt. As I said, I was just . . . Oh, are you reading about the Fates?"

She leaned over, a bit clumsily, to turn the book, and effectively blocked Anita's view.

Rebecca strolled up, switched cases smoothly and continued by the table. She spared a quick wink for Gideon, gripped firmly the handle of the briefcase that held the Fates and walked out of the reading room, toward the stairs and down.

"Just passing the time." Malachi tapped Anita's phone when he saw the call light blinking. "I think you've a call coming in, Anita."

"Excuse me." She picked up the phone. "Anita Gaye."

"I, ah, should get to work." Tia stepped back. "It was nice to see you again, Malachi. It was . . . well, good-bye."

"Shattered her maiden's dreams." Laughing lightly, Anita disconnected the call. "The transfer's complete, so . . ."

She reached down for the case, and for the second time Malachi closed a hand over her wrist. "Not quite so fast, darling. I'll just verify that for myself."

He took out his own phone and, as if to confirm what Rebecca had already verified, called Cleo in the van.

"I need to confirm an electronic transfer of funds," he stated curtly. "Yes, I'll wait."

“Rebecca’s just getting in the van. Jack should be at Anita’s with Detective Gilbert. They got the search warrant.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll give you the account number.”

“Mal, Rebecca. Jack e-mailed me from his PalmPilot. His friend Detective Robbins is going to bring Anita in for questioning on the murders. He should be at Morningside by now. With the other cop at her house, she’s nowhere to go. And here’s Tia now, just coming out of the library.”

“Excellent. Thank you very much.” He tucked his phone back in his pocket. “That seems to be that.” He got to his feet, handing her the briefcase. “I can’t say it’s been a pleasure.”

“You’re a fool, Malachi.” Anita rose. “Worse, you’re a fool who thinks small. I’ll turn what’s in this case into the biggest story in a decade. Hell, in a century. Enjoy your ten million. Before I’m done, that’ll be petty cash.”

“A nasty piece, that one,” Gideon commented as she clipped away.

“Oh well, ever since that house fell on her sister, she’s been out of sorts. Let’s give her a minute or two to start up her broomstick before we go see all our girls.”

THE BROOMSTICK MIGHT have been a New York City cab, but Anita was very near cackling. Everything she wanted—money, power, position, fame, respect—was tucked in the briefcase beside her.

It was Paul’s money that had brought her this far. But it would be hers that took her the rest of the way. She was, now, as far away from that row house in Queens as she had ever been.

Inspired, she flipped out her phone to call her butler and arrange for champagne and caviar to be waiting for her in her sitting room.

“Good afternoon, Morningside residence.”

“This is Ms. Gaye. Haven’t I told you Stipes or Fitzhugh is to answer the telephone?”

“Yes, Ms. Gaye. I’m sorry, Ms. Gaye. But both Mr. Stipes and Mrs. Fitzhugh are with the police.”

“What do you mean, with the police?”

“The police are here, ma’am. They brought a search warrant.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. I heard them say something about an insurance claim, and some items from Morning-side.” The excitement in the girl’s voice was palpable. Anita couldn’t know the internal war being waged between admitting to listening at the door and risking being fired, or passing on the information.

“What are they doing? Where are they?”

“In the library, ma’am. They went into your safe and they found things. Things that were supposed to be stolen from the store.”

“That’s ridiculous. That’s impossible. That’s . . .” And the pieces began to fall, to shuffle into place. “The son of a bitch. The son of a bitch!” She tossed the phone aside and, with trembling fingers, unlocked the briefcase.

Inside were three puppets. Even through the haze of fury, she recognized Moe, Larry and Curly.

“SHE WON’T APPRECIATE the full irony of the Three Stooges.”

Gideon reached over and stole the slice of pizza out of Cleo’s hand. “It’s a pie in the face. That point’s clear enough, even to her.”

“I never understood the humor. I’m sorry,” Tia said when all three men stared at her. “All that eye-poking and head bashing.”

“It’s a guy thing,” Jack told her. “They should have her downtown by now,” he added, checking his watch. “Her lawyers can dance till they drop, but they’re not going to tap their way around the insurance fraud.”

“And Mikey?”

Jack looked back at Cleo. “Jasper gave them chapter and verse. The courts may look dubiously on a guy with

his sheet, but the phone records will back up the connection. Start welding those links together, you've got a hell of a chain to wrap around her neck. She's accessory before and after the fact. She'll pay for Mikey. She'll pay for it all."

"Thinking of her in that really ugly orange jumpsuit—nasty color with her hair—brightens my day." Cleo lifted her beer. "Here's to us."

"It was a hell of a party." Gideon rose, rolled his shoulders. "I've got to go out."

"Where are we going?"

"You're not invited." He leaned down to tap Cleo's nose. "I'm taking Mal and Ma so I can have both male and female advice on a proper ring."

"You're getting me a ring? Aw, you traditional sap." She leaped to her feet to kiss him. "Then I'm going, too. I should pick it out since I'm the one who's going to wear it."

"You're not going, and I'm picking it out, as I'm the one giving it to you."

"That's pretty strict, but I think I can live with it."

"We'll walk down with you." Jack took Rebecca's hand. "We'll head downtown, see what we can wheedle out of Bob on the status. He might be able to resist me, but he won't be able to resist Irish face-to-face."

"A fine idea." Rebecca snagged her jacket. "When we're done, we'll make reservations at some hideously expensive restaurant. We'll have the mother of all celebration dinners. We'll just help Tia clean this mess up."

"No, that's all right. I'd rather know what's going on quicker. And I want to see Cleo's ring."

"Me, too." Cleo stretched on the sofa. "Enough that I'll help clean up. Don't be afraid to go for gaudy," she told Gideon. "I can live with it."

When she was alone with Tia, Cleo rolled over on her stomach, crossed her legs in the air. "Sit down a minute. Those pizza boxes aren't in a hurry."

"If I keep busy it won't seem like so long before everyone's back. You know, I've eaten more pizza in the past month than I have in my whole life."

“Stick with me and you’ll discover all the joys of fast food.”

“I never thought I’d enjoy having crowds of people in my apartment. But I do. It never seems quite right when they’re not around.”

“I was just wondering if you and Mal were going to go for it, too.”

“Go for what?” She looked at the Three Fates, even now standing among empty bottles and pizza boxes. “We’ve already gone for it, haven’t we?”

“No, I mean, you know, ‘till death do us part.’”

“Oh. We haven’t talked about it. I imagine he’s anxious to get home, to get back to the family business, to figure out what to do with his share of things. Maybe after . . . maybe in time he’ll feel more settled and we’ll talk about it.”

“Time’s part of it, isn’t it?” Cleo lifted Clotho. “Seems to me for all the fate and destiny stuff, sometimes you have to do the job yourself. Why don’t you ask him?”

“Him to what? To . . . to marry me? I couldn’t. He’s supposed to ask me.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s the man.”

“Yeah, yeah. So what? You love him, you want him, so you ask him. Then we can plan a triple wedding. Strikes me like that’s how all this was meant to shake down.”

“Ask him?” The idea rolled around in Tia’s brain before she shook her head. “I’d never have the nerve.”

When the phone rang, she carried empty boxes into the kitchen and picked up the nested portable on the counter.

“Hello?”

“Doing research, you bitch?”

A whipsnap of ice slapped up Tia’s spine. “Excuse me?”

“What did he promise you? True love? Devotion? You won’t get it.”

“I don’t understand.” She walked quickly back into the living room, signaled Cleo. “Is this Anita?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. Game’s over. I want the Fates.”

"I don't know what you're talking about." She tipped the phone so Cleo could bump heads with her and listen.

"If you don't, it's going to be very sad about your mother."

"My mother?" Tia jolted up straight, instinctively gripping Cleo's hand. "What about my mother?"

"She's not feeling well, not well at all. Are you, Alma?"

"Tia." The voice was weak, and thick with tears. "Tia, what's happening?"

"Tell her what I'm doing right now, Alma dear."

"She's . . . Tia, she's holding a gun to my head. I think, I think she shot Tilly. Oh God, my God, I can't breathe."

"Anita! Don't hurt her. She doesn't know anything. She's not involved in this."

"Everyone's involved. Is he there with you?"

"No, Malachi's not here. I swear to you, he's not here. I'm alone."

"Then come, alone, to your mommy's house. We'll have a nice cozy chat. You've got five minutes, so you'd better run. Five minutes, Tia, or I shoot her."

"Don't, please. I'll do anything you want."

"You're wasting time, and she doesn't have much."

Even as the phone clicked in her ear, Tia was tossing it aside. "I have to go now. I have to hurry."

"Jesus Christ, Tia, you can't go over there. You can't go by yourself."

"I have to. There's no time."

"We'll call Gideon, Malachi. We'll call Jack." Cleo muscled Tia away from the door. "Think, damn it. Think. You can't go rushing over there. We need the cops."

"I have to. She's my mother. She's terrified, maybe already hurt. Five minutes. I only have five minutes. She's my mother," Tia repeated, pushing Cleo aside.

"Stall her." Cleo rushed out the door behind Tia. "Stall her, I'll get help."

Tia called out her mother's address and ran. She hadn't known she could run that fast, that she could streak through the rain like a snake through water. Drenched, terrified and chilled to the bone, she hurled herself up the

steps to her parents' door and, desperate, lifted a hand to beat on the wood. Her fist pounding, she pushed the door, already slightly ajar, open.

"Mother!"

"We're up here, Tia." Anita's voice floated downstairs. "Close and lock the door behind you. You just made it, you know. Thirty seconds to spare."

"Mother." She hesitated at the base of the stairs. "Are you all right?"

"She struck me." Alma began to weep. "My face. Tia, don't come up. Don't come upstairs! Run!"

"Don't hurt her again. I'm coming." Tia gripped the banister hard and started up the steps.

At the top, she turned and saw Tilly lying in the hallway, blood seeping into the rug beneath her. "Oh God, no!" She rushed forward, threw herself down to check for a pulse.

Alive, she thought, nearly weeping. Still alive, but for how long? If she stalled Anita long enough for help to come, Tilly might bleed to death.

You're on your own. She ordered herself to get to her feet. And you will do whatever needs to be done.

"Tilly is badly hurt."

"Then your father will just have to call the agency and find another housekeeper. Get in here, Tia, before I start splattering your mother's blood in this overly rococo bedroom."

Without taking time for one last prayer, Tia stepped into the doorway. She saw her mother, tied in a chair. And behind her, Anita holding a gun to her already bruised temple.

"Hold your hands up," Anita ordered. "Turn a slow circle. Look at this," she continued when Tia obeyed. "She didn't even take time for a raincoat. Such daughterly devotion."

"I don't have a gun. I wouldn't know how to use one if I did."

"I can see that. Soaked to the skin. Come all the way inside."

"Tilly needs an ambulance."

Anita lifted her brows, pushed the barrel of the gun more firmly against Alma's temple. "Want to make it two?"

"No. Please."

"She came to the door," Alma sobbed. "Tilly let her in. She was coming up to tell me, and I heard that terrible sound. She shot poor Tilly, Tia. Then she came in here, she struck me. She tied me up."

"I used Hermés scarves, didn't I? Stop complaining, Alma. I don't know how you stand this woman," Anita said to Tia. "Seriously, I should put this bullet in her brain and do you a favor."

"If you hurt her, I won't have any reason to help you."

"Apparently I judged you right on some level." She rubbed the barrel of the gun against Alma's bloodless cheek. "I never would have figured you to lie, cheat, steal."

"Like you?"

"Exactly. I want the Fates."

"They won't help you. The police are at your house, at your business. They have warrants."

"Do you think I don't *know* that?" Anita's voice pitched up, like a child's about to throw herself into a tantrum. "You think you're so clever, planting stolen merchandise in my safe. You think I'm worried about a little insurance fraud?"

"They know you killed that man. First-degree murder. They know you were paying him when he killed Mikey. Accessory to murder." Tia moved forward as she spoke. "The Fates won't help you with that."

"You get them, and I'll worry about the rest. I want the statues and the money. Call that Irish prick and get them back, or I kill her, then you."

She'll kill us all for them, Tia thought. Even if she were to hand them over to Anita now, she would still kill them all. And maybe, somehow, find some hole to hide in.

"He doesn't have them. I do," she said quickly when Anita jerked her mother's head back with the barrel of the gun. "My father wanted them. You know what a coup it would be. I wanted Malachi. So we tricked you out of the money. My father would buy them. I get Malachi, and Wyley's gets the Fates."

“Not anymore.”

“No. I don’t want you to hurt my mother. I’ll get you the Fates, and my share of the money. I’ll try to get the rest. I’ll get you the Fates right now if you stop pointing the gun at my mother.”

“You don’t like it? How’s this?” Anita shifted her aim so the gun was pointed at Tia’s heart.

And seeing the gun aimed at her daughter, Alma began to scream. In an absent gesture, Anita rapped the side of her fist against Alma’s temple. “Shut the fuck up or I’ll shoot both of you for the hell of it.”

“Don’t. Don’t hurt my Tia.”

“You don’t have to hurt anyone. I’ll get them for you.” Moving slowly, Tia eased toward her mother’s dressing table.

“Do you think I’m stupid enough to believe they’re in there?”

“I need the key. Mother keeps the key to the lockbox in here.”

“Tia—”

“Mother.” Tia shook her head. “There’s no use pretending anymore. She knows. They’re not worth dying for.” Tia opened the drawer.

“Hold it, step back.” Gesturing with the gun, Anita moved forward as Tia stood by the open drawer. “If there’s a gun in there, I’m putting a bullet in Alma’s kneecap.”

“Please.” As if staggering, Tia laid a hand on the vanity for balance and palmed a small bottle. “Please don’t. There’s no gun.”

Anita used her free hand to riffle through the drawer. “There’s no key either.”

“It’s in there. Right—”

She slammed the drawer on Anita’s hand, then tossed the contents of the bottle in her face. The gun went off, plowing a hole in the wall an inch from Tia’s head. Through the screams—her mother’s, Anita’s, her own—Tia leaped.

The collision with Anita knocked the breath out of her, but flying on adrenaline, she didn’t notice. But she felt,

with a kind of primeval thrill, her own nails rake the flesh of Anita's wrist.

And she scented blood.

The gun sputtered out of Anita's hand, skidded over the floor. They grappled for it, Anita clawing blindly as the smelling salts Tia had flung at her stung her eyes. A fist glanced off her cheek and made her ears ring. Her knee plowed into Anita's stomach more by accident than design.

When their hands closed over the gun at the same time, when they rolled over the floor in a fierce, sweaty tangle, Tia did the only thing that came to mind. She got a handful of Anita's hair and yanked viciously.

She didn't hear the glass shattering as they rammed into a table. She didn't hear the shouts from downstairs or the pounding of feet. All she heard was the blood roaring in her own head, the fury and elemental violence of it.

For the first time in her life, she caused someone physical pain, and wanted to cause more.

"You hit my mother." She gasped it out and, using Anita's hair as a rope, slammed her head over and over against the floor.

Then someone was pulling her away. Teeth bared, hands fisted, Tia struggled as she stared down, watching Anita's bloodshot eyes roll back in her head.

Gideon stepped over, picked up the gun, and Malachi turned the still struggling Tia into his arms. "Are you hurt? Jesus, Tia, there's blood on you."

"She kicked her ass." Cleo sniffled her way through a grin. "Can't you see, she kicked her fat, sorry ass."

"Tilly." The adrenaline dumped out of her system and left her limbs feeling like water. Her voice was weak now, her head starting to spin.

"Ma's with her. She's ringing an ambulance. Here now, here now, darling, you're going to sit down. Gideon, help Mrs. Marsh there."

"I'll do it. She's frightened." Holding on, Tia stayed on her feet. Her knees wanted to buckle, her legs to give, but she took the first step. The second was easier. "Get her out of here, please. Get Anita out of here. I'll take care of my mother."

Stepping around the unconscious Anita, Tia hurried over to untie her mother. "You're not going to be hysterical," Tia ordered, pressing a kiss to her mother's bruised face as she dealt with the knots. "You're going to lie down. I'm going to make you some tea."

"I thought she would kill you. I thought—"

"She didn't. I'm perfectly fine, and so are you."

"Tilly. She's dead."

"She's not. I promise." Gently, Tia helped Alma to her feet. "An ambulance is coming. Lie down now. Everything's going to be fine."

"That horrible woman. I never liked her. My head hurts."

"I know." Tia brushed Alma's hair back from her bruised temple, kissed it. "I'll get you something for it."

"Tilly." Alma gripped Tia's hand.

"She's going to be all right." Tia leaned down, put her arms around her mother. "Everything's going to be all right."

"You were very brave. I didn't know you could be so brave."

"Neither did I."

To Tia's surprise, her mother insisted on going to the hospital with Tilly. And was just as forceful in sending Tia home again.

"She'll drive the doctors crazy. At least until my father gets there and calms her down."

"It shows a good heart"—Eileen set a cup of tea in front of Tia—"that she was more concerned with her friend than anything else. A good heart," she added, touching Tia's sore cheek, "goes a long way. Drink your tea now, so you're steady when you talk to those policemen."

"I will. Thank you."

She closed her eyes as Eileen left the room, then opened them and looked at Malachi.

"I never thought she could hurt you. I never thought she'd—I should have."

"It's no one's fault but hers."

"Look at you." He cupped her face gently. "Bruises on your cheek and scratches as well. I wouldn't have had it,

not for all the money in the world, not for the Fates, not for justice. I wouldn't have had one mark on you."

"There are more on her, and I put them there."

"That you did." He lifted her to her feet to hold her. "Smelling salts dead in the eyes. Who but you would think of it?"

"It's done now, isn't it? All the way done?"

"It is. All the way done."

"Then, are you going to marry me?"

"What?" He eased away, slow and careful. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you're going to marry me or not."

He let out a short laugh, raked a hand through his hair. "I thought I would, it being agreeable with you. As it happens, I was on the point of deciding on a ring when Cleo rang on Gideon's mobile."

"Go back and get it."

"Now?"

"Tomorrow." She wrapped her arms around him and sighed. "Tomorrow's just fine."

Epilogue

Cobh, Ireland
May 7, 2003

THE Deepwater Quay at water's edge was unchanged from the time of the *Lusitania*, the *Titanic* and the great, grand ships that once plied the waters between America and Europe.

Here, tenders from those ships had come to get mail and passengers from the Dublin train, which often arrived late.

Though the Quay still functioned as a train station, the Cobh Heritage Centre, with its displays and shops, ran through its main terminal.

Recently an addition had been added to serve as a small museum. With security by Burdett. The focal point of that museum were three silver statues known as the Three Fates.

They gleamed behind their protective glass and looked out at the faces—perhaps the lives—of those who came to see, and to study.

They stood, united by their bases, on a marble pedestal, and in the pedestal was a brass plaque.

THE THREE FATES

ON LOAN FROM
THE SULLIVAN-BURDETT COLLECTION
IN MEMORY OF

HENRY W. AND EDITH WYLEY
LORRAINE AND STEVEN EDWARD CUNNINGHAM III
FELIX AND MARGARET GREENFIELD
MICHAEL K. HICKS

"It's good. It's good that his name's on there." Cleo blinked back tears. "It's good."

Gideon draped his arm over her shoulders. "It's right. We did what we could to make it right."

"I'm proud of you." Rebecca hooked her arm through Jack's. "I'm proud to stand here beside you, as your wife. You could have kept them."

"Nope. I got you. One goddess is enough for any man."

"A wise and true answer. It's time we went to the cemetery. Cleo?"

"Yeah." She laid her fingers on the glass, just under Mikey's name. "Let's go."

"We'll be right behind you," Malachi told them. "Button up." He began doing up the buttons of Tia's jacket himself. "It's windy out."

"You don't have to fuss. We're fine."

"Expectant fathers are allowed to fuss and fret." He laid a hand on her belly. "Are you sure you want to walk?"

"Yes, it's good for us. I can't sit in a bubble for the next six months, Malachi."

"Listen to her. Not a year ago you were barricaded against every germ known to man."

"That was then." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "It's a tapestry. Threads woven in a life. I like the way my pattern's changing. I like standing here with you and seeing something we helped do shining in the light."

"You shine, Tia."

Content, she laid her hand over his. "We made justice. Anita's in prison, probably for the rest of her life. The Fates are together, as they were meant to be."

"And so are we."

"So are we."

She held out a hand and felt unreasonably strong when his linked with it. They caught up with the others and walked up the long hill in the May wind.

BIRTHRIGHT



Nora Roberts



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

BIRTHRIGHT



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For my darling Kayla, the new light in my life. My wishes for you are too many to count, so I'll just wish you love. Everything magic and everything real, everything that matters springs from that.

From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Three Fates* comes a novel about shattering loss and shocking discovery—set in a small town nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains . . .

When 5,000-year-old human bones are found at a construction site in the small town of Woodsboro, the news draws archaeologist Callie Dunbrook out of her sabbatical and into a whirlwind of adventure, danger, and romance. While overseeing the dig, she must try to make sense of a cloud of death and misfortune that hangs over the project—fueling rumors that the site is cursed. She must cope with the presence of her irritating—but irresistible—ex-husband, Jake. And when a stranger claims to know a secret about her privileged Boston childhood, she must question her own past as well. . . .

Birthright

“Nora Roberts is one of America’s bestselling writers, and *Birthright* makes it obvious why . . . Entertaining.”

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And he who gives a child a treat
Makes joy-bells ring in Heaven's street,
But he who gives a child a home
Builds palaces in Kingdom come,
And she who gives a baby birth
Brings Savior Christ again to Earth.

JOHN MASEFIELD

Know thyself.

INSCRIBED ON THE TEMPLE
OF APOLLO AT DELPHI

Prologue



DECEMBER 12, 1974

Douglas Edward Cullen had to pee. Nerves, excitement and the Coke he'd had as part of his reward lunch at McDonald's for being good while Mama shopped combined to fill his three-year-old bladder to bursting.

He danced, in exquisite torture, from the toe of one of his red Keds to the other.

His heart was pounding so hard he thought if he didn't yell really loud or run as fast as he could, he might explode.

He loved when stuff exploded on TV.

But Mama had told him he *had* to be good. If little boys weren't good Santa would put coal in their stocking instead of toys. He wasn't sure what coal was, but he knew he wanted toys. So he only yelled and ran in his mind like his daddy had taught him to do when it was really, *really* important to keep still.

The big snowman beside him grinned and was even fatter than Douglas's aunt Lucy. He didn't know what snowmen ate, but this one had to eat a *lot*.

The bright red nose of Rudolph, his very favorite reindeer, blinked on and off until Douglas's eyes were dazzled. He tried to entertain himself by counting the red dots that swam in front of his eyes, the way the Count counted on *Sesame Street*.

One, two, three! Three red dots! Ha ha ha ha ha!

But it made him feel a little bit sick.

The mall was full of noise, the blasts of Christmas music that added to his impatience, the shouts of other children, the crying of babies.

He knew all about crying babies now that he had a little sister. When babies cried you were supposed to pick them up and walk around with them singing songs, or sit with them in the rocking chair and pat them on the back till they burped.

Babies could burp right out loud and nobody made them say scuze me. Because, dummy, babies couldn't talk!

But Jessica wasn't crying now. She was sleeping in the stroller and looked like a doll baby in her red dress with the white frilly junk on it.

That's what Grandma called Jessica. Her little doll baby. But sometimes Jessie cried and cried and her face got all red and scrunched up. Nothing would stop her from crying, not the singing or the walking or the rocking chair.

Douglas didn't think she looked much like a doll baby then. She looked mean and mad. When that happened, Mama got too tired to play with him. She was never too tired to play with him before Jessica got in her belly.

Sometimes he didn't like having a little sister who cried and pooped in her pants and made Mama too tired to play.

But most of the time it was okay. He liked to look at her and watch the way she kicked her legs. And when she grabbed his finger, really tight, it made him laugh.

Grandma said he had to protect Jessica because that's what big brothers do. He'd worried so much about it that he'd snuck in to sleep on the floor beside her crib just in case the monsters who lived in the closet came to eat her in the nighttime.

But he'd woken in his own bed in the morning, so maybe he'd only dreamed he'd gone in to protect her.

They shuffled up in line, and Douglas glanced, a bit uneasily, at the smiling elves who danced around Santa's workshop. They looked a little bit mean and mad—like Jessica when she was crying really loud.

If Jessica didn't wake up, she wasn't going to get to sit on Santa's lap. It was stupid for Jessie to be all dressed up to sit on Santa's lap, because she *couldn't* say scuze me when she burped, and she *couldn't* tell Santa what she wanted for Christmas.

But he could. He was three and a half years old. He was a big boy now. Everyone said so.

Mama crouched down and spoke to him softly. When she asked if he had to pee, he shook his head. She had that tired look on her face and he was afraid if they went to the bathroom they'd *never* get back in line and see Santa.

She gave his hand a squeeze, smiled at him and promised it wouldn't be much longer.

He wanted a Hot Wheels, and a G.I. Joe, and a Fisher-Price garage, and some Matchbox cars and a big yellow bulldozer like the one his friend Mitch got for his birthday.

Jessica was too young to play with real toys. She just got girl stuff like funny dresses and stuffed animals. Girls were pretty dopey, but baby girls were even more dopey.

But he was going to tell Santa about Jessica, so he wouldn't forget to bring stuff for her when he came down the chimney at their house.

Mama was talking to someone, but he didn't listen. The grown-up talk didn't interest him. Especially when the line moved, people shifted, and he saw Santa.

He was big. It seemed to Douglas, on the first ripple of fear, that Santa wasn't so big in the cartoons or in the pictures in the storybooks.

He was sitting on his throne in front of his workshop. There were lots of elves and reindeer and snowmen. Everything was moving—heads and arms. Big, big smiles.

Santa's beard was very long. You could hardly see his

face. And when he let out a big, booming *ho ho ho*, the sound of it squeezed Douglas's bladder like mean fingers.

Lights flashed, a baby wailed, elves grinned.

He was a big boy now, a big boy now. He wasn't afraid of Santa Claus.

Mama tugged his hand, told him to go ahead. Go sit on Santa's lap. She was smiling, too.

He took a step forward, then another, on legs that began to shake. And Santa hoisted him up.

Merry Christmas! Have you been a good boy?

Terror struck Douglas's heart like a hatchet. The elves were closing in, Rudolph's red nose blinked. The snowman turned his wide, round head and leered.

The big man in the red suit held him tight and stared at him with tiny, tiny eyes.

Screaming, struggling, Douglas tumbled out of Santa's lap, hit the platform hard. And wet his pants.

People moved in, voices streamed above him so all he could do was curl up and wail.

Then Mama was there, pulling him close, telling him it was all right. Fussing over him because he'd hit his nose and made it bleed.

She kissed him, stroked him and didn't scold him for wetting his pants. His breath was still coming in hard little gasps as he burrowed into her.

She gave him a big hug, lifted him up so he could press his face to her shoulder.

Still murmuring to him, she turned.

And began to scream. And began to run.

Clinging to her, Douglas looked down. And saw Jessica's stroller was empty.

PART I



The Overburden

Go where we will on the *surface* of things,
men have been there before us.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

One

The Antietam Creek Project came to a rude halt when the blade of Billy Younger's backhoe unearthed the first skull.

It was an unpleasant surprise for Billy himself, who'd been squatting in the cage of his machine, sweating and cursing in the vicious July heat. His wife was staunchly opposed to the proposed subdivision and had given him her usual high-pitched lecture that morning while he'd tried to eat his fried eggs and link sausage.

For himself, Billy didn't give a rat's ass one way or the other about the subdivision. But a job was a job, and Dolan was paying a good wage. Almost good enough to make up for Missy's constant bitching.

Damn nagging had put him off his breakfast, and a man needed a good breakfast when he was going to be working his tail off the rest of the day.

And what he had managed to slurp up before Missy nagged away his appetite was sitting uneasily in his gut, stewed, he thought bitterly, in the goddamn wet heat.

He rammed the controls, had the satisfaction of knowing his machine would never bitch his ears off for trying to

do the job. Nothing suited Billy better, even in the god-awful sweaty clutch of July, than plowing that big-ass blade into the ground, feeling it take a good bite.

But scooping up a dirty, empty-eyed skull along with the rich bottomland soil, having it leer at him in that white blast of midsummer sunlight was enough to have 233-pound Billy scream like a girl and leap down from the machine as nimbly as a dancer.

His co-workers would razz him about it unmercifully until he was forced to bloody his best friend's nose in order to regain his manhood.

But on that July afternoon, he'd run over the site with the same speed and determination, and damn near the agility, he'd possessed on the football field during his high school heyday.

When he'd regained his breath and coherency, he reported to his foreman, and his foreman reported to Ronald Dolan.

By the time the county sheriff arrived, several other bones had been exhumed by curious laborers. The medical examiner was sent for, and a local news team arrived to interview Billy, Dolan and whoever else could help fill up the airtime on the evening report.

Word spread. There was talk of murder, mass graves, serial killers. Eager fingers squeezed juice out of the grapevine so that when the examination was complete, and the bones were deemed very old, a number of people weren't sure if they were pleased or disappointed.

But for Dolan, who'd already fought through petitions, protests and injunctions to turn the pristine fifty acres of boggy bottomland and woods into a housing development, the age of the bones didn't matter.

Their very existence was a major pain in his ass.

And when two days later Lana Campbell, the transplanted city lawyer, crossed her legs and gave him a smug smile, it was all Dolan could do not to pop her in her pretty face.

"You'll find the court order fairly straightforward," she told him, and kept the smile in place. She'd been one of the

loudest voices against the development. At the moment, she had quite a bit to smile about.

“You don’t need a court order. I stopped work. I’m cooperating with the police and the planning commission.”

“Let’s just consider this an additional safety measure. The County Planning Commission has given you sixty days to file a report and to convince them that your development should continue.”

“I know the ropes, sweetheart. Dolan’s been building houses in this county for forty-six years.”

He called her “sweetheart” to annoy her. Because they both knew it, Lana only grinned. “The Historical and Preservation Societies have retained me. I’m doing my job. Members of the faculty from the University of Maryland archaeology and anthropology departments will be visiting the site. As liaison, I’m asking you to allow them to remove and test samples.”

“Attorney of record, liaison.” Dolan, a strongly built man with a ruddy, Irish face, leaned back in his desk chair. Sarcasm dripped from his voice. “Busy lady.”

He hooked his thumbs in his suspenders. He always wore red suspenders over a blue work shirt. Part of the uniform, as he thought of it. Part of what made him one of the common men, the working class that had made his town, and his country, great.

Whatever his bank balance, and he knew it to the penny, he didn’t need fancy clothes to show himself off.

He still drove a pickup truck. American-made.

He’d been born and raised in Woodsboro, unlike the pretty city lawyer. And he didn’t need her, or anybody else, to tell him what his community needed. The fact was, he knew better than a lot of the people in the community about what was best for Woodsboro.

He was a man who looked to the future, and took care of his own.

“We’re both busy people, so I’ll come straight to the point.” Lana was dead sure she was about to wipe that patronizing grin off Dolan’s face. “You can’t proceed on your development until the site is examined and cleared by the

county. Samples need to be taken for that to happen. Any artifacts excavated won't be of any use to you. Cooperation in this matter would, we both know, go a long way toward shoring up your PR troubles."

"I don't look at them as troubles." He spread his big workingman's hands. "People need homes. The community needs jobs. The Antietam Creek development provides both. It's called progress."

"Thirty new homes. More traffic on roads not equipped to handle it, already overcrowded schools, the loss of rural sensibilities and open space."

The "sweetheart" hadn't gotten a rise out of her, but the old argument did. She drew a breath, let it out slowly. "The community fought against it. It's called quality of life. But that's another matter," she said before he could respond. "Until the bones are tested and dated, you're stuck." She tapped a finger on the court order. "Dolan Development must want that process expedited. You'll want to pay for the testing. Radiocarbon dating."

"Pay—"

Yeah, she thought, who's the winner now? "You own the property. You own the artifacts." She'd done her homework. "You know we'll fight against the construction, bury you in court orders and briefs until this is settled. Pay the two dollars, Mr. Dolan," she added as she got to her feet. "Your attorneys are going to give you the same advice."

Lana waited until she had closed the office door behind her before letting the grin spread across her face. She strolled out, took a deep breath of thick summer air as she gazed up and down Woodsboro's Main Street.

She refrained from doing a happy dance—too undignified—but she nearly skipped down the sidewalk like a ten-year-old. This was *her* town now. Her community. Her home. And had been since she'd moved there from Baltimore two years before.

It was a good town, steeped in tradition and history, fueled by gossip, protected from the urban sprawl by distance and the looming shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Coming to Woodsboro had been a huge leap of faith for a born and bred city girl. But she couldn't bear the memories in Baltimore after losing her husband. Steve's death had flattened her. It had taken her nearly six months to find her feet again, to pull herself out of the sticky haze of grief and deal with life.

And life demanded, Lana thought. She missed Steve. There was still a hole in her where he'd been. But she'd had to keep breathing, keep functioning. And there was Tyler. Her baby. Her boy. Her treasure.

She couldn't bring back his daddy, but she could give him the best childhood possible.

He had room to run now, and a dog to run with. Neighbors and friends, and a mother who'd do whatever needed to be done to keep him safe and happy.

She checked her watch as she walked. It was Ty's day to go to his friend Brock's after preschool. She'd give Brock's mother, Jo, a call in an hour. Just to make sure everything was all right.

She paused at the intersection, waited for the light. Traffic was slow, as traffic was meant to be in small towns.

She didn't look small-town. Her wardrobe had once been selected to suit the image of an up-and-coming lawyer in a major urban firm. She might have hung out her shingle in a little rural dot of less than four thousand people, but that didn't mean she couldn't continue to dress for success.

She wore a summer blue suit in crisp linen. The classic tailoring complemented her delicate build and her own sense of tidiness. Her hair was a straight swing of sunny blond that brushed the jawline of a pretty, youthful face. She had round blue eyes that were often mistaken for guileless, a nose that tipped up at the end and a deeply curved mouth.

She swung into Treasured Pages, beamed at the man behind the counter. And finally did her victory dance.

Roger Grogan took off his reading glasses and raised his bushy silver eyebrows. He was a trim and vigorous seventy-five, and his face made Lana think of a canny leprechaun.

He wore a short-sleeved white shirt, and his hair, a beautiful mix of silver and white, exploded in untamed tufts.

“You look pretty full of yourself.” His voice was gravel spilling down a steel chute. “Must’ve seen Ron Dolan.”

“Just came from there.” She indulged herself with another spin before she leaned on the counter. “You should’ve come with me, Roger. Just to see his face.”

“You’re too hard on him.” Roger tapped a fingertip to Lana’s nose. “He’s just doing what he thinks is right.”

When Lana merely angled her head, stared blandly, Roger laughed. “Didn’t say I agreed with him. Boy’s got a hard head, just like his old man did. Doesn’t have the sense to see if a community’s this divided over something, you need to rethink.”

“He’ll be rethinking now,” Lana promised. “Testing and dating those bones is going to cause him some major delays. And if we’re lucky, they’re going to be old enough to draw a lot of attention—national attention—to the site. We can delay the development for months. Maybe years.”

“He’s as hardheaded as you. You’ve managed to hold him up for months already.”

“He says it’s progress,” she mumbled.

“He’s not alone in that.”

“Alone or not, he’s wrong. You can’t plant houses like a corn crop. Our projections show—”

Roger held up a hand. “Preaching to the choir, counselor.”

“Yeah.” She let out a breath. “Once we get the archaeological survey, we’ll see what we see. I can’t wait. Meanwhile, the longer the development’s delayed, the more Dolan loses. And the more time we have to raise money. He might just reconsider selling that land to the Woodsboro Preservation Society.”

She pushed back her hair. “Why don’t you let me take you to lunch? We can celebrate today’s victory.”

“Why aren’t you letting some young, good-looking guy take *you* out to lunch?”

“Because I lost my heart to you, Roger, the first time I

saw you." It wasn't far from the truth. "In fact, hell with lunch. Let's you and me run off to Aruba together."

It made him chuckle, nearly made him blush. He'd lost his wife the same year Lana had lost her husband. He often wondered if that was part of the reason for the bond that had forged between them so quickly.

He admired her sharp mind, her stubborn streak, her absolute devotion to her son. He had a granddaughter right about her age, he thought. Somewhere.

"That'd set this town on its ear, wouldn't it? Be the biggest thing since the Methodist minister got caught playing patty-cake with the choir director. But the fact is, I've got books to catalogue—just in. Don't have time for lunch or tropical islands."

"I didn't know you'd gotten new stock. Is this one?" At his nod, she gently turned the book around.

Roger dealt in rare books, and his tiny shop was a small cathedral to them. It smelled, always, of old leather and old paper and the Old Spice he'd been sprinkling on his skin for sixty years.

A rare bookstore wasn't the sort of thing expected in a two-stoplight rural town. Lana knew the bulk of his clientele came, like his stock, from much farther afield.

"It's beautiful." She traced a finger over the leather binding. "Where did it come from?"

"An estate in Chicago." His ears pricked at a sound at the rear of the shop. "But it came with something even more valuable."

He waited, heard the door between the shop and the stairs to the living quarters on the second floor open. Lana saw the pleasure light up his face, and turned.

He had a face of deep valleys and strong hills. His hair was very dark brown with gilt lights in it. The type, she imagined, that would go silver and white with age. There was a ruffled mass of it that brushed the collar of his shirt.

The eyes were deep, dark brown, and at the moment seemed a bit surly. As did his mouth. It was a face, Lana mused, that mirrored both intellect and will. Smart and

stubborn, was her first analysis. But perhaps, she admitted, it was because Roger had often described his grandson as just that.

The fact that he looked as if he'd just rolled out of bed and hitched on a pair of old jeans as an afterthought added sexy to the mix.

She felt a pleasant little ripple in the blood she hadn't experienced in a very long time.

"Doug." There was pride, delight and love in the single word. "Wondered when you were going to wander down. Good timing, as it happens. This is Lana. I told you about our Lana. Lana Campbell, my grandson, Doug Cullen."

"It's nice to meet you." She offered a hand. "We've missed each other whenever you've popped back home since I moved to Woodsboro."

He shook her hand, scanned her face. "You're the lawyer."

"Guilty. I just stopped in to tell Roger the latest on the Dolan development. And to hit on him. How long are you in town?"

"I'm not sure."

A man of few words, she thought, and tried again. "You do a lot of traveling, acquiring and selling antiquarian books. It must be fascinating."

"I like it."

Roger leaped into the awkward pause. "I don't know what I'd do without Doug. Can't get around like I used to. He's got a feel for the business, too. A natural feel. I'd be retired and boring myself to death if he hadn't taken up the fieldwork."

"It must be satisfying for both of you, to share an interest, and a family business." Since Doug looked bored by the conversation, Lana turned to his grandfather. "Well, Roger, since you've blown me off, again, I'd better get back to work. See you at the meeting tomorrow night?"

"I'll be there."

"Nice meeting you, Doug."

"Yeah. See you around."

When the door closed behind her, Roger let out a steam-kettle sigh. “‘See you around’? That’s the best you can do when you’re talking to a pretty woman? You’re breaking my heart, boy.”

“There’s no coffee. Upstairs. No coffee. No brain. I’m lucky I can speak in simple declarative sentences.”

“Got a pot in the back room,” Roger said in disgust, and jerked a thumb. “That girl’s smart, pretty, interesting and,” he added as Doug moved behind the counter and through the door, “available.”

“I’m not looking for a woman.” The scent of coffee hit his senses and nearly made him weep. He poured a cup, burned his tongue on the first sip and knew all would, once again, be right with the world.

He sipped again, glancing back at his grandfather. “Pretty fancy piece for Woodsboro.”

“I thought you weren’t looking.”

Now he grinned, and it changed his face from surly to approachable. “Looking, seeing. Different kettle.”

“She knows how to put herself together. Doesn’t make her fancy.”

“No offense.” Douglas was amused by his grandfather’s huffy tone. “I didn’t know she was your girlfriend.”

“I was your age, she damn well would be.”

“Grandpa.” Revived by the coffee, Doug slung an arm over Roger’s shoulders. “Age doesn’t mean squat. I say you should go for it. Okay if I take this upstairs? I need to go clean up, head out to see Mom.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Roger waved him off. “See you around,” he muttered as Doug walked to the rear of the store. “Pitiful.”

Callie Dunbrook sucked up the last of her Diet Pepsi as she fought Baltimore traffic. She’d timed her departure from Philadelphia—where she was supposed to be taking a three-month sabbatical—poorly. She saw that now.

But when the call had come through, requesting a con-

sultation, she hadn't considered travel time or rush-hour traffic. Or the basic insanity of the Baltimore Beltway at four-fifteen on a Wednesday afternoon.

Now she just had to deal with it.

She did so by blasting her horn and propelling her old and beloved Land Rover into an opening more suited to a Tonka toy. The dark thoughts of the driver she cut off didn't concern her in the least.

She'd been out of the field for seven weeks. Even the whiff of a chance to be back in again drove her as ruthlessly as she drove the four-wheeler.

She knew Leo Greenbaum well enough to have recognized the restrained excitement in his voice. Well enough to know he wasn't a man to ask her to drive to Baltimore to look at some bones unless they were very interesting bones.

Since she hadn't heard a murmur about the find in rural Maryland until that morning, she had a feeling no one had expected them to be particularly interesting.

God knew she needed another project. She was bored brainless writing papers for journals, lecturing, reading papers others in her field had written for the same journals. Archaeology wasn't classroom and publishing to Callie. To her it was digging, measuring, boiling in the sun, drowning in the rain, sinking in mud and being eaten alive by insects.

To her, it was heaven.

When the radio station she had on segued into a news cycle, she switched to CDs. Talk wasn't any way to deal with vicious, ugly traffic. Snarling, mean-edged rock was.

Metallica snapped out, and instantly improved her mood.

She tapped her fingers on the wheel, then gripped it and punched through another opening. Her eyes, a deep, golden brown, gleamed behind her shaded glasses.

She wore her hair long because it was easier to pull it back or bunch it up under a hat—as it was now—than to worry about cutting and styling it. She also had enough healthy vanity to know the straight honey blond suited her.

Her eyes were long, the brows over them nearly

straight. As she approached thirty, her face had mellowed from cute to attractive. When she smiled, three dimples popped out. One in each tanned cheek, and the third just above the right corner of her mouth.

The gently curved chin didn't reveal what her ex-husband had called her rock-brained stubbornness.

But then again, she could say the same about him. And did, at every possible opportunity.

She tapped the brakes and swung, with barely any decrease in speed, into a parking lot.

Leonard G. Greenbaum and Associates was housed in a ten-story steel box that had, to Callie's mind, no redeeming aesthetic value. But the lab and its technicians were among the best in the country.

She pulled into a visitor's slot, hopped out into a vicious, soupy heat. Her feet began to sweat inside her Wolverines before she made it to the building's entrance.

The building's receptionist glanced over, saw a woman with a compact, athletic body, an ugly straw hat and terrific wire-framed sunglasses.

"Dr. Dunbrook for Dr. Greenbaum."

"Sign in, please."

She handed Callie a visitor's pass. "Third floor."

Callie glanced at her watch as she strode to the elevators. She was only forty-five minutes later than she'd planned to be. But the Quarter Pounder she'd wolfed down on the drive was rapidly wearing off.

She wondered if she could hit Leo up for a meal.

She rode up to three, found another receptionist. This time she was asked to wait.

She was good at waiting. All right, Callie admitted as she dropped into a chair. Better at waiting than she'd once been. She used up her store of patience in her work. Could she help it if there wasn't much left over to spread around in other areas?

She could only work with what she had.

But Leo didn't keep her long.

He had a quick walk. It always reminded Callie of the way a corgi moved—rapid, stubby legs racing too fast for

the rest of the body. At five-four, he was an inch shorter than Callie herself and had a sleeked-back mane of walnut-brown hair, which he unashamedly dyed. His face was weathered, sun-beaten and narrow with his brown eyes in a permanent squint behind square, rimless glasses.

He wore, as he did habitually, baggy brown pants and a shirt of wrinkled cotton. Papers leaked out of every pocket.

He walked straight up to Callie and kissed her—and was the only man of her acquaintance not related to her who was permitted to do so.

“Looking good, Blondie.”

“You’re not looking so bad yourself.”

“How was the drive?”

“Vicious. Make it worth my while, Leo.”

“Oh, I think I will. How’s the family?” he asked as he led her back the way he’d come.

“Great. Mom and Dad got out of Dodge for a couple weeks. Beating the heat up in Maine. How’s Clara?”

Leo shook his head at the thought of his wife. “She’s taken up pottery. Expect a very ugly vase for Christmas.”

“And the kids?”

“Ben’s playing with stocks and bonds, Melissa’s juggling motherhood and dentistry. How did an old digger like me raise such normal kids?”

“Clara,” Callie told him as he opened a door and gestured her in.

Though she’d expected him to take her to one of the labs, she looked around his sunny, well-appointed office. “I’d forgotten what a slick setup you’ve got here, Leo. No burning desire to go back out and dig?”

“Oh, it comes over me now and again. Usually I just take a nap and it goes away. But this time . . . Take a look at this.”

He walked behind his desk, unlocked a drawer. He drew out a bone fragment in a sealed bag.

Callie took the bag and, hooking her glasses in the V of her shirt, examined the bone within. “Looks like part of a tibia. Given the size and fusion, probably from a young female. Very well preserved.”

“Best guess of age from visual study?”

“This is from western Maryland, right? Near a running creek. I don’t like best guess. You got soil samples, stratigraphic report?”

“Ballpark. Come on, Blondie, play.”

“Jeez.” Her brow knitted as she turned the bag over in her hand. She wanted her fingers on bone. Her foot began to tap to her own inner rhythm. “I don’t know the ground. Visual study, without benefit of testing, I’d make it three to five hundred years old. Could be somewhat older, depending on the silt deposits, the floodplain.”

She turned the bone over again, and her instincts began to quiver. “That’s Civil War country, isn’t it? This predates that. It’s not from a Rebel soldier boy.”

“It predates the Civil War,” Leo agreed. “By about five thousand years.”

When Callie’s head came up, he grinned at her like a lunatic. “Radiocarbon-dating report,” he said, and handed her a file.

Callie scanned the pages, noted that Leo had run the test twice, on three different samples taken from the site.

When she looked up again, she had the same maniacal grin as he. “Hot dog,” she said.

Two

Callie got lost on the way to Woodsboro. She'd taken directions from Leo, but when studying the map had noted a shortcut. It *should* have been a shortcut. Any logical person would have deemed it a shortcut—which was, in her opinion, exactly what the cartographer figured.

She had a long-standing feud with mapmakers.

She didn't mind being lost. She never stayed that way, after all. And the detour gave her a feel for the area.

Rugged, rolling hills riotously green with summer spilled into wide fields thick with row crops. Outcroppings of silver rock bumped through the green like gnarled knuckles and rippling finger bones.

It made her think of those ancient farmers, carving their rows with primitive tools, hacking into that rocky ground to grow their food. To make their place.

The man who rode his John Deere over those fields owed them a debt.

He wouldn't think of it as he plowed and planted and harvested. So she, and those like her, would think of it for him.

It was a good place, she decided, to work.

The higher hills were upholstered with forest that

climbed up toward a sky of glassy blue. Ridge tumbled into valley; valley rose toward ridge, giving the land texture and shadows and scope.

The sun sheened over the hip-high corn and gave it a wash of gold over green and gave a young chestnut gelding a bright playground for romping. Old houses made from local stone, or their contemporary counterparts of frame or brick or vinyl, stood on rises or flats with plenty of elbow room between them.

Cows lolled in the heat behind wire or split-rail fences.

The fields would give way to woods, thick with hardwoods and tangled with sumac and wild mimosa, then the hills would take over, bumpy with rock. The road twisted and turned to follow the snaking line of the creek, and overhead those trees arched to turn the road into a shady tunnel that dropped off on one side toward the water and rose up on the other in a jagged wall of limestone and granite.

She drove ten miles without passing another car.

She caught glimpses of more houses back in the trees, and others that were so close to the road she imagined if someone came to the door she could reach out and shake hands.

There were plenty of summer gardens in evidence, bright plops and splashes of color—heavy on the black-eyed Susans and tiger lilies.

She saw a snake, thick as her wrist, slither across the blacktop. Then a cat, pumpkin orange, skulking in the brush on the shoulder of the road.

Tapping her fingers on the wheel in time with the Dave Matthews Band, she speculated on the outcome if feline should meet reptile.

Her money was on the cat.

She rounded a curve and saw a woman standing on the side of the road pulling her mail out of a dull-gray mailbox. Though she barely glanced toward the Rover, the woman raised a hand in what Callie assumed was an absent and habitual greeting.

She answered the wave, and sang along with Dave as

she rode the roller coaster of a road through the sun and shade. When the road opened up again, she punched it, flying by a roll of farmland, a roadside motel, a scatter of homes, with the rise of mountains ahead.

Houses increased in number, decreased in size as she approached Woodsboro's town line.

She slowed, got caught by one of the two traffic lights the town boasted, and was pleased to note one of the businesses tucked near the corner of Main and Mountain Laurel was a pizza parlor. A liquor store stood on the other corner.

Good to know, she thought, and inched up as the light went green.

Reviewing Leo's directions in her mind, she made the turn on Main and headed west.

Structures along the main drag were neat, and old. Brick or wood or stone, they nestled comfortably against one another, fronted with covered porches or sunny stoops. Streetlights were old-timey carriage style, and the sidewalks were bricked. Flowers hung in pots from eaves, from poles and porch rails.

Flags hung still. American, and the bright decorative banners people liked to hoist to announce seasons and holidays.

The pedestrian traffic was as sparse and meandering as the vehicular. Just, Callie supposed, as it was meant to be on Main Street, U.S.A.

She noted a cafe, a hardware store, a small library and a smaller bookstore, several churches, a couple of banks, along with a number of professionals who advertised their services with small, discreet signs.

By the time she hit the second light, she had the west end of town recorded in her mind.

She made a right when the road split, followed its winding path. The woods were creeping in again. Thick, shadowy, secret.

She came over a rise, with the mountains filling the view. And there it was.

She pulled to the side of the road by the sign announcing:

HOMES AT ANTIETAM CREEK
A Dolan and Son Development

Snagging her camera and hitching a small pack over her shoulder, Callie climbed out. She took the long view first, scanning the terrain.

There was wide acreage of bottomland, and from the looks of the dirt mounded early in the excavation, it was plenty boggy. The trees—old oak, towering poplar, trash locust—ranged to the west and south and crowded around the run of the creek as if guarding it from interlopers.

Part of the site was roped off, and there the creek had widened into a good-sized pond.

On the little sketch Leo had drawn for her, it was called Simon's Hole.

She wondered who Simon had been and why the pond was named for him.

On the other side of the road was a stretch of farmland, a couple of weathered outbuildings, an old stone house and nasty-looking machines.

She spotted a big brown dog sprawled in a patch of shade. When he noticed her glance, he stirred himself to thump his tail in the dirt twice.

"No, don't get up," she told him. "Too damn hot for socializing."

The air hummed with a summer silence that was heat, insects and solitude.

Lifting her camera, she took a series of photos, and was just about to hop the construction fence when she heard, through the stillness, the sound of an approaching car.

It was another four-wheeler. One of the small, trim and, to Callie's mind, girlie deals that had largely replaced the station wagon in the suburbs. This one was flashy red and as clean as a showroom model.

The woman who slid out struck her as the same. Girlie, a bit flashy and showroom perfect.

With her sleek blond hair, the breezy yellow pants and top, she looked like a sunbeam.

"Dr. Dunbrook?" Lana offered a testing smile.

“That’s right. You’re Campbell?”

“Yes, Lana Campbell.” Now she offered a hand as well and shook Callie’s enthusiastically. “I’m so glad to meet you. I’m sorry I’m late meeting you here. I had a little hitch with child care.”

“No problem. I just got here.”

“We’re so pleased to have someone with your reputation and experience taking an interest in this. And no,” she said when Callie’s eyebrows raised, “I’d never heard of you before all this started. I don’t know anything about your field, but I’m learning. I’m a very fast learner.”

Lana looked back toward the roped-off area. “When we heard the bones were thousands of years old—”

“‘We’ is the preservation organization you’re representing?”

“Yes. This part of the county has a number of areas that are of significant historical importance. Civil War, Revolutionary, Native American.” She pushed back a wing of hair with her fingertip, and Callie saw the glint of her wedding band. “The Historical and Preservation Societies and a number of residents of Woodsboro and the surrounding area banded together to protest this development. The potential problems generated by twenty-five to thirty more houses, an estimated fifty more cars, fifty more children to be schooled, the—”

Callie held up a hand. “You don’t have to sell me. Town politics aren’t my field. I’m here to do a preliminary survey of the site—with Dolan’s permission,” she added. “To this point he’s been fully cooperative.”

“He won’t stay that way.” Lana’s lips tightened. “He wants this development. He’s already sunk a great deal of money into it, and he has contracts on three of the houses already.”

“That’s not my problem either. But it’ll be his if he tries to block a dig.” Callie climbed nimbly over the fence, glanced back. “You might want to wait here. Ground’s mucky over there. You’ll screw up your shoes.”

Lana hesitated, then sighed over her favorite sandals. She climbed the fence.

“Can you tell me something about the process? What you’ll be doing?”

“Right now I’m going to be looking around, taking photographs, a few samples. Again with the landowner’s permission.” She slanted a look at Lana. “Does Dolan know you’re out here?”

“No. He wouldn’t like it.” Lana picked her way around mounds of dirt and tried to keep up with Callie’s leggy stride. “You’ve dated the bones,” she continued.

“Uh-huh. Jesus, how many people have been tramping around this place? Look at this shit.” Annoyed, Callie bent down to pick up an empty cigarette pack. She jammed it in her pocket.

As she got closer to the pond, her boots sank slightly in the soft dirt. “Creek floods,” she said almost to herself. “Been flooding when it needs to for thousands of years. Washes silt over the ground, layer by layer.”

She crouched down, peered into a messy hole. The footprints trampled through it made her shake her head. “Like it’s a damn tourist spot.”

She took photos, absently handed the camera up to Lana. “We’ll need to do some shovel tests over the site, do stratigraphy—”

“That’s studying the strata, the layers of deposits in the ground. I’ve been cramming,” Lana added.

“Good for you. Anyway, no reason not to see what’s right here.” Callie took a small hand trowel out of her pack and slithered down into the six-foot hole.

She began to dig, slowly, methodically while Lana stood above, swatting at gnats and wondering what she was supposed to do.

She’d expected an older woman, someone weathered and dedicated and full of fascinating stories. Someone who’d offer unrestricted support. What she had was a young, attractive woman who appeared to be disinterested, even cynical, about the area’s current battle.

“Um. Do you often locate sites like this? Through serendipity?”

“Mmm-hmm. Accidental discovery’s one way. Natural

causes—say, an earthquake—are another. Or surveys, aerial photography, subsurface detections. Lots of scientific ways to pinpoint a site. But serendipity's as good as any."

"So this isn't that unusual."

Callie stopped long enough to glance up. "If you're hoping to generate enough interest to keep the big, bad developer away, the method of finding the site isn't going to give you a very long run. The more we expand civilization, build cities, the more often we find remnants of other civilizations underneath."

"But if the site itself is of significant scientific interest, I'll get my long run."

"Most likely." Callie went back to slow, careful digging.

"Aren't you going to bring in a team? I understood from my conversation with Dr. Greenbaum—"

"Teams take money, which equals grants, which equals paperwork. That's Leo's deal. Dolan's footing the bill, at the moment, for the prelim and the lab work." She didn't bother to look up. "You figure he'll spring for a full team, the equipment, the housing, the lab fees for a formal dig?"

"No." Lana let out a breath. "No, I don't. It wouldn't be in his best interest. We have some funds, and we're working on gathering more."

"I just drove through part of your town, Ms. Campbell. My guess is you couldn't come up with enough to bring in more than a few college students with shovels and clipboards."

Annoyance creased Lana's brow. "I'd think someone in your profession would be willing, even eager, to focus your time and energy on something like this, to work as hard as possible to keep this from being destroyed."

"I didn't say I wasn't. Give me the camera."

Impatient now, Lana edged closer, felt her sandals slide into dirt. "All I'm asking is that you— Oh God, is that another bone? Is that—"

"Adult femur," Callie said, and none of the excitement that was churning in her blood was reflected in her voice. She took the camera, snapped shots from different angles.

"Are you going to take it into the lab?"

“No. It stays. I take it out of this wet ground, it’ll dry out. I need proper containers before I excavate bone. But I’m taking this.” Delicately, Callie removed a flat, pointed stone from the damp wall of dirt. “Give me a hand up.”

Wincing only a little, Lana reached down and clasped Callie’s filthy hand with her own. “What is it?”

“Spear point.” She crouched again, took a bag out of her pack and sealed the stone, labeled it. “I didn’t know much about this area a couple of days ago. Nothing about the geological history. But I’m a fast learner, too.”

She wiped her hands on the thighs of her jeans, straightened up. “Rhyolite. There was plenty of it in these hills. And this . . .” She turned the sealed stone in her hand. “This looks like rhyolite to me. Could be this was a camp—Neolithic campsite. Could be it was more. People of that era were starting to settle, to farm, to domesticate animals.”

If she’d been alone, if she’d closed her eyes, she could have seen it in her mind. “They weren’t as nomadic as we once believed. What I can tell you, Ms. Campbell, from this very cursory study, is that you’ve got yourself something real sexy here.”

“Sexy enough for a grant, a team, a formal dig?”

“Oh yeah.” Behind her tea-colored lenses, Callie’s gaze scanned the field. She was already beginning to plot the site. “Nobody’s going to be digging footers for houses on this site for some time to come. You got any local media?”

The light began to gleam in Lana’s eyes. “A small weekly newspaper in Woodsboro. A daily in Hagerstown. There’s a network affiliate in Hagerstown, too. They’re already covering the story.”

“We’ll give them more, then bump it up to national.” Callie studied Lana’s face as she tucked the sealed bag in her pack. Yeah, pretty as a sunbeam, she thought. And smart, too. “I bet you come across real well on TV.”

“I do,” Lana said with a grin. “How about you?”

“I’m a killer.” Callie scanned the area again, began to imagine. Began to plan. “Dolan doesn’t know it, but his development was fucked five thousand years ago.”

“He’s going to fight you.”

“He’s going to lose, Ms. Campbell.”

Once again Lana held out a hand. “Make it Lana. How soon do you want to talk to the press, Doctor?”

“Callie.” She pursed her lips and considered. “Let me touch base with Leo, find a place to stay. How’s that motel outside of town?”

“Adequate.”

“I’ve done lots worse than adequate. It’ll do for a start. Okay, let me do some groundwork. You got a number where I can reach you?”

“My cell phone.” Lana pulled out a card, scribbled down the number. “Day and night.”

“What time’s the evening news?”

“Five-thirty.”

Callie looked at her watch, calculated. “Should be enough time. If I can move things along, I’ll be in touch by three.”

She started back toward her car. Lana scrambled to catch up. “Would you be willing to speak at a town meeting?”

“Leave that to Leo. He’s better with people than I am.”

“Callie, let’s be sexist.”

“Sure.” Callie leaned on the fence a moment. “Men are pigs whose every thought and action is dictated by the penis.”

“Well, that goes without saying, but what I mean in this case is people are going to be a lot more intrigued and interested in a young, attractive *female* archaeologist than a middle-aged man who works primarily in a lab.”

“Which is why I’ll talk to the TV crew.” Callie boosted herself over the fence. “And don’t shrug off Leo’s impact. He was a digger when you and I were still sucking our thumbs. He’s got a passion for it that gets people stirred up.”

“Will he come in from Baltimore?”

Callie looked back at the site. Pretty flatland, the charm of the creek and the sparkle of the pond. The green and mysterious woods. Yes, she could understand why people would want to build houses there, settle in by the trees and water.

She suspected they had done so before. Thousands of

years before.

But this time around they were going to have to look elsewhere.

“You couldn’t keep him away. By three,” she said again, and swung into the Rover.

She was already yanking out her cell phone and dialing Leo when she drove away.

“Leo.” She shifted the phone so she could bump up the air-conditioning. “We struck gold.”

“Is that your scientific opinion?”

“I had a femur and a spear point practically fall in my lap. And this is in some hole dug by heavy equipment where people have been tramping around like it was Disneyland. We need security, a team, equipment, and we need that grant. We need them all ASAP.”

“I’ve already pulled the chain on the funds. You take on some students from the U of M.”

“Grad students or undergrads?”

“Still being discussed. The university wants first crack at studying some of the artifacts. And I’m doing some fast talking with the Natural History Museum. I’ve got a buzz going, Blondie, but I’m going to need a hell of a lot more than a couple of bones and a spear point to keep it up.”

“You’re going to get it. It’s a settlement, Leo. I can feel it. And the soil conditions? Jesus, they couldn’t be much better. We may have some hitches with this Dolan. The girl lawyer’s pretty firm on that. Small-town politics at play here. We need some big guns to get his cooperation. Campbell wants to call a town meeting.”

Callie glanced wistfully at the pizza parlor before she made the turn to head out of town to the motel. “I drafted you for that.”

“When?”

“Sooner the better. I want to set up an interview with the local TV late afternoon.”

“It’s early for the media, Callie. We’re just gathering ammo. You don’t want to break the story before we’ve outlined strategy.”

“Leo, it’s midsummer. We’ve only got a few months be-

fore we'll have to pack it in for the winter. Media exposure puts the pressure on Dolan. He doesn't step back and let us work, he refuses to donate the finds or pushes to resume his development, he comes off as a greedy asshole with no respect for science or history."

She pulled into the motel's lot, parked and, shifting the phone again, grabbed her pack.

"There's not that much you can tell them."

"I can make a little seem like a lot," she said as she climbed out and went to the back of the Rover to pull out her duffel.

With that slung over her shoulder, she pulled out her cello case. "Trust me on this part, and get me a team. I'll take the students, use them for grunts until I see what they're made of."

She yanked open the door of the lobby, stepped up to the desk. "I need a room. Biggest bed you got in the quietest spot. Get me Rosie," she said into the phone. "And Nick Long if he's available." She dug out a credit card, set it on the counter. "They can bunk at the motel just outside of town. I'm checking in now."

"What motel?"

"Hell, I don't know. What's this place called?" Callie asked the desk clerk.

"The Hummingbird Inn."

"No kidding? Cute. Hummingbird Inn, on Maryland Route Thirty-four. Get me hands, eyes and backs, Leo. I'm going to start shovel tests in the morning. I'll call you back."

She disconnected, shoved the phone in her pocket. "You got room service?" she asked the clerk.

The woman looked like an aged little doll and smelled strongly of lavender sachet. "No, honey. But our restaurant's open from six A.M. to ten P.M. every day of the week. Best breakfast you'll get anywhere outside your own mama's kitchen."

"If you knew my mother," Callie said with a chuckle, "you'd know that's not saying much. You think there's a waitress or a busboy who'd like to earn an extra ten by

bringing a burger and fries, a Diet Pepsi to my room? Well done on the burger. I've got some work that can't wait."

"My granddaughter could use ten dollars. I'll take care of it." She took the ten-dollar bill and handed Callie a key attached to a huge red plastic tag. "I put you 'round back, room six-oh-three. Got a queen bed and it's quiet enough. Probably take about half an hour for that hamburger."

"Appreciate it."

"Miss... ah..." The woman squinted at the scrawled signature on the check-in card. "Dunbock."

"Dunbrook."

"Dunbrook. You a musician?"

"No. I dig in the dirt for a living. I play this"—she jiggled the large black case—"to relax. Tell your granddaughter not to forget the ketchup."

At four o'clock, dressed in clean olive-green pants and a khaki-colored camp shirt, her long hair freshly shampooed and drawn back in a smooth tail, Callie once again pulled to the shoulder of the site.

She'd worked on her notes, had e-mailed a copy of them to Leo. On her way back, she'd dropped by the post office to express-mail him her undeveloped film.

She slipped on little silver earrings with a Celtic design and had spent ten very intense minutes on her makeup.

The camera crew was already setting up for the remote. Callie noted Lana Campbell was there as well, clutching the hand of a towheaded boy who had a scab on one knee, dirt on his chin and the kind of cherubic face that spelled trouble.

Dolan, in his signature blue shirt and red suspenders, stood directly beside his business sign and was already talking to a woman Callie pegged as the reporter.

She assumed he was Ronald Dolan because he didn't look happy.

The minute he spotted Callie, he broke off and marched toward her.

“You Dunbrook?”

“Dr. Callie Dunbrook.” She gave him a full-power smile. Callie had known some men to dissolve into a panting puddle when she used full power. Dolan appeared to be immune.

“What the hell’s going on here?” He jabbed a finger at her chest, but fortunately for him didn’t make contact.

“Local TV asked for an interview. I always try to cooperate. Mr. Dolan”—still smiling, she touched his arm as if they were compatriots—“you’re a very lucky man. The archaeological and anthropological communities are never going to forget your name. They’ll be teaching classes about your site for generations. I have a copy of my preliminary report here.”

She held out a folder. “I’ll be happy to explain anything you don’t understand. I realize some of it’s pretty technical. Has a representative of the National History Museum at the Smithsonian contacted you yet?”

“What?” He stared at the report as if she were handing him a live snake. “What?”

“I just want to shake your hand.” She took his, pumped. “And thank you for your part in this incredible discovery.”

“Now, you listen here—”

“I’d love to take you, your wife and family out to dinner at the first opportunity.” She kept the smile in place, even boosted it with a couple of flutters of her lashes, while she steamrolled him. “But I’m afraid I’m going to be very busy for the next several weeks. Will you excuse me? I want to get this part over with.”

She pressed a hand to her heart. “Talking on camera always makes me a little nervous.” She tied up the lie with a quick, breathless laugh. “If you have any questions, any at all about the report or the ones that follow, please ask either myself or Dr. Greenbaum. I’ll be spending most of my time right here, on-site. I won’t be hard to find.”

He started to bluster again, but she hurried off to introduce herself to the camera crew.

“Slick,” Lana murmured. “Very slick.”

“Thanks.” She squatted down and studied the little boy. “Hi. You the reporter?”

“No.” He giggled, and his mossy-green eyes twinkled with fun. “You’re gonna be on TV. Mommy said I could watch.”

“Tyler, this is Dr. Dunbrook. She’s the scientist who studies old, old things.”

“Bones and stuff,” Tyler declared. “Like Indiana Jones. How come you don’t have a whip like he does?”

“I left it back at the motel.”

“Okay. Did you ever see a dinosaur?”

Callie figured he was getting his movies mixed up and winked at him. “I sure have. Dinosaur bones. But they’re not my specialty. I like human bones.” She gave his arm a testing squeeze. “I bet you’ve got some good ones. You have Mom bring you by sometime and I’ll let you dig. Maybe you’ll find some.”

“Really? Can I? *Really?*” Overwhelmed, he danced on his Nikes, tugged on Lana’s hand. “Please?”

“If Dr. Dunbrook says it’s okay. That’s nice of you,” she said to Callie.

“I like kids,” Callie said as she rose. “They haven’t learned how to shut down to possibilities. I’m going to get this done.” She ran her hand over his sun-shot hair. “See you later, Ty-Rex.”

Suzanne Cullen experimented with a new recipe. Her Kitchen was equal parts science lab and homey haven. Once she’d baked because she enjoyed it and because it was something a housewife did. She’d often laughed over the suggestions that she open her own bakery.

She was a wife, then a mother, not a businesswoman. She’d never aspired to a career outside the home.

Then, she’d baked to escape her own pain. To give herself something to occupy her mind other than her own guilt and misery and fears.

She’d buried herself in cookie dough and piecrusts and

cake batter. And all in all, she'd found it a more effective therapy than all the counseling, all the prayers, all the public appearances.

When her life, her marriage, her world had continued to fall apart, baking had been a constant. Suddenly, she *had* wanted more. She had needed more.

Suzanne's Kitchen had been born in an ordinary, even uninspired room in a neat little house a stone's throw from the house where she grew up. She'd sold to local markets at first, and had done everything—the buying, the planning, the baking, the packaging and delivery—herself.

Within five years, the demand had been great enough for her to hire help, to buy a van and to take her products countywide.

Within ten, she'd gone national.

Though she no longer did the baking herself, and the packaging, distribution and publicity were handled by various arms of her corporation, Suzanne still liked to spend time in her own kitchen, formulating new recipes.

She lived in a big house snuggled well back on a rise and guarded from the road by woods. And she lived alone.

Her kitchen was huge and sunny, with acres of bold blue counters, four professional ovens and two ruthlessly organized pantries. Its atrium doors led out to a slate patio and several theme gardens if she felt the need for fresh air. There was a cozy sofa and overstuffed chair near a bay window if she wanted to curl up, and a fully equipped computer center if she needed to note down a recipe or check one already in her files.

The room was the largest of any in the house, and she could happily spend an entire day never leaving it.

At fifty-two, she was a very rich woman who could have lived anywhere in the world, done anything she desired. She desired to bake and to live in the community of her birth.

Though she had chosen the wall-screen TV for entertainment rather than music, she hummed as she whipped eggs and cream in a bowl.

When she heard the five-thirty news come on, she

stopped work long enough to pour herself a glass of wine. She sampled the filling she was mixing, closed her eyes and considered as she rolled the taste on her tongue.

She added a tablespoon of vanilla. Mixed, sampled, approved. And noted the addition meticulously on her pad.

She caught the mention of Woodsboro on the television and, picking up her wine, turned to see.

She watched the pan of Main Street, smiling when she caught sight of her father's store. There was another pan of the hills and fields outside of town, as the reporter spoke of the historic community.

Interested now, certain the report would focus on the recent discovery near Antietam Creek, she wandered closer to the set. And nodded, knowing how pleased her father would be that the reporter spoke of the importance of the site, the excitement in the world of science at the possibilities to be unearthed there.

She sipped, thinking she'd call her father as soon as the segment was over, and listened with half an ear as a Dr. Callie Dunbrook was introduced.

When Callie's face filled the screen, Suzanne blinked, stared. There was a burn at the back of her throat as she stepped still closer to the screen.

Her heart began to thud, painfully, against her ribs as she looked into dark amber eyes under straight brows. Her skin went hot, then cold, and her breath grew short and choppy.

She shook her head. Everything inside it was buzzing like a swarm of wasps. She couldn't hear anything else, could only watch in shock as that wide mouth with its slight overbite moved.

And when the mouth smiled, quick, bright, and three shallow dimples popped out, the glass in Suzanne's hand slid out of her trembling fingers and shattered on the floor at her feet.

Three



Suzanne sat in the living room of the house where she'd grown up. Lamps she'd helped her mother pick out perhaps ten years before stood on doilies her grandmother had crocheted before she'd been born.

The sofa was new. She'd had to browbeat her father into replacing the old one. The rugs had been taken up and stored for the summer, and summer sheers, dotted-swiss priscillas, replaced the winter drapes. Those housekeeping routines were something her mother had done every season, something her father continued to do simply because it was routine.

Oh God, how she missed her mother.

Her hands were clutched in her lap, white knuckles pressed hard against her belly as if she were protecting the child who'd once lived in her womb.

Her face was a blank sheet, dull and colorless. It was as if she'd used up all her energy and strength to gather her family together. Now she was a sleepwalker, slipping between past and present.

Douglas sat on the edge of a Barcalounger that was older than he was. He watched his mother out of the corner

of his eye. She was still as stone, and seemed as removed from him as the moon.

His stomach was as tight and tangled as his mother's fingers.

The air smelled of the cherry tobacco from his grandfather's after-dinner pipe. A warm scent that always lingered there. With it was the cold yellow odor of his mother's stress.

It had a smell, a form, an essence that was strain and fear and guilt, and slapped him back into the terrible and helpless days of his childhood when that yellow smear on the air had permeated everything.

His grandfather gripped the remote with one hand and kept his other on Suzanne's shoulder, as if to hold her in place.

"I didn't want to miss the segment," Roger said, then cleared his throat. "Asked Doug to run home here and set the VCR as soon as Lana told me about it. Didn't watch it yet."

He'd made tea. His wife had made tea, always, for sickness and upsets. The sight of the white pot with its little rosebuds comforted him, as the crocheted doilies did, and the sheer summer curtains. "Doug watched it."

"Yes, I watched it. It's cued up."

"Well . . ."

"Play it, Daddy." Suzanne's voice hitched, and beneath her father's hand, her body came to life again, and trembled. "Play it now."

"Mom, you don't want to get yourself all worked up about—"

"Play it." She turned her head, stared at her son with eyes that were red-rimmed and a bit wild. "Just look."

Roger started the tape. The hand on Suzanne's shoulder began to knead.

"Fast-forward through—here." Energy whipped back, had Suzanne snatching the remote, fumbling with the buttons. She slowed the tape to regular speed when Callie's face came on-screen. "Look at her. God. Oh my God."

"Sweet Jesus," Roger murmured. Like a prayer.

"You see it." Suzanne dug her fingers into his leg, but

didn't take her attention off the screen. Couldn't. "You see it. It's Jessica. It's my Jessie."

"Mom." Douglas's heart ached at the way she said it. *My Jessie*. "She's got the coloring, but... Jesus, that lawyer, Grandpa. Lana. She looks as much like Jessie might as this woman does. Mom, you can't know."

"I *can* know," she snapped out. "Look at her. Look!" She stabbed the remote, froze the screen as Callie smiled. "She has her father's eyes. She has Jay's eyes—the same color, the same shape. And my dimples. Three dimples, like me. Like Ma had. Daddy..."

"There's a strong resemblance." Roger felt weak when he said it, husked out. "The coloring, the shape of the face. Those features." Something was rising up in his throat that felt like equal parts panic and hope. "The last artist projection—"

"I have it." Suzanne leaped up, grabbed the folder she'd brought with her and took out a computer-generated image. "Jessica, at twenty-five."

Now Douglas rose as well. "I thought you'd stopped having those done. I thought you'd stopped."

"I never stopped." Tears wanted to spill but she forced them back with the iron will that had gotten her through every day of the last twenty-nine years. "I stopped talking to you about it because it upset you. But I never stopped looking. I never stopped believing. Look at your sister." She pushed the picture into his hands. "Look at her," she demanded and whirled back to the television.

"Mom. For Christ's sake." He held the photo as the pain he'd shut down, through a will every bit as strong as his mother's, bit back at him. It made him helpless. It made him sick.

"A resemblance," he continued. "Brown eyes, blond hair." Unlike his mother, he couldn't live on hope. Hope destroyed him. "How many other girls, women, have you looked at and seen Jessica? I can't stand watching you put yourself through this again. You don't know anything about her. How old she is, where she comes from."

"Then I'll find out." She took the photo back, put it into

the folder with hands that were steady again. "If you can't stand it, then stay out of it. Like your father."

She knew it was cruel, to slash at one child in the desperate need for the other. She knew it was wrong to strike out at her son while clutching the ghost of her daughter to her breast. But he would either help, or step aside. There was no middle ground in Suzanne's quest for Jessica.

"I'll run a computer search." Douglas's voice was cold and quiet. "I'll get you what information I can."

"Thank you."

"I'll use my laptop back at the store. It's fast. I'll send you what I find."

"I'll come with you."

"No." He could slap just as quick and hard as she. "I can't talk to you when you're like this. Nobody can. I'll do better alone."

He walked out without another word. Roger let out a long sigh. "Suzanne, his only concern is you."

"No one has to be concerned for me. I can use support, but concern doesn't help me. This is my daughter. I know it."

"Maybe she is." Roger rose, ran his hands up and down Suzanne's arms. "And Doug is your son. Don't push him, honey. Don't lose one child trying to find another."

"He doesn't want to believe. And I have to." She stared at Callie's face on the TV screen. "I have to."

So, she was the right age, Doug thought as he scanned the information from his search. The fact that her birthday was listed within a week of Jessica's was hardly conclusive.

His mother would see it as proof, and ignore the other data.

He could read a lifestyle into the dry facts. Upper-middle-class suburban. Only child of Elliot and Vivian Dunbrook of Philadelphia. Mrs. Dunbrook, the former Vivian Humphries, had played second violin in the Boston Symphony Orchestra before her marriage. She, her husband and infant daughter had relocated to Philadelphia,

where Elliot Dunbrook had taken a position as surgical resident.

It meant money, class, an appreciation for the arts and for science.

She'd grown up in privilege, had graduated first in her class at Carnegie Mellon, gone on to get her master's and, just recently, her doctorate.

She'd pursued her career in archaeology while compiling her advanced degrees. She'd married at twenty-six, divorced not quite two years later. No children.

She was associated with Leonard G. Greenbaum and Associates, the Paleolithic Society, several universities' archaeology departments.

She'd written a number of well-received papers. He printed out what he could access to wade through later. But from a glance he assessed her as dedicated, probably brilliant and focused.

It was difficult to see the baby who'd kicked her legs and pulled his hair as any of those things.

What he could see was a woman who'd been raised by well-to-do, respected parents. Hardly baby-napping material. But his mother wouldn't see that, he knew. She would see the birthday and nothing else.

Just as she had countless times before.

Sometimes, when he let himself, he wondered what had fractured his family. Had it been that instant when Jessica disappeared? Or had it been his mother's unrelenting, unwavering determination to find her again?

Or was it the moment when he himself had realized one simple fact: that by reaching for one child, his mother had lost another.

None of them, it seemed, had been able to live with that.

He would do what he could, as he had done countless times before. He attached the files, e-mailed them to his mother.

Then he turned off his computer, turned off his thoughts. And buried himself in a book.

There was nothing like the beginning of a dig, that time when anything is possible and there is no limit to the potential of the discovery. Callie had a couple of fresh-faced undergraduates who might be more help than trouble. Right now they were free labor that came along with a small grant from the university. She'd take what she could get.

She would have Rose Jordan as geologist, a woman she both respected and liked. She had Leo's lab, and the man himself as consultant. Once she had Nick Long pulled in as anthropologist, she'd be in fat city.

She worked with the students, digging shovel samples, and had already chosen the two-trunked oak at the northwest corner of the pond as her datum point.

With that as her fixed reference they'd begin measuring the vertical and horizontal location of everything on the site.

She'd completed the plan of the site's surface the night before, and had begun to plot her one-meter-square divisions.

Today they'd start running the rope lines to mark the divisions.

Then the fun began.

A cold front had dumped the humidity and temperatures into the nearly tolerable range. It had also brought rain the night before that had turned the ground soggy and soft. Her boots were already mucked past the ankle, her hands were filthy and she smelled of sweat and the eucalyptus oil she'd used to discourage insects.

For Callie, it didn't get much better.

She glanced over at the toot of a horn, and this time the interruption had her leaning on her shovel and grinning. She'd known Leo wouldn't be able to stay away for long.

"Keep at it," she told the students. "Dig slow, sieve thoroughly. Document everything."

She walked over to meet Leo. "We're finding flakes in every shovel sample," she told him. "My theory is we're in the knapping area there." She gestured to where the two students continued to dig and sieve the soil. "Rosie will verify rhyolite flakes. They sat there, honing the rock into

arrowheads, spear points, tools. Go a little deeper, we'll find discarded samples."

"She'll be here this afternoon."

"Cool."

"How are the students doing?"

"Not bad. The girl, Sonya, she's got potential. Bob, he's able and willing. And earnest. Really, really earnest." She shrugged. "We'll wear some of that down in no time. I tell you what I figure. Every time I turn around, somebody's bopping by here wanting a little tutorial. I'm going to put Bob on community relations."

She glanced back. "He's got this farm-fresh Howdy Doody face. They'll love that. Let him give the visitors a nice little lecture on what we're doing, what we're looking for, how we do it. I can't be stopping every ten minutes to play nice with the locals."

"I'll take that for you today."

"That's great. I'm going to run the lines. I've got the surface plan worked up, if you want to take a look. You can give me a hand with marking the plots in between your outdoor classroom obligations."

She glanced at her ancient Timex, then tapped the list she'd already made and fixed to her clipboard. "Leo, I'm going to need containers. I don't want to start pulling bones out of the ground and have them go to dust on me once they're out of the bog. I need equipment. I need nitrogen gas, dry ice. I need more tools. More sieves, more trowels, more dustpans, buckets. I need more hands."

"You'll have them," he promised. "The great state of Maryland has given you your first grant on the Antietam Creek Project."

"Yeah?" She grabbed his shoulders as the delight burst through her. "Yeah? Leo, you're my one true love." She kissed him noisily on the mouth.

"Speaking of that." He patted her dirty hands, stepped back. She was too pleased to notice he was putting safe distance between them.

"We're going to have to discuss another key member of the team. While we do, I want you to remember we're all

professionals, and what we're doing here could have enormous impact. Before we're done, this project could involve scientists from all over the world. It's not about individuals, but about discovery."

"I don't know where you're going, Leo, but I don't like how you're getting there."

"Callie..." He cleared his throat. "The anthropological significance of this find is every bit as monumental as the archaeological. Therefore, you and the head anthro will need to work together as coheads of the project."

"Well, for Christ's sake, Leo, what am I, a diva?" She pulled the water bottle out of the slot on her belt, drank deep. "I don't have a problem sharing authority with Nick. I asked for him because I know we work well together."

"Yes, well..." Leo trailed off at the sound of an approaching engine. And worked up a pained smile as he spotted the new arrivals. "You can't always get what you want."

Shock came first, racing with recognition as she spotted the brawny four-wheeler in demon black, then the ancient pickup truck in a hideous medley of faded red, rusty blue and primer gray pulling a dirty, white travel trailer covered with scratches and dings.

Painted across the side of the trailer was a snarling Doberman and the name **DIGGER**.

Emotions, too many, too mixed, too huge, slammed through her. They choked her throat, twisted her belly, stabbed her heart.

"Callie... before you say anything—"

"You're not going to do this." She had to swallow.

"It's done."

"Aw, Leo, no. Goddamnit, I asked for Nick."

"He's not available. He's in South America. The project needs the best, Callie. Graystone's the best." Leo nearly stumbled back when she spun toward him. "You know it. Personal business aside, Callie, you know he's the best. Digger, too. Adding his name to yours greased the grant. I expect you to behave professionally."

She showed Leo her teeth. “You can’t always get what you want,” she tossed back.

She watched him jump out of the four-wheeler. Jacob Graystone, all six feet one and a quarter inches of him. He wore his old brown hat, its brim and crown creased and battered from years of hard wear. His hair, a straight-arrow fall of black, spilled out beneath it. A plain white T-shirt was tucked into the waistband of faded Levi’s. And the body beneath them was prime.

Long bones, long muscles, all covered in bronzed skin that was a result of working outdoors and the quarter of his heritage that was Apache.

He turned, and though he wore dark glasses, she knew his eyes were a color caught, rather beautifully, between gray and green.

He flashed a smile—arrogant, smug, sarcastic. All of which, she thought, fit him to the ground. He had a face too handsome for his own good, or so she’d always thought. Those long bones again, sharp enough to cut diamonds, the straight nose, the firm jaw with the hint of a scar slashed diagonally across it.

Her pulse began to throb and her temples to pound. Casually, she ran a hand down the chain around her neck, assured herself it was tucked under her shirt.

“This blows, Leo.”

“I know it’s not an ideal situation for you, but—”

“How long have you known he was coming?” Callie demanded.

This time, it was Leo who swallowed. “A couple of days. I wanted to tell you face-to-face. I didn’t think he’d be here until tomorrow. We need him, Callie. The project needs him.”

“Fuck it, Leo.” She squared her shoulders as a boxer might before the main event. “Just fuck it.”

He even walked smugly, she thought now, in that damn cowboy swagger. It had always irritated the hell out of her.

His companion stepped out of the truck. Stanley Digger Forbes. A hundred and twenty-five pounds of ugly.

Callie resisted the urge to curl her lip and snarl. Instead,

she put her hands on her hips and waited for the men to reach her.

“Graystone.” She inclined her head.

“Dunbrook.” His eyebrows lifted between the tops of his sunglasses and the brim of his hat. His voice was a drawl, a warm and lazy slide of words that brought images of deserts and prairies. “It’s Dr. Dunbrook now, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“Congratulations.”

Deliberately she looked away from him. One look at Digger made her lips curve. He was grinning like a hyena, his smashed walnut face livened by a pair of spooky black eyes and the glint of his gold eyetooth.

He wore a gold hoop in his left ear, and a dirty blond rat’s tail hung beneath the bright red bandanna tied around his head.

“Hey, Dig, welcome aboard.”

“Callie, looking good. Got prettier.”

“Thanks. You didn’t.”

He gave her his familiar hooting laugh. “That girl with the legs?” He jerked his chin toward the students. “She legal?”

Despite his looks, Digger was renowned for being able to score dig groupies as triumphantly as a batter connecting with a high fastball.

“No hitting on the undergrads, Digger.”

He merely sauntered off toward the shovels.

“Okay, let’s run through the basics,” Callie began.

“No catching up?” Jake interrupted. “No small talk? No ‘what the hell you been up to since we parted ways, Jake?’”

“I don’t care what you’ve been up to. Leo thinks we need you for the project.” And she would devise several satisfactory ways to kill Leo later. “I disagree. But you’re here, and there’s no point wasting time debating that or bullshitting about old times.”

“Digger’s right. You’re looking good.”

“If it has breasts, it looks good to Digger.”

“Can’t argue.” But she was looking good. Just the sight

of her blew through him like a storm. He could smell the eucalyptus on her. He couldn't smell the damn stuff without having her face swim into his mind.

She wore the same clunky watch, pretty silver earrings. Her open collar exposed the line of her throat where the skin was damp with sweat.

Her mouth was just a bit top-heavy, and naked. She never bothered with paint on a dig. But she'd always slathered cream on her face morning and night no matter what the living conditions.

Just as she'd always made a nest out of whatever those living conditions might be. A fragrant candle, her cello, comfort food, good soap and shampoo that had the faintest hint of rosemary.

He imagined she still did.

Ten months, he thought, since he'd seen her last. And her face had been in his mind every day, and every night. No matter what he'd done to erase it.

"Word was you were on sabbatical." He said it casually, without a flicker on his face to show his thoughts.

"I was, now I'm not. You're here to co-coordinate, and to head up the anthropological details of the project now known as Antietam Creek."

She angled away as if to study the site. The truth was it was too hard to stand face-to-face with him. To know they were both measuring each other. Remembering each other. "We have what I believe to be a Neolithic settlement. Radiocarbon testing on human bones already excavated from the site are dated at five thousand, three hundred and seventy-five years, plus or minus one hundred. Rhyolite—"

"I've read the reports, Callie. You got yourself a hot one." He glanced around, already assessing. "Why isn't there any security?"

"I'm working on it."

"Fine. While you're working on it, Digger can set up camp here. I'll get my field pack, then you can show me around. We'll get to work."

She drew a deep breath when he strode back toward his

four-wheeler. She counted to ten. "I'm going to kill you for this, Leo. Kill you dead."

"You've worked together before. You did some of your best work, both of you, together."

"I want Nick. As soon as he's available, I want Nick."

"Callie—"

"Don't talk to me, Leo. Just don't talk to me right now." She gritted her teeth, girded her loins and prepared to give her ex-husband a tour of the site.

They did work well together. And that, Callie thought as she showered off the grime of the day, was one more pisser. They challenged each other, professionally, and somehow that challenge forced them to complement each other.

It had always done so.

She loved his mind, even if it was inside the hardest head she'd ever butted her own against. His was so fluid, so flexible, so open to possibilities. And it could, it did, latch on to the tiniest detail, work it, build on it, until it gleamed like gold.

The problem was they challenged each other personally, too. And for a while... for a while, she mused, they had complemented each other.

But mostly they'd fought like a pair of mad dogs.

When they weren't fighting, they were falling into bed. When they weren't fighting or falling into bed or working on a common project they... baffled each other, she supposed.

It had been ridiculous for them to get married. She could see that now. What had seemed romantic, exciting and sexy in eloping like a couple of crazy teenagers had turned into stark reality. And marriage had become a battlefield with each of them drawing lines the other had been dead set on crossing.

Of course, his lines had been absurd, while hers had been rational. But that was neither here nor there.

They hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other, she remembered. And her body still remembered, poignantly, the feel of those hands.

But then, it had been painfully apparent that Jacob Graystone's hands hadn't been particularly selective where they wandered. The bastard.

That brunette in Colorado had been the last straw. Busty, baby-voiced Veronica. The bitch.

And when she'd confronted him with her conclusions, when she'd accused him in plain, simple terms of being a rat-bastard cheater, he hadn't had the courtesy—he hadn't had the *balls*, she corrected as her temper spiked—to confirm or deny.

What had he called her? Oh yeah. Her mouth thinned as she heard the hot slap of his words in her head.

A childish, tight-assed, hysterical female.

She'd never been sure which part of that phrase most pissed her off, but it had coated her vision with red. The rest of the argument was a huge, boiling blur. All she clearly remembered was demanding a divorce—the first sensible thing she'd done since laying eyes on him. And demanding he get the hell out, and off the project, or she would.

Had he fought for her? Hell no. Had he begged her forgiveness, pledged his love and fidelity? Not a chance.

He'd walked. And so—ha ha, what a coincidence—had the busty brunette.

Still steaming from the memory, Callie stepped out of the shower, grabbed one of the thin, tiny towels the motel provided. Then closed a hand around the ring she wore on a chain around her neck.

She'd taken the wedding ring off—yanked it off, she recalled—as soon as she'd received the divorce papers for her signature. She'd very nearly heaved it into the Platte River, where she'd been working.

But she hadn't been able to. She hadn't been able to let it go as she'd told herself she'd let Jacob go.

He was, in her life, her only failure.

She told herself she wore the ring to remind herself not to fail again.

She pulled off the chain, tossed it on the dresser. If he saw it, he'd think she'd never gotten over him. Or something equally conceited.

She wasn't going to think about him anymore. She'd work with him but that didn't mean she'd spend a minute of her free time thinking about him.

Jacob Graystone had been a personal mistake, a personal failure. And she'd moved on.

He certainly had. Their little world was incestuous enough for her to have heard how quickly he'd dived back into the single-guy dating pool to do the backstroke.

Rich, amateur diggers, that was his style, she thought as she yanked out fresh jeans. Rich, amateur diggers with big breasts and empty heads. Someone who looked good on his arm and made him feel intellectually superior.

That's what he wanted.

"Screw him," she muttered and dragged on jeans and a shirt.

She was going to see if Rosie wanted to hunt up a meal, and she wasn't going to give Graystone another thought.

She pulled open the door and nearly plowed into the woman who was standing outside it.

"Sorry." Callie jammed the room key in her pocket. "Can I help you with something?"

Suzanne's throat snapped shut. Tears threatened to overflow as she stared at Callie's face. She fought a smile on her lips and clutched her portfolio bag as if it were a beloved child.

In a way, it was.

"Didn't mean to startle you," Callie said when the woman only continued to stare. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm looking for someone. You... I need to speak with you. It's awfully important."

"Me?" Callie shifted, to block the door. It seemed to her

the woman looked just a little unhinged. "I'm sorry. I don't know you."

"No. You don't know me. I'm Suzanne Cullen. It's very important that I speak with you. Privately. If I could come inside, for a few minutes."

"Ms. Cullen, if this is about the dig, you're welcome to come by during the day. One of us will be happy to explain the project to you. But right now isn't convenient. I was just on my way out. I'm meeting someone."

"If I could have five minutes, you'd see why this is so important. To both of us. Please. Five minutes."

There was such urgency in the woman's voice, Callie stepped back. "Five minutes." But she left the door open. "What can I do for you?"

"I wasn't going to come tonight. I was going to wait until..." She'd nearly hired a detective again. Had been on the point of picking up the phone to do so. To sit back and wait while facts were checked. "I've lost so much time already. So much time."

"Look, you'd better sit down. You don't look very well." The fact was, Callie thought, the woman looked fragile enough to shatter into pieces. "I've got some bottled water."

"Thank you." Suzanne lowered to the side of the bed. She wanted to be clear, she wanted to be calm. She wanted to grab her little girl and hold on to her so tight three decades would vanish.

She took the bottle Callie offered. Sipped. Steadied. "I need to ask you a question. It's very personal, and very important." She took a deep breath.

"Were you adopted?"

"What?" With a sound that was part shock, part laugh, Callie shook her head. "No. What the hell kind of question is that? Who the hell are you?"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Of course I am. Jesus, lady. Look—"

"On December 12, 1974, my infant daughter, Jessica, was stolen from her stroller in the Hagerstown Mall."

She spoke calmly now. She had, over the years, given countless speeches on missing children and her own ordeal.

"I was there to take my son, her three-year-old brother, Douglas, to see Santa Claus. There was a moment of distraction. A moment. That's all it took. She was gone. We looked everywhere. The police, the FBI, family, friends, the community. Organizations for missing children. She was only three months old. We never found her. She'll be twenty-nine on September eighth."

"I'm sorry." Annoyance wavered into sympathy. "I'm very sorry. I can't imagine what it must be like for you, for your family. If you have some idea that I might be that daughter, I'm sorry for that, too. But I'm not."

"I need to show you something." Though her breathing was shallow, Suzanne opened the portfolio carefully. "This is a picture of me when I was about your age. Will you look at it, please?"

Reluctantly, Callie took it. A chill danced up her spine as she studied the face. "There's a resemblance. That sort of thing happens, Ms. Cullen. A similar heritage, or mix of genes. You hear people say everyone's got a double. That's because it's basically true."

"Do you see the dimples? Three?" Suzanne brushed her trembling fingers over her own. "You have them."

"I also have parents. I was born in Boston on September 11, 1974. I have a birth certificate."

"My mother." Suzanne pulled out another photo. "Again, this was taken when she was about thirty. Maybe a few years younger, my father wasn't sure. You see how much you look like her. And, and my husband."

Suzanne drew out another photo. "His eyes. You have his eyes—the shape, the color. Even the eyebrows. Dark and straight. When you—when Jessica was born, I said her eyes were going to be like Jay's. And they were turning that amber color when she, when we . . . Oh, God. When I saw you on television, I knew. I *knew*."

Callie's heart was galloping, a wild horse inside her breast, and her palms began to sweat. "Ms. Cullen, I'm not

your daughter. My mother has brown eyes. We're almost the same height and build. I know who my parents are, my family history. I know who I am and where I came from. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can say to make you feel better. There's nothing I can do to help you."

"Ask them." Suzanne pleaded. "Look them in the face and ask them. If you don't do that, how can you be sure? If you don't do that, I'll go to Philadelphia and ask them myself. Because I know you're my child."

"I want you to go." Callie moved to the door. Her knees were starting to shake. "I want you to go now."

Leaving the photographs on the bed, Suzanne rose. "You were born at four thirty-five in the morning, at Washington County Hospital in Hagerstown, Maryland. We named you Jessica Lynn."

She took another picture out of her bag, set it on the bed. "That's a copy of the photograph taken shortly after you were born. Hospitals do that for families. Have you ever seen a picture of yourself before you were three months old?"

She paused a moment, then stepped to the door. Indulged herself by brushing her hand over Callie's. "Ask them. My address and phone number are with the pictures. Ask them," she said again and hurried out.

Trembling, Callie shut the door, leaned back against it.

It was crazy. The woman was sad and deluded. And crazy. Losing a child had snapped her brain or something. How could you blame her? She probably saw her daughter in every face that held any remote resemblance.

More than remote, Callie's mind whispered as she studied the photographs on the bed. Strong, almost uncanny resemblance.

It didn't mean anything. It was insane to think otherwise.

Her parents weren't baby thieves, for God's sake. They were kind, loving, interesting people. The kind who would feel nothing but compassion for someone like Suzanne Cullen.

The resemblance, the age similarity, they were only coincidences.

Ask them.

How could you ask your own parents such a thing? Hey, Mom, did you happen to be in the mall in Maryland around Christmas in 'seventy-four? Did you pick up a baby along with some last-minute gifts?

"God." She pressed her hand to her belly as it roiled. "Oh God."

At the knock on the door she whirled around, yanked it open. "I told you I'm not... What the hell do you want?"

"Share a beer?" Jake clanged the two bottles he held by the necks. "Truce?"

"I don't want a beer, and there's no need for a truce. I'm not interested enough to have a fight with you, therefore, a truce is moot."

"Not like you to turn down a free beer at the end of the day."

"You're right." She snagged one, then booted the door. It would have slammed satisfactorily in his face, but he'd always been quick.

"Hey. Trying to be friendly here."

"Go be friendly with someone else. You're good at it."

"Ah, that sounds like interested enough to fight to me."

"Get lost, Graystone. I'm not in the mood." She turned her back on him and spotted her wedding ring on the dresser. Shit. Perfect. She stalked over, laid a hand over it and drew the chain into her fist.

"The Callie Dunbrook we all know and love is always in the mood to fight." He sauntered toward the bed as she jammed the ring and chain into her pocket. "What's this? Looking at family pictures?"

She spun around and went pale as ice. "Why do you say that?"

"Because they're on the bed. Who's this? Your grandmother? Never met her, did I? Then again, we didn't spend a lot of time getting chummy with each other's families."

"It's not my grandmother." She tore the photo out of his hand. "Get out."

"Hold on." He tapped his knuckles on her cheek, an old

habit that had tears burning the back of her throat. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is I’d like to have some goddamn privacy.”

“Babe, I know that face. You’re not pissed off at me, you’re upset. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She wanted to. Wanted to pull the cork and let it all pour out. “It’s none of your business. I have a life without you. I don’t need you.”

His eyes went cold, went hard. “You never did. I’ll get out of your way. I’ve had a hell of a lot of practice getting out of your way.”

He walked to the door. He glanced at the cello case in the corner, the sandalwood candle burning on the dresser, the laptop on the bed and the open bag of DoubleStuf Oreos beside the phone.

“Same old Callie,” he muttered.

“Jake?” She stepped to the door, nearly touched him. Nearly gave in to the urge to put a hand on his arm and pull him back. “Thanks for the beer,” she said and closed the door, gently at least, in his face.

Four

She felt like a thief. It hardly mattered that she had a key to the front door, that she knew every sound and scent of the neighborhood, every corner and closet of the big brick house in Mount Holly.

She was still sneaking in at two in the morning.

Callie hadn't been able to settle after Suzanne Cullen's visit. She hadn't been able to eat, or sleep or lose herself in work.

And she had realized she'd go crazy sitting around a dumpy motel room obsessing about a stranger's lost baby.

Not that she believed she'd been that baby. Not for a minute.

But she was a scientist, a seeker, and until she had answers she knew she'd pick at the puzzle like a scab until it was uncovered.

Leo wasn't happy with her, she thought as she pulled into the driveway of her parents' suburban home. He'd blustered and complained and asked questions she couldn't answer when she'd called to tell him she was taking the next day off.

But she'd *had* to come.

Along the drive from Maryland to Philadelphia she'd convinced herself she was doing the only logical thing. Even if that meant going into her parents' house when they were away, even if it meant searching their files and papers for some proof of what she already knew.

She was Callie Ann Dunbrook.

The elegant neighborhood was quiet as a church. Though she shut her car door gently, the sound of it echoed like a shot and set a neighbor's dog to barking.

The house was dark but for a faint gleam in the second-story window of her mother's sitting room. Her parents would have set the security system, putting the lights on a changing pattern of time and location while they were in Maine.

They'd have stopped the newspapers, had the mail held, informed neighbors of their plans to be away.

They were, she thought as she crossed the flagstone walk to the big front porch, sensible, responsible people.

They liked to play golf and give clever dinner parties. They enjoyed each other's company and laughed at the same jokes.

Her father liked to putter around the garden and pamper his roses and tomatoes. Her mother played the violin and collected antique watches. He donated four days a month to a free clinic. She gave music lessons to underprivileged children.

They'd been married for thirty-eight years, and though they argued, occasionally bickered, they still held hands when they walked together.

She knew her mother deferred to her father on major decisions, and most of the minor ones. It was a trait that drove Callie crazy, one she perceived as a developed subservience that fostered dependence and weakness.

She was often ashamed of herself for viewing her mother as weak, and for viewing her father as just a bit smug for fostering the dependence.

Her father actually gave her mother an allowance. They didn't call it that, of course. Household expenses. But to Callie's mind it came to the same thing.

But if these were the biggest flaws she could find in her parents, it hardly made them baby-snatching monsters.

Feeling foolish, guilty and ridiculously nervous, Callie let herself into the house, hit the foyer lights, then punched in the code for the security alarm.

For a moment she simply stood, absorbing the feel. She couldn't think of the last time she'd been alone in the house. Certainly before she'd moved out and into her first apartment.

She could smell the faint drift of Murphy Oil Soap that told her Sarah, their longtime cleaning woman, had been there within the last few days. There was the scent of roses, too, strong and sweet from her mother's favorite potpourri.

She saw there were fresh flowers, some elegant summer arrangement, on the refectory table that ran under the staircase. Her mother would have told Sarah to see to that, Callie thought. She would have said the house enjoyed flowers, whether anyone was home or not.

She crossed the unglazed checkerboard of tile and started up the stairs.

She stopped in the doorway of her room first. Her childhood room. It had gone through numerous incarnations from the little-girl fussiness that was her first memory of it—and her mother's vision—through the eye-popping colors she'd insisted on when she'd begun to have her own ideas and into the messy cave where she'd kept her collection of fossils and old bottles, animal bones and anything else she'd managed to dig up.

Now it was an elegant space to welcome her or any guests. Pale green walls and sheer white curtains, an antique quilt on a wide four-poster bed. And all the pretty little whatnots her mother collected on shopping expeditions with friends.

With the exception of vacations, sleepovers at friends', summer camp and the summer nights when she'd pitched a tent in the backyard, she'd always slept in that room until she'd left for college.

That made it, she supposed, in whatever incarnation, part of her.

She moved down the wide hallway and into her father's study. She hesitated there, wincing a bit as she looked at his lovely old mahogany desk with its pristine surface, the fresh blotter in its burgundy leather holder, the silver desk set, the charming folly of an antique inkwell with quill.

The desk chair was the same rich leather, and she could see him there, as likely studying a gardening catalogue as a medical journal. His glasses would be sliding down his nose, and his hair, pale gold and shot with silver, would fall over his wide forehead.

This time of year he'd wear a golf shirt and chinos, over a very fit frame. He'd have music on—probably classical. Indeed his first formal date with the girl who'd become his wife had been a concert.

Callie had often come into this room, plopped down in one of the two cozy leather chairs and interrupted her father with news, complaints, questions. If he'd been really busy, he'd give her a long, cool look over the top of his glasses, which would make her slink out again.

But the majority of the time she'd been welcomed there.

Now she felt like an intruder.

She ordered herself not to think about it. She would simply do what she'd come to do. After all, they were her papers.

She walked to the first of the wooden file cabinets. Anything she needed to find would be in this room, she knew. Her father took care of the finances, the record keeping, the filing.

She opened the top drawer and began to search.

An hour later, she went downstairs to brew a pot of coffee. Since she was there anyway, she raided the pantry and dug up a bag of low-sodium potato chips. Pitiful, she decided as she carted the snack upstairs. What was the point in living longer if you had to eat cardboard?

She took a ten-minute break at the desk. At the rate she was going, it wasn't going to take her as long as she'd estimated. Her father's files were meticulously organized.

She'd have been nearly done already if she hadn't gotten caught up in the file dedicated to her report cards and grades.

Walking back through her own past had been irresistible. Looking through the school file made her think of the friends she'd had—the digs she'd organized in backyards in elementary school. Her pal Donny Riggs had caught hell from his mom over the holes they'd dug in her garden.

She thought of her first real kiss. Not Donny, but Joe Torrento, her heartthrob at thirteen. He'd worn a black leather jacket and Redwing boots. He'd seemed pretty sexy and dangerous to her at thirteen. Last she'd heard, he was teaching biology at St. Bernadette's High School in Cherry Hill, had two kids and served as head of the local Rotary.

There was her best friend and next-door neighbor Natalie Carmichael. They'd been as close as sisters, had shared every secret. Then college had come, and after a year or so of trying to maintain the connection, they'd drifted apart.

Because it made her sad to think of it, she got up again and began to go through the second file cabinet.

Like the school file, medical records were precisely organized. She flipped past the folder marked for her mother and the one marked for her father and drew out her own.

It was where she should have started in the first place, she realized, and certain the simple proof she wanted would be there, she sat again. Opened the file.

She noted the childhood inoculations, the X rays and reports on the broken arm she'd suffered at ten when she'd fallen out of a tree. There was her tonsillectomy in June 1983. The dislocated finger she'd earned trying to slam-dunk during a pickup basketball game when she'd been sixteen.

She reached for more chips as she continued to scan the paperwork. He'd even kept the basic stuff from every one of her annual checkups until she'd moved out of the house. Jesus, even from the gynecologist.

"Dad," she muttered. "That's just anal."

She didn't react until she'd gone straight through every paper. Then she simply turned the file over and went through every paper a second time.

But she found no hospital records of her birth. No paperwork from pediatric exams for the first three months of her life.

Didn't mean anything. She rubbed a fist between her breasts when her breathing quickened. He just filed them somewhere else. A baby file. Or he put them in with her mother's medicals.

Yes, that was it. He'd kept the documentation of her pregnancy and had kept his daughter's earliest records with that. To close the event.

To prove to herself she wasn't worried, she poured more coffee, sipped at it before she rose to replace her file and pull out her mother's.

She couldn't, wouldn't, feel guilty for going through papers not her own. It was only to put all this to rest. She scanned through, trying to pick up key data without actually reading what she considered her mother's private business.

She found the reports and treatment for the first miscarriage in August of 1969. She'd known about it, and about the one that followed in the fall of 'seventy-one.

Her mother had told her how they'd devastated her, had even sent her into a clinical depression. And how much finally having a healthy baby girl had meant to her.

And here, Callie noted with a shudder of relief, here was the third pregnancy. The ob-gyn had been concerned, naturally, with the diagnosis of incompetent cervical os that had caused the previous miscarriages, had prescribed medication, bed rest through the first trimester.

The pregnancy had been carefully monitored by Dr. Henry Simpson. She'd even been admitted to the hospital for two days during her seventh month due to concerns about hypertension, and dehydration due to continued morning sickness.

But she'd been treated, released.

And that, to Callie's confusion, was where all documen-

tation of the pregnancy ended. The next of the paperwork picked up nearly a year later with a sprained ankle.

She began to flip through more quickly, certain she'd find the rest of the documents mixed in.

But they weren't there. Nothing was there. It was as if her mother's pregnancy had stopped in its seventh month.

There was a knotted ball in her stomach as she rose again, returned to the files. She opened the next drawer, thumbed through looking for more medicals. And when she found no folder that fit, crouched and started to open the bottom drawer.

Found it locked.

For a moment, she stayed just as she was, squatted in front of the polished wooden cabinet, one hand on the gleaming brass handle. Then she straightened and, refusing to allow herself to think, searched through her father's desk for the key.

When she didn't find it, she took his letter opener, knelt down in front of the drawer and broke the lock.

Inside she found a long metal fire box, again locked. This she took back to the desk, sat. For a long moment she simply stared at it, wishing it away.

She could put it back, stick it in the drawer and pretend it didn't exist. Whatever was inside was something her father had gone to some trouble to keep private.

What right did she have to violate his privacy?

And yet wasn't that what she did every day? She violated the privacy of the dead, of strangers, because knowledge and discovery were more sacred than their secrets.

How could she dig up, test, examine, handle the bones of dead strangers and not open a box that might very well hold secrets that involved her own life?

"I'm sorry," she said aloud, and attacked the lock with the letter opener.

She lifted the lid, and began.

There hadn't been a third miscarriage. Nor had there been a live birth. Callie forced herself to read as though it were a lab report from a dig. In the first week of the eighth month of her pregnancy, Vivian Dunbrook's fetus had died

in the womb. Labor was induced, and she delivered a still-born daughter on June 29, 1974.

Diagnosis: pregnancy-induced hypertension, resulting in missed pregnancy.

The cervical defect that induced the miscarriages, the extreme hypertension resulting in the stillbirth made another pregnancy dangerous.

Less than two weeks later, a hysterectomy, recommended due to cervical damage, made it impossible.

The patient was treated for depression.

On December 16, 1974, they adopted an infant girl whom they named Callie Ann. A private adoption, Callie noted dully, arranged through a lawyer. The fee for his services was ten thousand dollars. In addition, another fee of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was paid through him to the unnamed biological mother.

The infant, somehow it helped to think of it as *the infant*, was examined by Dr. Peter O'Malley, a Boston pediatrician, and deemed healthy.

Her next examination was a standard six-month checkup, by Dr. Marilyn Vermer, in Philadelphia, who had continued as the infant's pediatrician until the patient reached the age of twelve.

"When I refused to go to a baby doctor anymore," Callie murmured and watched, with some surprise, as a tear plopped on the papers she held.

"Jesus. Oh Jesus."

Her stomach cramped, forcing her to bend over, clutching her middle, hissing out breaths until the pain subsided.

It couldn't be real. It couldn't be true. How could two people who'd never lied to her about the most inconsequential matter have lived a lie all these years?

It simply wasn't possible.

But when she forced herself to straighten, forced herself to read through the papers again, she saw it wasn't just possible. It was real.

What the hell do you mean she's taken the day off?" Jake shoved his hat back and fried Leo with one searing look. "We're at a critical point in plotting out the site, and she takes a goddamn holiday?"

"She said something came up."

"What the hell came up that was more important than doing her job?"

"She wouldn't say. You can be as pissed off as you want. At me, at Callie, but we both know this isn't like her. We both know she's worked sick, exhausted, injured."

"Yeah, yeah. And it would be just like her to flip off this project because she's ticked I'm on it."

"No, it wouldn't." Because his own temper was starting to spike, Leo moved in. Height difference kept him from getting in Jake's face, so he compensated by drilling a finger into Jake's chest. "And you know damn well she doesn't play that kind of game. Whatever problems she has with you, or with me for putting you here, she'll handle. But they won't interfere with the project. She's too professional, and she's too bullheaded to let it."

"Okay, you got me." Jake jammed his hands in his pockets and stared out over the field they'd begun to segment. It was worry that had anger gnawing at him. "Something was wrong with her last night."

He'd known it, seen it. But instead of convincing her to tell him what was wrong, he'd let her shrug him off, scrape at his own pride and temper.

Old habits die hard.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I dropped by her room. She was upset. It took me a few minutes to realize it didn't have anything to do with me. I like to tell myself anything that gets under Callie's skin has to do with me. She wouldn't talk about it. Big surprise. But she had some pictures out. Looked like family shots to me."

What he knew about her family would fit in one shovel of spoil.

"Would she tell you if something was wrong with her family?"

Leo rubbed the back of his neck. "I'd think so. She only said she had some personal business, that it couldn't wait. If she could, she'd be back before the end of the day, if not, she'd be here tomorrow."

"She got a guy?"

"Graystone—"

He kept his voice low. Digs were always fertile soil for growing gossip. "Give me a break, Leo. Is she seeing someone?"

"How the hell do I know? She doesn't tell me about her love life."

"Clara would grill her about it." Jake turned back now. "Nobody can hold out against Clara once she gets her teeth in. And Clara would tell you."

"As far as Clara's concerned, Callie should still be married to you."

"Yeah? Your wife's a smart woman. She ever say anything about me?"

Leo aimed a bland look. "Clara and I discuss you every evening at dinner."

"*Callie*. Jesus, Leo, stop busting my balls."

"I can't repeat what Callie's said to me about you. I don't use that kind of language."

"Cute." He stared off toward the pond, his eyes shielded by his dark glasses. "Whatever she's said, whatever she thinks, she's going to have to start making some adjustments. If she's in some sort of trouble, I'll get it out of her."

"If you're so damned concerned, so damn interested, why the hell did you get divorced?"

Jake lifted his shoulders. "Good question, Leo. Damn good question. When I figure it out, you'll be the second or third to know. Meanwhile, short a head archaeologist or not, we'd better get to work."

He'd fallen for her, and fallen hard, the first time he'd seen her, Jake admitted. Like a finger snap, his life had been divided into before and after Callie Dunbrook.

It had been terrifying and annoying. *She* had been terrifying and annoying.

He'd been thirty, unencumbered—unless you counted

Digger—and planning to stay that way. He loved his work. He loved women. And whenever a man could combine the two, well, life was as perfect as it was ever going to get.

He didn't answer to anyone, and certainly had no intentions of answering to some curvy little archaeologist with a mean streak.

God, he'd loved that mean streak of hers.

Sex had been nearly as stormy and fascinating as their bickering. But it hadn't solved his problem. The more he had her, the more he'd wanted. She'd given him her body, her companionship, the challenge of her contrary mind. But she'd never given him the one thing that might have settled him down.

Her trust. She'd never trusted him. Not to stick by her, to share loads with her. And most certainly she didn't trust his fidelity.

For months after she'd booted him, he'd consoled himself that it was her blatant lack of faith that had ruined everything. Just as for months he'd held on to the conviction that she'd come crawling after him.

Stupid, he could admit now. Callie never crawled. It was one thing they had firmly in common. And as time passed, he'd begun to see that maybe, perhaps, possibly, he hadn't handled everything quite as adeptly as he could have. Should have.

It didn't really shift the blame away from her, which was exactly where it belonged, but it did open the door to considering another approach.

That current still ran between them, he acknowledged. There was no question of it. If the Antietam Project offered him a channel for that current, he'd use it.

He'd use whatever came to hand to get her back.

And whatever was troubling her now, well, she was going to tell him. She was going to let him help her. If he had to tie her down and pry it out of her with forceps.

Callie hadn't expected to sleep, but just after dawn she'd curled up on top of the bed in her old room. She'd

hugged a pillow under her arm, the way she had since childhood when ill or unhappy.

Physical and emotional fatigue had beaten out even the headache and the nausea. She'd woken a full four hours later at the sound of the front door slamming, and the bright call of her name.

For a moment, she'd been a child again, snuggled into bed on a Saturday morning until her mother's call stirred her. There'd be Cheerios for breakfast, with fresh strawberries cut up in the bowl and the extra sugar she'd sneak into it when her mother wasn't looking.

She rolled over. The aches of her body, the sick headache, the utter weight settled in her chest reminded her she wasn't a little girl any longer, whose biggest concern was sweetening her cereal.

She was a grown woman. And she didn't know whose child she was.

She swung her legs slowly to the floor, then sat on the side of the bed with her head in her hands.

"Callie!" Sheer delight lifted Vivian's voice as she rushed through the doorway. "Baby, we had no idea you were coming home. I was so surprised to see your car in the drive."

She gave Callie a quick hug, then ran a hand over her hair. "When did you get here?"

"Last night." She didn't lift her head. She wasn't ready to look at her mother's face. "I thought you and Dad were in Maine."

"We were. We decided to come home today instead of Sunday. Your father was obsessing about his garden, and he has a full day at the hospital on Monday. Baby..." Vivian put a hand under Callie's chin, lifted it. "What's wrong? Aren't you feeling well?"

"Just a little groggy." Her mother's eyes were brown, Callie thought. But not like her own. Her mother's were darker, deeper, and went so beautifully with the rose and cream skin, the softly curling hair that had the texture and color of blond mink. "Is Dad here?"

"Yes, of course. He's taking a look at his tomato plants

before he brings in the rest of the luggage. Sweetie, you look awfully pale.”

“I need to talk to you. To both of you.”

I'm not ready. I'm not ready, not ready, her mind screamed, but she pushed herself to her feet. “Will you ask Dad to come in? I just want to wash up.”

“Callie, you’re scaring me.”

“Please. Just give me a minute to throw some water on my face. I’ll be right down.”

Without giving Vivian a chance to argue, she hurried out and into the bath across the hall.

She leaned on the sink, took slow, deep breaths because her stomach was clutching again. She ran the water cold, as cold as she could stand, and splashed it on her face.

She didn’t look in the mirror. She wasn’t ready for that, either.

When she came out, started down, Vivian was in the foyer, clutching her husband’s hand.

Look how tall he is, Callie thought. How tall and trim and handsome. And how perfect they look together. Dr. Elliot Dunbrook and his pretty Vivian.

They’d lied to her, every day of her life.

“Callie. You’ve got your mother in a state.” Elliot crossed over, wrapped his arms around Callie and gave her a bear hug. “What’s wrong with my girl?” he questioned, and had tears burning her eyes.

“I didn’t expect you back today.” She stepped out of his arms. “I thought I’d have more time to figure out what I wanted to say. Now I don’t. We need to go in and sit down.”

“Callie, are you in trouble?”

She looked at her father’s face, into his face, saw nothing but love and concern. “I don’t know what I am,” she said simply, and walked across the foyer into the living room.

The perfect room, she thought, for people of taste and means. Antiques, carefully chosen, carefully maintained. Comfortable chairs in the deep colors they both favored. The charm of folk art for the walls, the elegance of old crystal.

Family pictures on the mantel that made her heart ache.
“I need to ask you . . .”

No, she couldn't do this with her back to them. Whatever she'd learned, whatever she would learn, they deserved to speak directly to her face. She turned, took one deep breath.

“I need to ask you why you never told me I was adopted.”

Vivian made a strangled sound, as if she'd been dealt a hard punch to the throat. Her lips trembled. “Callie, where did you—”

“Please don't deny it. Please don't do that.” She could barely get the words out. “I'm sorry, but I went through the files.” She looked at her father. “I broke into the locked drawer, and the security box inside. I saw the medical records, the adoption papers.”

“Elliot.”

“Sit down, Vivian. Sit down.” He pulled her to a chair, lowered her into it. “I couldn't destroy them.” He stroked a hand over his wife's cheek as he might a frightened child's. “It wasn't right.”

“But it was right to conceal the facts of my birth from me?” Callie demanded.

Elliot's shoulders slumped. “It wasn't important to us.”

“Wasn't—”

“Don't blame your father.” Vivian reached up for Elliot's hand. “He did it for me,” she said to Callie. “I made him promise. I made him swear. I needed . . .”

She began to weep, slow tears streaming down her face. “Don't hate me, Callie. Oh God, don't hate me for this. You were my baby the instant you were put in my arms. Nothing else mattered.”

“A replacement for the baby you lost?”

“Callie.” Now Elliot stepped forward. “Don't be cruel.”

“Cruel?” Who was this man, staring at her out of sad, angry eyes? Who was her father? “You can speak to me of cruel after what you've done?”

“What have we done?” he tossed back. “We didn't tell you. How can that matter so much? Your mother—your

mother needed the illusion at first. She was devastated, inconsolable. She could never give birth to a child. When there was a chance to adopt you, to have a daughter, we took it. We loved you, love you, not because you're like our own, because you *are* our own."

"I couldn't face the loss of that baby," Vivian managed. "Not after the two miscarriages, not after doing everything I could to make certain the baby was born healthy. I couldn't bear the thought of people looking at you and seeing you as a substitute. We moved here, to start fresh. Just the three of us. And I put all of that away. It doesn't change who you are. It doesn't change who we are or how much we love you."

"You pay for a black-market baby. You take a child stolen from another family, and it doesn't change anything?"

"What are you talking about?" Elliot's face filled with angry color. "That's a vicious thing to say. Vicious. Whatever we've done we don't deserve that."

"You paid a quarter of a million dollars."

"That's right. We arranged for a private adoption and money speeds the wheel. It may not be considered fair to couples less able to pay, but it's not a crime. We agreed to the fee, agreed that the biological mother should be compensated. To stand there and accuse us of *buying* you, of stealing you denigrates everything we've ever had as a family."

"You don't ask why I came here, why I looked in your files, why I broke into your private papers?"

Elliot dragged a hand through his hair, then sat. "I can't keep up. For God's sake, Callie, do you expect logic and reason when you throw this at us?"

"Last night, a woman came to my room. She'd seen the news segment I did on my current project. She said I was her daughter."

"You're my daughter," Vivian said, low and fierce. "You're my child."

"She said," Callie continued, "that on December 12, 1974, her infant daughter was stolen. From a mall in Hagerstown, Maryland. She showed me pictures of herself

at my age, of her mother at my age. There's a very strong resemblance. Coloring, facial shape. The damn three dimples. I told her I couldn't be. I told her I wasn't adopted. But I was."

"It can't have anything to do with us." Elliot rubbed a hand over his heart. "That's insane."

"She's mistaken." Vivian shook her head slowly. Back and forth, back and forth. "She's horribly mistaken."

"Of course she is." Elliot reached for her hand again. "Of course she is. We went through a lawyer," he told Callie. "A reputable lawyer who specialized in private adoptions. We had recommendations from your mother's obstetrician. We expedited the adoption process, yes, but that's all. We'd never be a party to kidnapping, to baby brokering. You can't believe that."

She looked at him, at her mother, who stared at her out of swimming eyes. "No. No," she said and felt a little of the weight lift. "No, I don't believe that. So let's talk about exactly what you did."

First, she stepped to her mother's chair, crouched down. "Mom." All she did was touch Vivian's hand and repeat. "Mom."

With one choked sob, Vivian lunged forward and caught Callie in her arms.

Five

Callie made coffee as much to give her parents time to compose themselves as for the need. They were her parents. That hadn't changed.

The sense of anger and betrayal was fading. How could it stand against her mother's ravaged face or her father's sorrow?

But if she could block out the hurt, she couldn't block out the need to understand, to have answers she could align until they gave her the whole.

No matter how much she loved them, she needed to know.

She carried the coffee back to the living room and saw that her parents sat together on the couch now, hands clasped.

A unit, she mused. They were, as always, a unit.

"I don't know if you can ever forgive me," Vivian began.

"I don't think you understand." Callie poured the coffee. The simple task gave her something to do with her hands, kept her gaze focused on pot and cup. "I have to know the facts. I can't see the whole picture until I have the

pieces of it to put together. We're a family. Nothing changes that, but I have to know the facts."

"You were always a logical girl," Elliot replied. "We've hurt you."

"Let's not worry about that now." Rather than move to a chair, Callie lowered herself to sit cross-legged on the floor on the other side of the table. "First I need to understand . . . about adoption. Did you feel it made you, me . . . *us* less valid?"

"However a family is made is a miracle," Elliot responded. "You were our miracle."

"But you concealed it."

"It's my fault." Vivian blinked at tears again. "It was my fault."

"There's no fault," Callie said. "Just tell me."

"We wanted a child." Vivian's fingers tightened on Elliot's. "We so very much wanted a child. When I had the first miscarriage, it was terrible. I can't explain it to you. The sense of loss and grief and panic. Of . . . failure. My doctor said we could try again, but that I might have . . . might have difficulty carrying a child to term. Any future pregnancy would have to be carefully monitored. And even though it was, I miscarried again. I was . . . I felt . . . broken."

Callie lifted a cup, held it up to her mother. "I know. I understand."

"They gave me a mood elevator to get me through the depression." She managed a watery smile. "Elliot weaned me off the pills. He kept me busy instead. Antiquing, going to the theater. Weekends in the country when he could manage it." She pressed their joined hands to her cheek. "He pulled me out of the pit."

"She felt it was her fault, that she'd done something to cause it."

"I smoked a lot of pot in college."

Callie blinked, then found something rising unexpectedly in her throat. It was laughter. "Oh, Mom, you wild woman."

"Well, I did." Vivian wiped at tears even as a smile

trembled on her lips. “And I did LSD once, and had two one-night stands.”

“Okay then, that explains it. You slut. Got any grass in the house now?”

“No! Of course not.”

“Oh well, we’ll get through this without blissing out then.” Callie leaned over the table, patted her mother’s knee. “So you were a pothead floozy. Got it.”

“You’re trying to make this easier for me.” On an uneven breath, Vivian rested her head on Elliot’s shoulder. “She’s so much like you. Strong, like you. I wanted to try again. Elliot wanted to wait a little longer, but I was determined. I wouldn’t listen to anyone. I was, I suppose, obsessed. We fought about it.”

“I was worried about your mother’s health. Physical, emotional.”

“He’d suggested adoption, brought me information on it. But I wouldn’t hear him. I’d see these women, pregnant, with babies. I’d think it’s my right, it’s my function. My friends were having children. Why should they and not us? They felt sorry for me, and that made it worse.”

“I couldn’t stand to see her so unhappy. So lost. I couldn’t stand it.”

“I got pregnant again. I was so happy. Sick—just like the other times. I’d get horribly sick, then dehydrated. But I was careful. When they said bed rest, I went to bed. This time I got past the first trimester, and it looked good. I felt the baby move. Remember, Elliot?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“I bought maternity clothes. We started decorating the nursery. I read a mountain of books on pregnancy, on childbirth, on child rearing. There were some problems with my blood pressure, serious enough in the seventh month for them to hospitalize me briefly. But it seemed like everything was all right until . . .”

“We went in for an exam,” Elliot continued. “There was no fetal heartbeat. Tests showed the fetus had died.”

“I didn’t believe them. Wouldn’t. Even though I’d

stopped feeling the baby kick. I kept reading the books, I kept planning. I wouldn't let Elliot discuss it—went wild if he tried to. I wouldn't let him tell anyone.”

“We induced labor.”

“It was a little girl,” Vivian said quietly. “Stillborn. So beautiful, so tiny. I held her, and for a while I told myself she was only sleeping. But I knew she wasn't, and when they took her away, I fell apart. I took pills to get through it. I . . . Oh God, I stole some of your father's scripts and got Alivan and Seconal. I walked through the days in a fog, went through the nights like a corpse. I was working up the courage to take all of them at once and just go away.”

“Mom.”

“She was in a deep state of depression. The stillbirth, the hysterectomy. The loss, not only of another child but any hope of conceiving again.”

How old had she been? Callie thought. Twenty-six? So young to face the loss. “I'm so sorry, Mom.”

“People sent flowers,” Vivian continued. “I hated that. I'd close myself in the nursery, fold and refold the blankets, the little clothes I'd bought. We named her Alice. I wouldn't go to the cemetery. I wouldn't let Elliot take the crib away. As long as I didn't go to her grave, as long as I could still fold the blankets and her little clothes, she wasn't gone.”

“I was afraid. This time I was really afraid,” Elliot admitted. “When I realized she was taking drugs in addition to what had been prescribed, I was terrified. I felt helpless, unable to reach her. Taking the meds away wasn't going to reach the root of the problem. I talked with her OB. He brought up the possibility of adoption.”

“I still didn't want to listen,” Vivian put in. “But Elliot made me sit down, and he laid it out in stark medical terms. Shock treatment, you could say. There would not be another pregnancy. That was no longer an option. We could make a life, just the two of us. He loved me, and we could make a good life. If we wanted a child, it was time to explore other ways of having one. We were young, he reminded me. Financially solvent. Intelligent, caring people

who could and would provide a loving and secure home. Did I want a child, or did I just want to be pregnant? If I wanted a child, we could have a child. I wanted a child.”

“We went to an agency—several,” Elliot added. “There were waiting lists. The longer the list, the more difficult it was for Vivian.”

“My new obsession.” She sighed. “I repainted the nursery. Gave the crib away and bought a new one. Gave away everything we’d bought for Alice so that this new child, when it came, would have its own. I thought of myself as expecting. Somewhere there was a child that was mine. We were only waiting to find each other. And every delay was like another loss.”

“She was blooming again, with hope. I couldn’t stand the thought of that bloom fading, of watching that sadness come into her again. I spoke of it to Simpson, her OB. Told him how frustrating and how painful it was for both of us to be told it could be years. He gave me the name of a lawyer who did private adoptions. Direct with the birth mother.”

“Marcus Carlyle,” Callie said, remembering the name from the files.

“Yes.” Steadier now, Vivian sipped at her coffee. “He was wonderful. So supportive, so sympathetic. And best of all so much more hopeful than the agencies. The fee was very high, but that was a small price to pay. He said he had a client who was unable to keep her infant daughter. A young girl who’d had a baby and realized that she couldn’t care for her properly as a single mother. He would tell her about us, give her all the information about what kind of people we were—even our heritage. If she approved, he could place the child with us.”

“Why you?” Callie demanded.

“He said we were the kind of people she was looking for. Stable, financially secure, well educated, childless. He said she wanted to finish school, go to college, start a new life. She had run up debts trying to support the baby on her own. She needed to pay them off, and needed to know her little girl was going to have the best possible life with par-

ents who would love her.” Vivian lifted her shoulders. “He said he would let us know within weeks.”

“We tried not to get too enthusiastic, too hopeful,” Elliot explained. “But it seemed like fate.”

“He called eight days later at four-thirty in the afternoon.” Vivian set down the coffee she’d barely touched. “I remember exactly. I was playing Vivaldi on the violin, trying to lose myself in the music, and the phone rang. I knew. I know that sounds ridiculous. But I knew. And when I answered the phone, he said, ‘Congratulations, Mrs. Dunbrook. It’s a girl.’ I broke down and sobbed over the phone. He was so patient with me, so genuinely happy for me. He said it was moments like this that made his job worthwhile.”

“You never met the birth mother.”

“No.” Elliot shook his head. “That sort of thing wasn’t done then. There were no names exchanged. The only information given was medical and hereditary history, and a basic profile. We went to his office the following day. There was a nurse, holding you. You were sleeping. The procedure was we didn’t sign the papers or pay the remainder of the fee until we’d seen you, accepted you.”

“You were mine as soon as I saw you, Callie,” Vivian said. “The instant. She put you in my arms, and you were my baby. Not a substitute, not a replacement. Mine. I made Elliot promise that we’d never refer to the adoption again, never speak of it, never tell you or discuss it with anyone. Because you were our baby.”

“It just didn’t seem important,” Elliot said. “You were just three months old. You wouldn’t have understood. And it was so vital to Vivian’s state of mind. She needed to close away all the pain and disappointment. We were bringing our baby home. That’s all that mattered.”

“But the family,” Callie began.

“Were just as concerned about her as I was,” Elliot answered. “And just as dazzled by you, as completely in love. We just set that one thing aside. Then, we moved here; it was easier yet to forget it. New place, new people. No one knew, so why bring it up? Still, I kept the documentation,

the papers, though Vivian asked me to get rid of them. It didn't seem right to do that. I locked them away, just as we'd locked away everything that happened before we brought you home."

"Callie." Composed again, Vivian reached out. "This woman, the one who . . . You can't know she's involved. It's crazy. Mr. Carlyle was a reputable lawyer. We wouldn't have gone through anyone we didn't absolutely trust. My own obstetrician recommended him. These men were—are—compassionate, ethical men. Hardly involved in some sort of black-market baby ring."

"Do you know what coincidence is, Mom? It's fate breaking a lock so you can open a door. This woman's baby was stolen on December twelfth. Three days after that, your lawyer calls and says he has a baby girl for you. The next day, you sign papers, write checks and bring me home."

"You don't know her baby was stolen," Vivian insisted.

"No, but that's easy enough to verify. I have to do this. The way my parents raised me makes it impossible for me to do otherwise."

"If you confirm the kidnapping"—Elliot's heart shuddered as he spoke—"there are tests that can be run to determine if . . . if there's a biological connection."

"I know. I'll take that step if it's necessary."

"I can expedite that, cut through the red tape so you'll have the results quickly."

"Thanks."

"What will you do if . . ." Vivian couldn't finish the sentence.

"I don't know." Callie blew out a breath. "I don't know. I'll do what comes next. You're my mother. Nothing changes that. Dad, I need to take the paperwork. I need to start checking out everyone who was involved. Dr. Simpson, Carlyle. Did you get the name of the nurse who brought me to his office?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not that I remember. I can track down Simpson for you. It would be easier for me. I'll make some calls."

"Let me know as soon as you find out. You've got my

cell phone number, and I'll leave you the number at my motel in Maryland."

"You're going back?" Vivian demanded. "Oh, Callie, can't you stay?"

"I can't. I'm sorry. I love you. Whatever we find out, I'm still going to love you. But there's a woman who's in considerable pain over the loss of a child. She deserves some answers."

Doug didn't know the last time he'd been so angry. There was no talking to his mother—he'd given that up. It was like beating your head against the iron wall that was her will.

He was getting no help from his grandfather either. Reality, reason, reminders of the dozens of disappointments in the past did nothing to budge either of them an inch.

And to find out that his mother had gone to this Callie Dunbrook. Actually gone to her motel room—with family pictures, yet. Humiliating herself, tearing open scars, dragging an outsider into a personal family tragedy.

The way Woodsboro worked, it wasn't going to take long for the Cullen family history to be dug up, sifted through and discussed endlessly all over again.

So he was going to see Callie Dunbrook himself. To ask her not to speak of his mother's visit with anyone—if it wasn't too late for that. To apologize for it.

He wasn't going to get a better look at her, he assured himself. As far as he was concerned Jessica was gone. Long gone, and no amount of wishing or searching or hoping was going to bring her back.

And if she did come back, what was the point? She wasn't Jessica now. If she was still alive, she was a different person, a grown woman with a life of her own that had nothing to do with the baby they'd lost.

Whatever way it worked, it was only more heartache for his mother. Nothing he said or did could convince her of that. Jessica was her Holy Grail, the quest of her life.

He pulled over to the side of the road by the construction fence.

He remembered this spot—the soft ground of the field, the exciting paths through the woods. He'd gone swimming in Simon's Hole. Had once skinny-dipped there on a moon-drenched night with Laurie Worrell and had very nearly talked her out of her virginity in the cool, dark water.

Now there were holes in the field, mounds of dirt and rope lines strung everywhere.

He'd never understand why people couldn't leave well enough alone.

As he stepped out of the car to head toward the fence, a short man in mud-brown attire broke away from a group and walked to meet him.

"How's it going?" Doug said for lack of anything else.

"Very well. Are you interested in the project?" Leo asked him.

"Well..."

"It probably looks a bit confusing right now, but in fact, it's the early days of a very organized archaeological dig. The initial survey produced artifacts that we've dated to the Neolithic era. Human bones nearly six thousand years old were discovered by a backhoe operator during excavation for a proposed housing development—"

"Yes, I know. Dolan. I...caught the report on the news," Doug added and scanned the people at work over Leo's shoulder. "I thought there was a Callie Dunbrook heading this up."

"Dr. Dunbrook's the head archaeologist on the Antietam Creek Project, with Dr. Graystone as head anthropologist. We're segmenting the area," Leo continued, gesturing behind him, "measuring off by square meters. Each meter will be given a number for reference. It's one of the most vital steps, the documentation. As we dig, we destroy the site. By documenting each segment, with photographs and on paper, we maintain its integrity."

"Uh-huh." Doug didn't give a flying fuck about the dig. "Is Dr. Dunbrook here?"

"I'm afraid not. But if you have any questions, I can assure you either I or Dr. Graystone can answer them."

Doug glanced back, caught the look. Jesus, he thought, the guy thought he was some moron dropping by hoping to hit on a woman he'd seen on TV. Smoothly, he switched gears. "The only thing I know about this stuff is what I've seen in *Indiana Jones*. It's not like I expected."

"Not as dramatic. No evil Nazis or chase scenes. But it can be just as exciting."

Couldn't just walk away now, Doug realized. Questions were expected. And, God help him, small talk. "So, what's the point? I mean, what do you prove by looking at old bones?"

"Who they were. Who we were. Why they lived here, how they lived. The more we know about the past, the more we understand ourselves."

As far as Doug was concerned, the past was over, the future was later. It was today that ran the show. "I don't feel like I have much in common with—what was it?—a six-thousand-year-old man."

"He ate and he slept, he made love and he grew old. He got sick, felt cold and heat." Leo took off his glasses, began to polish them on his shirt. "He wondered. Because he wondered, he progressed and gave those who came after a road to follow. Without him, you wouldn't be here."

"Got a point," Doug conceded. "Anyway, I just wanted to take a look. I used to play in those woods as a kid. Swam in Simon's Hole in the summer when I could."

"Why do they call it Simon's Hole?"

"What? Oh." Doug looked back at Leo. "The story is some kid named Simon drowned there a couple hundred years ago. He haunts the woods, if you're into that kind of thing."

Lips pursed, Leo slipped his glasses on again. "Who was he?"

Doug shrugged. "I don't know. Just a kid."

"There's the difference. I'd need to know. Who was Simon, how old was he? What was he doing here? It interests

me. By drowning here, he changed lives. The loss of anyone, but particularly a child, changes lives.”

A dull ache settled in Doug’s belly. “Yeah. You got that right. I won’t hold you up any longer. Thanks for your trouble.”

“Come back anytime. We appreciate the community’s interest.”

It was just as well she hadn’t been there, Doug told himself as he started back to his car. What could he have said to her, really, that wouldn’t have made things worse?

Another car pulled up behind his. Damn tourist attraction now, Doug thought bitterly. Nobody ever left things alone.

Lana jumped out, gave him a cheery wave. “Hi there. Taking a look at Woodsboro’s latest claim to fame?”

He placed her. Hers wasn’t a face a man forgot quickly. “Bunch of holes in the ground. I don’t know how it’s any better than Dolan’s houses.”

“Oh, let me count the ways.” Her hair tossed in the breeze. She let it fly and put her hands on her hips as she looked toward the dig. “We’re already starting to get some national attention. Enough that Dolan won’t be pouring any concrete slabs anytime soon. If ever. Hmmm.” Her lips pursed. “I don’t see Callie.”

“You know her?”

“Yes, we’ve met. Did you take a tour of the site?”

“No.”

She shifted slightly, angled her head. “Are you naturally unfriendly, or have you just taken an instant dislike to me?”

“Just naturally unfriendly, I guess.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

She took a step away, and cursing under his breath, Doug touched her arm. He wasn’t unfriendly, he assured himself. Private was different from unfriendly. But rude was rude, and his grandfather was very fond of her.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’ve got some things on my mind.”

“It shows.” She took another step, then turned back quickly. “Is something wrong with Roger? I’d have heard if—”

“He’s fine. He’s just fine. Got a thing for him, do you?”

“A huge thing. I’m crazy about him. Did he tell you how we met?”

“No.”

She paused, then laughed. “Okay, don’t nag, I’ll tell you. I wandered into the bookstore a few days after moving here. I was setting up my practice, I’d put my son in day care, and I couldn’t seem to hold two thoughts together. So I went for a walk and ended up in your grandfather’s place. He asked me if he could help me with anything. And I burst into tears. Just stood there, sobbing hysterically. He came around the counter, put his arms around me and let me cry all over him. A complete stranger who was having an emotional breakdown in his place of business.

“I’ve been in love with him ever since.”

“That’s just like him. He’s good with strays.” Doug winced. “No offense.”

“None taken. I wasn’t a stray. I knew where I was, how I’d gotten there and where I needed to go. But at that moment it was all so huge, so heavy, so horrible. And Roger held on to me, and mopped me up. Even when I tried to apologize, he put the Closed sign on the door, took me into the back room. He made tea and he let me tell him everything I was feeling. Things I didn’t even know I was feeling and had never been able to say to anyone else. There’s nothing in the world I wouldn’t do for Roger.”

She paused again. “Even marry you, which is what he’d like. So watch yourself.”

“Jesus.” Instinctively, he took a step in retreat. “What am I supposed to say to that?”

“You could ask me to dinner. It’d be nice to have a meal or two together before we start planning the wedding.” The look on his face was so perfect, so priceless, so utterly filled with male horror, she laughed until her sides ached.

“Relax, Doug, I haven’t started buying place settings. Yet. I just thought it fair to tell you, if you haven’t figured it out, that Roger’s got this fantasy in his mind about you

and me. He loves us, so he figures we're perfect for each other."

He considered. "Nothing I say at this point could possibly be the right thing to say. I'm shutting up."

"Just as well, I'm running behind. And I want a quick look at the progress before I head back to the office." She started toward the fence, glanced back with a brilliant smile. "Why don't you meet me for dinner tonight? The Old Antietam Inn. Seven o'clock?"

"I don't think—"

"Scared?"

"Hell, no, I'm not scared. It's just—"

"Seven o'clock. My treat."

He jiggled the car keys still in his pocket and frowned after her. "You always this pushy?"

"Yes," she called back. "Yes, I am."

Moments after Lana got back to her office, Callie walked into it. Ignoring the assistant at the desk in the outer office, Callie looked straight through the connecting doorway to Lana's.

"I need to talk to you."

"Sure. Lisa? Put off making that call for me until I'm done with Dr. Dunbrook. Come on in, Callie. Have a seat. Want something cold?"

"No. No, thanks." She shut the door at her back.

The office was small, and pretty, tidy, female as a parlor.

The window behind the fancy little desk looked over a park. Which told Callie however low the real estate market in a town this size, Lana Campbell had enough money for a prime spot, and the good taste to use it stylishly.

It didn't tell her Lana was a good lawyer.

"Where'd you study?" Callie demanded.

Lana took a seat, leaned back. "Undergraduate work at Michigan State. I transferred to University of Maryland after I met my husband. He was a Marylander. I got my law degree there, as he did."

“Why did you move here?”

“Is this a personal or professional inquiry?”

“It’s professional.”

“All right. I worked for a firm in Baltimore. I had a child. I lost my husband. After I could think straight again, I decided to relocate in an area where I could practice with less pressure and raise my son in the way his father and I had planned. I wanted him to have a house and a yard, and a mother who wasn’t obliged to be at the office ten hours a day and work another two when she got home. All right?”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Callie walked to the window. “If I hire you, whatever we discuss is confidential.”

“Of course.” Just standing there, Lana thought, the woman put off waves of energy. She wondered if it was exhausting to run on that vibrating loop.

Lana opened a drawer, took out a fresh legal pad. “Whether or not you hire me, whatever you tell me here will be confidential. So why don’t you tell me so we can decide?”

“I’m looking for a lawyer.”

“Looks like you’ve found one.”

“No, another lawyer. Marcus Carlyle. He practiced in Boston between 1968 and 1979.” That much she’d been able to find out by cell phone on the drive back down.

“And after ’seventy-nine?”

“He closed his practice. That’s all I know. I also know that at least part of his practice included arranging private adoptions.”

She took a folder out of her bag, leafed through and set her adoption papers on Lana’s desk. “I want you to check on this, too.”

Lana noted the names, looked up. “I see. Are you trying to find your birth parents?”

“No.”

“Callie, if you want me to help you, you have to trust me. I can initiate a search for Carlyle. I can, with your written permission, attempt to cut through some of the privacy blocks on adoptions in the seventies and get you some answers on your birth family. I can do both of those things

without any more information than what you've given me. But I can do them quicker, and better, if you give me more."

"I'm not prepared to give you more. Yet. I'd like you to find out what you can about Carlyle. To locate him if possible. And to find out what you can about the process that led to this adoption. I've got some digging to do myself in a couple of other areas. When we have answers, we'll see if I need to take this any further. Do you want a retainer?"

"Yes, I do. We'll start with five hundred."

With the idea of picking up a few supplies at the hardware store, Jake cruised into Woodsboro. He'd been tempted a number of times that day to try Callie on her cell phone.

But since he knew any conversation would probably end in an argument, he saved himself the headache.

If she wasn't back in the field the next morning, they'd go a round. Getting her mad was a surefire way to unearth whatever was wrong with her.

When he spotted her Rover parked in front of the local library, he swung to the curb himself. He parked on top of her bumper—just in case she decided to run out on him—then got out and sauntered across the sidewalk and up the concrete steps to the old stone building.

There was an elderly woman at the check-in counter. He was very good with elderly women and, pouring on the charm, leaned on her counter.

"Afternoon, ma'am. I don't mean to bother you, but I saw my associate's car out front. I'm Jacob Graystone, with the Antietam Creek Project."

"You're one of the scientists. I promised my grandson I'd bring him out to see what y'all are doing soon as I can. We're sure excited about it."

"So are we. How old's your grandson?"

"He's ten."

"You make sure to come and see me when you visit the site. I'll show you both around."

“That’s mighty nice of you.”

“We want to educate as well as document. Can you tell me if Dr. Dunbrook came in? Callie Dunbrook. A very attractive blonde, about this high.”

He held up a hand at his shoulder as the woman nodded. “We don’t get many faces in here I don’t know right off. Sure, she’s in the resource room, just in the back there.”

“Thanks.” He gave her a wink and headed off.

As far as he could see, the library was empty but for the old woman, himself and Callie, whom he saw running a microfiche at a table.

She had her legs crossed on the chair, which told him she’d been at it at least twenty minutes. She always ended up sitting like that when she worked at a desk longer than twenty minutes.

He walked up behind her, read over her shoulder.

The fingers of her left hand were tapping lightly on the table, another sign she’d been at it awhile.

“Why are you looking through thirty-year-old local papers?”

She nearly jumped out of the chair and sprang up high and hard enough to rap her head against his chin.

“Goddamnit,” they said in unison.

“What the hell are you doing sneaking up on me that way?” she demanded.

“What the hell are you doing not coming to the site?” Even as he countered, he grabbed her hand before she could switch off the machine.

“What’s your interest in a kidnapping in 1974?”

“Back off, Graystone.”

“Cullen.” He simply kept her hand firm in his, continued to read. “Jay and Suzanne Cullen. Suzanne Cullen—something familiar about that name. ‘Three-month-old Jessica Lynn Cullen was taken from her stroller at the Hagerstown Mall yesterday,’” he read. “Christ, people suck, don’t they? They ever find her?”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Too bad, because you know I’m not going to let up un-

til you tell me why this business has you so upset. You're on the verge of tears here, Callie, and you don't cry easy."

"I'm just tired." She rubbed at her eyes like a child. "I'm just so fucking tired."

"Okay." He laid his hands on her shoulders, kneaded at the tension. He wouldn't have to make her angry, he realized. Good thing, as he didn't have the heart for it.

If she was fighting tears, she was as open as she'd ever be. And still, he didn't have the heart to exploit the weakness.

"I'll take you back to the motel. You can get some sack time."

"I don't want to go back there. I don't want to go there yet. God. God. I need a drink."

"Fine. We'll dump your car back at the motel, then we'll go find a drink."

"Why do you want to be nice to me, Graystone? We don't even like each other."

"One question at a time, babe. Come on. We'll go find us a bar."

Six

The Blue Mountain Hideaway was a spruced-up roadside house tucked back from the road several miles outside of the town proper. It served what the laminated single-sheet menu called EATS along with DRINKS.

There were three booths ranged down one wall like soldiers, and a half dozen tables with folding chairs were grouped in the center of the room as if someone had shoved them there, then forgotten about it.

The bar was black with age, and the floor a beige linoleum speckled with gray. The lone waitress was young and bird-thin. Travis Tritt was singing on the juke.

Some men Callie took to be locals sat at the bar having an after-work brew. From the work boots, gimme caps and sweaty T-shirts, she pegged them as laborers. Maybe part of Dolan's construction crew.

Their heads swiveled around when Callie and Jake walked in, and she noted they weren't particularly subtle in sizing up the female.

She slid into a booth and immediately wondered why she'd come. She'd be better off flat out on the motel room bed, shooting for oblivion.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here.” She looked at Jake, really looked. But she couldn’t read him. That had been one of the problems, she thought. She’d never been quite sure what he was thinking. “What the hell is this?”

“Food and drink.” He pushed the menu across the table. “And right up your alley.”

She glanced down. If it wasn’t fried, it wasn’t EATS, she decided. “Just a beer.”

“Never known you to turn down food, especially when it’s covered with grease.” He laid a finger on the menu, inched it back as the waitress came over. “A couple of burgers, well, with fries, and two of whatever you’ve got on draft.”

Callie started to protest, then just shrugged and went back to brooding.

And that worried him. If she wasn’t up to flaying his ass for making a decision—*any* decision—for her, she was in bad shape.

She didn’t just look tired, he’d seen her look tired before. She looked worn. He wanted to take her hand, close it in his and tell her that whatever was wrong, they’d find a way to fix it.

And that was a surefire way to get his hand chopped off at the wrist.

Instead he leaned toward her. “This place remind you of anything?”

She stirred herself enough to glance around. Travis Tritt had moved on to Faith Hill. The guys at the bar were sucking down beers and shooting over belligerent stares. The air smelled like the bottom of a deep-fat fryer when the oil hadn’t been changed in recent memory.

“No.”

“Come on. That dive in Spain, when we were working the El Aculadero dig.”

“What, are you stupid? This place is nothing like that. That had some weird-ass music going, and there were black flies all over the damn place. The waiter was a three-hundred-pound guy with hair down to his butt and no front teeth.”

“Yeah, but we had a beer there. Just like this.”

She shot him a dry look. “Where didn’t we have a beer?”

“We had wine in Veneto, which is entirely different.”

That got a laugh out of her. “What, do you remember all the alcoholic beverages we’ve managed to consume?”

“You’d be surprised at what I remember.” The laugh had loosened the knot in his stomach. “I remember you toss off all the covers at night and insist on sleeping in the middle of the bed. And how a foot rub makes you purr like a kitten.”

She said nothing as their beers were served. Nothing until she’d taken the first cold gulp. “And I remember you puking up your guts after some bad clams in Mozambique.”

“You always were a romantic fool, Cal.”

“Yeah.” She lifted her glass, drank again. “Ain’t it the truth.” He was trying to cheer her up. She couldn’t figure why he’d bother. “How come you’re not bitching at me for being away from the field today?”

“I was going to get to it. I just wanted a beer first.” He grinned at her. “Want me to start bitching now, or wait until we eat?”

“I had something I had to do. It couldn’t wait. And since you’re not my boss, you’ve got no authority to bitch and moan if I have to take a day off. I’m just as committed to this project as you. More, because I was here first.”

He eased back as the waitress brought out their burgers. “Wow. I guess that told me.”

“Oh, stuff it, Graystone. I don’t have to—” She broke off as the men who’d been at the bar swaggered up to the table.

“You two with those assholes digging around by Simon’s Hole?”

Jake squeezed bright yellow mustard on his burger. “That’s right. In fact, we’re the head assholes. What can we do for you?”

“You can get the hell out, quit fucking around with a bunch of old bones and shit and keeping decent men from making a living.”

Callie took the mustard from Jake, sizing up the men as she dumped it on her burger. The one doing the talking was fat, but it was hard fat. He'd be solid as a tank. The other had that alcohol-induced mean in his eyes.

"Excuse me?" She set down the mustard, opened the ketchup. "I'm going to have to ask you to watch your language. My associate here is very sensitive."

"Well, fuck him."

"I have, actually, and it's not bad. But regardless. So," she continued in a conversational tone, "you guys work for Dolan?"

"That's right. And we don't need a buncha flatlanders coming in and telling us what to do."

"There we disagree." Jake dumped salt on his fries, passed the shaker to Callie.

The pleasant tone, the casual moves gave the impression of a man not in the least interested in a fight, or prepared for one.

Those who believed that impression, Callie knew, did so at their peril.

Jake dashed some pepper on the burger, dropped the top of the bun in place. "Since it's unlikely either of you know dick about archaeological investigation or anthropological study, or any of the associated fields such as dendrochronology or stratigraphy, we're here to take care of that for you. And happy to do it. Want another beer?" he asked Callie.

"Yeah, thanks."

"You think throwing around twenty-dollar words is gonna keep us from kicking you out of town, you better think again. Asshole."

Jake merely sighed, but Callie recognized the ice-cold gleam in his eye.

The guys still had a chance, Callie calculated, as long as Jake wanted to eat in peace more than he wanted the entertainment of a bar fight.

"I guess you figure since we're academic assholes, twenty-dollar words is all we've got to throw around." He shrugged, picked up a fry. "The fact is, my associate here

has a black belt in karate and is mean as a snake. I should know. She's my wife."

"Ex-wife," Callie corrected. "But he's right. I'm mean as a snake."

"Which one do you want?" Jake asked her.

"I want the big one." She looked up at the men with a cheerful, wide grin.

"Okay, but I want you to hold back," Jake warned her. "Last time—that big Mexican? He was in a coma for five days. We don't want that kind of trouble again."

"Hey, you're the one who broke that guy's jaw and dislocated his retina. In Oklahoma."

"I didn't think a cowboy'd go down so easy. Live and learn." Jake nudged his plate away. "You guys all right with doing this outside? I hate having to shell out for damages every time we bust ass in a bar."

They shifted their feet, bunched and released fists. Then the big one sneered. "We're telling you the way it is. We don't fight with pussies and girls."

"Suit yourself." Jake waved a hand at the waitress. "Can we get another round here?" He lifted his burger, bit in with every appearance of enjoyment as the men, muttering insults, stalked to the door. "Told you it was like that place in Spain."

"They don't mean anything." The waitress set fresh beers on the table, scooped up the empties. "Austin and Jimmy, they're just stupid is all, but they don't mean anything."

"No problem," Jake told her.

"Mostly, people are real excited about the doings out there by Simon's Hole. But there's some's got a problem with it. Dolan hired extra crew, and they got laid off when the work stopped. It can make you mean when it pinches your pocketbook. Those burgers all right for you?"

"They're great. Thanks," Callie said.

"Y'all just let me know if you need anything. And don't you worry about Austin and Jimmy. It was mostly the beer talking."

"Beer talks loud enough," Jake said when the waitress left them alone, "it can be a problem. Digger's camped

out on the site, but we may want to think about adding a little more security.”

“We need more hands as it is. I’ll talk to Leo. I was going to swing by the site after . . . I was going to swing by and see what you did today.”

“We’ve got the field plotted, and the segments are logged into the computer. We started removing the overburden.”

She winced at that. She’d wanted to be there when the team removed the topsoil. “You got the college kids doing the sieving?”

“Yeah. I sent today’s report to your computer. We can go over it all now, but you’re just going to read it anyway. Callie, tell me what’s wrong. Tell me why instead of being in the field you were in a library reading about a kidnapping that happened in 1974. The same year you were born.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about it. I came to have a beer.”

“Fine, I’ll talk about it. I come by your room last night and there are photographs on your bed. You’re upset. You say they’re not family photos, but there’s a strong resemblance. Today, you’re gone, and I find you searching through the archives of the local paper covering the kidnapping of a baby girl same age as you. What makes you think you might have been that baby?”

She didn’t speak, merely put her elbows on the table and lowered her head to her hands. She’d known he would put it together. Give the man a hatful of jumbled details and he’d make them into a cohesive picture in less time than most people could solve the daily crossword puzzle.

And she’d known she’d tell him. The minute he’d found her in the library she’d known he was the one person she would tell.

She just wasn’t ready to analyze why.

“Suzanne Cullen came to my room,” Callie began. And told him everything.

He didn’t interrupt, nor did he take his eyes off her face.

He knew the moods of it so well. He couldn’t always decipher the cause of them, but he knew the moods. She

was still dealing with shock, and along with the shock was guilt.

“So . . . there will have to be tests,” she finished. “To verify identity. But, well, science is full of suppositions. Especially our field. And given the current data and events, it’s reasonable to make the supposition that Suzanne Cullen is correct.”

“You’ll need to track down the lawyer, the doctor, anyone else involved in the adoption and placement.”

She looked at him then. This, she realized, was one solid reason she could tell him. He’d never burden her with the weight of sympathy or outrage on her behalf. He’d understand that to get through it, she’d need to pursue the practical.

“I’ve started that. My father’s tracking down the OB. I ran into a block on the lawyer, so I hired one of my own to dig there. Lana Campbell, she’s the one representing the preservation people. I met her the other day. She strikes me as smart and thorough, and like someone who doesn’t give up easily. I guess you could say I need to start removing the overburden so I can find out what’s underneath all this.”

“The lawyer had to know.”

“Yeah.” Callie’s lips tightened. “He had to know.”

“So he’s your datum point. Everything spreads out from him. I want to help you.”

“Why?”

“We’re both good at puzzles, babe. But together, we’re the best out there.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“It was always tough to slide something by you.” He pushed his plate aside, reached over and took her hand. His fingers tightened when she tried to jerk it free. “Don’t be so damn prickly. Christ, Dunbrook, I’ve had my hands on every inch of your body and you get jumpy because I’ve got your fingers.”

“I’m not jumpy, and they’re my fingers.”

“You think you stopped mattering to me because you cut me loose?”

“I didn’t cut you loose,” she said furiously. “You—”

“Let’s just save that for another day.”

“You know one of the things about you that pissed me off?”

“I’ve got a list of them on a data bank.”

“The way you interrupt me whenever you know I’m right.”

“I’ll add that one. It occurs to me that we got to be a lot of things to each other, but we never got to be friends. I’d like to take a shot at it, that’s all.”

If he’d told her he’d decided to ditch science and sell Avon products door-to-door, she’d have been no more surprised. “You want us to be friends?”

“I’m offering to be your friend, you blockhead. I want to help you find out what happened.”

“Calling me a blockhead isn’t very friendly.”

“It’s friendlier than the alternate word that came to mind.”

“Okay, points for you. There’s a lot of garbage between us, Jake.”

“Maybe we’ll sift through it one of these days. But for now we’ve got two priorities.” He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. He couldn’t help himself. “The dig, and your puzzle. We’ve got no choice but to work with each other on the first. Why not do the same on the second?”

“We’ll fight.”

“We’ll fight anyway.”

“True, very true.” That didn’t bother her nearly as much as the urge she was resisting to curl her fingers into his. “I appreciate it, Jake. I really do. Now let go of my hand. I’m starting to feel goofy.”

He released her, dug out his wallet. “We can go back to your room. I’ll give you a foot rub.”

“Those days are over, Jake.”

“Too bad. I always liked your feet.”

He paid the check, and kept his hands in his pockets as they walked outside.

She blinked, in some surprise, against the strength of the sun. It seemed they’d been inside that bar for hours.

But there was plenty of daylight left, she calculated. Enough to drive to the site and take a look, if she could drum up the energy.

She pulled out her sunglasses, then pursed her lips when Jake yanked a sheet of paper from under his windshield.

“Go back to Baltimore or you’ll pay,” Jake read. He balled up the note, tossed it into the car. “I think I’ll run out and check on Digger.”

“We’ll go out and check on Digger.”

“Fine.” He climbed in, waited for her to slide into the seat beside him. “Heard you playing for a while last night,” he commented. “I’m right next door. Walls are thin.”

“Then I’ll try to keep it down when I have Austin and Jimmy over for a party.”

“See how considerate you are now that we’re friends?”

Even as she laughed, he leaned over, pressed his lips to hers.

She had an instant of pure shock. How could all that heat still be there? How *could* it? And cutting through the shock was a quick primal urge to move in, wrap around him and burn alive.

Before she could, he was easing back, turning the key in the ignition. “Seat belt,” he said casually.

She set her teeth, more furious with herself than with him. She yanked the seat belt in place as he backed up. “Keep your hands and your mouth to yourself, Graystone, or this friendship isn’t going to last very long.”

“I still like the taste of you.” He made the turn out of the lot. “Hard to figure why after... Wait, wait, wait.” He tapped a hand on the wheel. “Speaking of taste. Suzanne Cullen. Suzanne’s Kitchen?”

“Huh?”

“I knew it was familiar. Christ, Cal. Suzanne’s Kitchen.”

“Cookies? Those amazing chocolate chip cookies?”

“Macadamia nut brownies.” He made a low sound of pleasure. “Quiet—I’m having a moment.”

“Suzanne Cullen is Suzanne’s Kitchen.”

“Great story. You know, baking in her little house in the

country. Entering her pies and cakes in county fairs. Starting a little business, then boom, a national treasure.”

“Suzanne’s Kitchen,” Callie repeated. “Son of a bitch.”

“Could explain your genetic obsession with sugar.”

“Very funny.” But the tickle at the back of her throat wasn’t humor. “I have to go see her, Jake. I have to go tell her we have to take tests. I don’t know how to handle her.”

He touched a hand to hers, but kept the contact brief. “You’ll figure it out.”

“She has a son. I guess I have to figure out how to handle him, too.”

Doug was trying to figure out how to handle himself where Lana Campbell was concerned.

She was already at the table when he got to the restaurant, and was sipping a glass of white wine. She was in a summer dress—soft, sheer, simple—instead of the slick business suits he’d seen so far.

She smiled when he sat across from her, then angled her head the way he’d seen her do when she was considering something. Or someone.

“I wasn’t sure you’d show up.”

“If I hadn’t, my grandfather would have disowned me.”

“We’re so mean, ganging up on you this way. Would you like a drink?”

“What have you got there?”

“This?” She lifted it to the light of the candle between them. “A very palatable California chardonnay, buttery, but not overbearing, with a delicate bouquet matched with a good backbone.”

Her eyes laughed as she sipped. “Pompous enough for you?”

“Just about. I’ll try it.” He let her order it, along with a bottle of sparkling water. “Okay, why are you ganging up on me?”

“Roger because he loves you, he’s proud of you and he worries about you. He had such a good life with your grand-

mother, and he can't see how you can have a good life unless you find the woman you're meant to share that life with."

"Which would be you?"

"Which would be me, at the moment," she agreed. "Because he loves me, too. And he worries about me being alone, raising a child without a father. He's an old-fashioned man, in the best possible definition of the term."

"That explains him. What about you?"

She took her time. She'd always enjoyed the art of flirtation and let her gaze skim over his face. "I thought I'd enjoy having dinner out, with an attractive man. You were elected."

"When did I get on the ballot?" he asked, and made her laugh.

"I'll be frank with you, Doug. I haven't dated very much since my husband died. But I enjoy people, company, conversation. I seriously doubt Roger needs to worry about either of us, but that doesn't mean we can't make him happy by having a meal together and enjoying the company and conversation."

She opened her menu. "And the food here is wonderful."

The waiter brought his drink and performed a spirited monologue of the evening's specials before sliding away to give them time to decide.

"How did he die?"

She paused only a moment, but it was just long enough for Doug to see the grief come and go.

"He was killed. Shot in a convenience-store robbery. He'd gone out late because Ty was fussy, and nobody was getting any sleep."

It still hurt; she knew it always would. But she no longer feared remembering would break her. "I wanted some ice cream. Steve ran down to the 7-Eleven to buy some for me. They came in just as he was walking to the counter to pay."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. It was senseless. There was no money to speak of, and neither Steve nor the clerk did anything to resist or incite. And it was very horrible. One moment my life was one thing, and in the next instant it was another."

“Yeah, I know how that goes.”

“Do you?” Before he could respond, she reached across the table, touched his hand. “I’m sorry. I forgot. Your sister. I suppose that gives us something traumatic in common. Let’s hope we have some other, more cheerful mutual connections. I like books. I’m afraid I treat them carelessly, in a way that would make bibliophiles like you and Roger weep.”

Tougher than she looked, he realized. Tough enough to put the pieces back together after being shattered. Respecting that, he put a little more effort into holding up his end of the evening.

“You dog-ear pages?”

“Please, even I wouldn’t go that far. But I break spines. I spill coffee on pages. And once I dropped an Elizabeth Berg novel in the bathtub. I think it was a first edition.”

“Obviously, this relationship is doomed. So why don’t we order?”

“So,” she began after they had, “do you actually read, or do you just buy and sell?”

“They’re not stocks, they’re books. It’d be pointless to be in the business of books if I didn’t value them for what they are.”

“I imagine there are a number of dealers who don’t. I know Roger loves to read. But I happened to be in the shop when he opened a shipment from you and found the first-edition copy of *Moby-Dick*. He tenderly stroked that book like it was a lover. He wouldn’t have curled up in his easy chair to read it if you’d held a gun to his head.”

“That’s what a nice paperback reprint is for.”

She cocked her head, and he caught the wink of small, colored stones at her ears. “Is it the discovery? The treasure hunt?”

“Partly.”

She waited a beat. “Well, you certainly are a blabbermouth. That’s enough about you. Aren’t you going to ask me why I became a lawyer?”

“You know what the problem is when you ask most people a question?”

She smiled over the rim of her wineglass. "They answer it."

"There you go. But since we're here, I'll ask. Why'd you become a lawyer?"

"I like to argue." She picked up her fork as their first course was served.

"That's it? You like to argue. You're not going to expand on that?"

"Mmm. Not at the moment. And the next time you ask me a question, I'll figure it's because you really want to know. What do you like to do, besides read and hunt books?"

"That takes up most of my time."

If talking with him was going to be like pulling teeth, she thought, she'd just get out the pliers. "You must enjoy the travel."

"It has its moments."

"Such as?"

He looked over at her, his face mirroring such obvious frustration, she laughed. "I'm relentless. You might as well give up and tell me about yourself. Let's see... Do you play a musical instrument? Are you interested in sports? Do you believe Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone gunman?"

"No. Yes. I have no definitive opinion."

"Caught you." She gestured with her fork. "You smiled."

"I did not."

"Oh, yes you did. And there, you're doing it again. A very nice smile, too. Does it hurt?"

"Only a little. I'm out of practice."

She picked up her wine and chuckled. "I bet we can fix that."

He enjoyed himself more than he'd expected. Of course, since he'd expected to get through the meal in order to shake his grandfather off his back, that wasn't saying much.

But if he was honest, he'd enjoyed her company. She was... intriguing, he supposed, as they walked out of the

restaurant. She was a bright, interesting woman who'd been strong enough to face up to a terrible personal blow and carve out a fulfilling life.

He had to admire that, as he hadn't done nearly so well in that area himself.

Added to that, it was certainly no hardship to look at her. God knew looking at her, listening to her, being drawn out by her had taken his mind off his family situation for a few hours.

"I had a good time." When they reached her car, she dug her keys out of a purse the size of a postage stamp. "I'd like to do it again." She tossed her hair back, aimed those blue eyes at him. "Next time, you ask," she said, then rose on her toes and kissed him.

He hadn't been expecting that, either. A peck on the cheek wouldn't have surprised him. Even a quick brush of lips would have seemed in keeping with her personality.

But this was a warm, wet invitation. A seductive intimacy that could have a man sliding off an edge he'd had no idea he'd been poised on.

Her fingers skimmed into his hair, her tongue danced lightly over his, and her body fit—curve to angle.

He tasted the wine they'd shared, and the chocolate she'd sampled for dessert. The light tones of the scent she wore hazed over his mind. He heard the crunch of wheels on gravel as someone drove in or out of the lot. And her soft, soft sigh.

Then she eased back, and left his head spinning.

"Good night, Doug."

She slid into the car and sent him one long, sexy look through the closed window before she backed out and drove away.

It took him nearly a full minute to pull two coherent thoughts together. "Jesus," he muttered and stalked to his car. "Jesus, Grandpa, what have you got me into?"

Seven



Callie elected to work the site both horizontally and vertically. This would give the team the ability to discover and study the periods of inhabitation, and the connections between whatever artifacts and ecofacts they uncovered, while simultaneously slicing through time to note the changes from one period to another in a different segment of the dig.

She needed the horizontal method if she was going to verify and prove that the site had once been a Neolithic village.

She could admit, to herself, that she needed Jake for that, too. An anthropologist of his knowledge and skill could identify and analyze those artifacts and ecofacts from the cultural viewpoint. Best of all, he could and would build theories and expand the box with those finds, and leave her more time with the bones.

Digger was already working at his square, his hands as delicate as a surgeon's as they finessed the soil with dental probes and fine brushes. He wore headphones over his signature bandanna, and Callie knew the music would be blasting through them. Despite it, his concentration on the work would be absolute.

Rosie was one square over, her pretty toffee-colored skin sheened with sweat. Her hair was a tight black buzz over her skull.

The two college students carted buckets of spoil over to the sieving area. Leo and Jake manned the cameras for the moment. Callie chose the far end of the first grid, nearest the pond.

They were going to need a project photographer, she thought. A finds assistant. More diggers. More specialists.

It was early days yet, but in her mind it was never too early to forge a strong team.

There was too much going on in her mind. She needed to concentrate, and the best way she knew how was to separate herself as much as possible from the group. To think only about the work, one specific square.

As she worked she moved the dirt from her square into a pan for sieving. Now and again she stopped to document a new layer by camera and on her record sheet.

As mosquitoes whined and gnats swarmed she focused on what she could do, inch by methodical inch.

When she uncovered bone, she continued to record, to brush the dirt away, to pour it into the pail. Sweat dripped down her face, down her back. At one point she paused only to strip off her camp shirt and continue working in the damp tank beneath it.

Then she sat back on her heels, lifted her head and looked over the site.

As if she'd spoken, Jake stopped his own work and turned toward her. Though neither spoke, he began to cross the field. Then he stopped, looked down, squatted beside her.

Deep in the boggy soil the bones lay, almost perfectly articulated from sternum to skull. She would continue to excavate the rest.

The remains told a story without words. The larger skeleton with the smaller turned close to its side, tucked there in the crook of the elbow.

"They buried them together," Callie said at length. "From the size of the remains, the infant died in childbirth

or shortly after. The mother, most likely the same. The lab should be able to confirm that. They buried them together,” she said again. “That’s more intimate than tribal. That’s family.”

“Leo needs to see this. We’ll need to excavate the rest of these remains. And the rest of this segment. If they had the culture to inter this intimately, these two aren’t alone here.”

“No.” It’s what she’d felt all along. “They’re not alone here. This is a cemetery.”

Had they loved each other? she wondered. Did the bond forge that quickly—mother to child, child to mother? Had Suzanne held her like this, moments after she’d taken her first breath? Close, safe, even as the birth pangs faded?

What became imprinted in the womb, and in those first moments of life? Were they forever etched?

And yet wasn’t it the same, still the same for her own mother? The same bonding when Vivian Dunbrook had reached out to take, to hold close and safe, the infant daughter she’d longed for?

What made a daughter if it wasn’t love? And here was proof that the love could last thousands of years.

Why should it make her so horribly sad?

“We’ll need a Native American consult before we disinter.” Out of habit, Jake laid a hand on her shoulder as they knelt over the grave together. “I’ll make the calls.”

She shook herself back. “Take care of it. But these need to come up. Don’t start,” she said before he could speak. “Ritual and sensibilities aside, I’ve exposed these to the air. They need to be treated and preserved or they’ll dry out and fall apart.”

Jake glanced toward the sky as thunder rumbled. “Nothing’s going to dry out today. That storm’s going to hit.” Ignoring her resistance, he pulled her to her feet. “Let’s get this documented before it does.”

He rubbed a thumb over the fresh nick on the back of her hand. “Don’t be sad.”

Deliberately she turned away from him. “It’s a key find.”

“And hits a little close to home right now.”

“That’s not the issue.” She couldn’t let it be. Reaching down, she picked up her camera, began to document.

She’d already stepped away from him, and there was no sound but the click of the shutter. He ordered himself to be patient. “I’ll make the calls.”

“I’m not going to have her and her child crumble while you powwow. Make it fast, Graystone,” she ordered, and went to get Leo.

Digger’s find of an antler horn and a hollowed bone that might have been used as a kind of whistle were overshadowed by the skeletons. But with them, and the flakes, the broken spear points Rosie unearthed, Callie began to put together a picture of the settlement in her mind.

The storm broke, as Jake had predicted. It gave her the chance to hole up in her motel room and sketch her vision of the settlement. The knapping area, the huts, the graveyard. If she was right, she expected they’d find the kitchen midden somewhere between areas D-25 and E-12.

She needed more hands, and could only hope today’s find would shake some loose.

When the phone rang, she answered it absently. The minute she heard her father’s voice her focus shattered.

“I wasn’t sure I’d catch you this time of day, but I thought I’d try there before I tried your cell phone.”

“We got hit by a storm,” she told him. “I’m doing paperwork.”

“I wanted you to know I tracked down Henry Simpson. He’s retired now, relocated in Virginia. I...I spoke with him briefly. Honey, I didn’t know how much you wanted me to tell him. I said you were interested in finding out a bit more about your birth parents. I hope that was all right.”

“It seems the simplest way.”

“He couldn’t tell me much. He thought Marcus Carlyle had relocated. He didn’t seem to know where or when, but he, ah, told me he’d see if he could find out.”

“I appreciate it. I know this isn’t easy for you, or Mom. Ah, if I decide to talk to Dr. Simpson myself, I’ll probably ask you to talk to him again, fill him in more specifically.”

“Whatever you want. Callie, this woman, Suzanne Cullen . . . what do you plan to tell her?”

“I don’t know. I can’t leave things the way they are, Dad.” She thought of the bones again. Mother and child. “I’d never be able to live with it.”

There was a long pause, a short sigh. “No, I don’t suppose you could. We’ll be here if you need . . . anything.”

“You’ve always been there.”

She couldn’t go back to work now, she thought after she hung up. Nor could she stand pacing the box of a room. She looked at her cello. But there were times, she thought, when music didn’t soothe the savage beast.

The only way to move forward was to do what came next.

She called Suzanne.

The directions were detailed and exact. That told Callie that Suzanne could be, when necessary, controlled and organized. Figured, she thought as she drove up the long sweep of gravel that cut through the trees. You couldn’t start your own national business from scratch if you were hyper and scattered as she’d seemed on her visit to Callie’s motel room.

She also, obviously, liked her privacy, Callie decided. Kept her roots here in the area, but dug them into secluded ground.

The house itself showed her good taste, financial security and an appreciation for space. It was honey wood, contemporary lines, with two long decks and plenty of glass. Plenty of flora, too, Callie noted, and all of it lush and tended, with what looked to be stepping-stones or stone paths winding around through pristine oak chips or plots of tidy grass.

It was, to Callie’s mind, a fair way to analyze a person—this study of their choice of habitat. She imagined

Jake would agree. How and where an individual elected to live spoke to that individual's personality, background and inner culture.

As she pulled up behind a late-model SUV, Callie tried to remember what Suzanne had been wearing when she'd come to the motel. Choices of apparel, body ornamentation, style were other signals of type and category.

But the visit was blurred in her mind.

Though the lightning had passed on, the rain was still beating the ground. Callie slid out of the car and arrived on the front porch, dripping.

The door opened immediately.

She was wearing very slim black pants with a tailored blouse in aqua. Her makeup looked fresh, and her hair carefully styled. Her feet were bare.

At her side was a big black Lab, and its tail was beating the wall like a joyful metronome.

"Please . . . come in out of the rain. Sadie's harmless, but I can put her away if you want."

"No. She's okay." Callie held out the back of her hand, let the dog sniff, then lick before she ruffled the fur between Sadie's ears. "Great dog."

"She's three, and a bit rambunctious. Terrific company, though. I like living out here, but I feel more secure having Sadie in the house or around the property. Of course, she's so friendly, she'd just lick a burglar to death if . . . I'm sorry. I'm babbling."

"It's okay." Callie stood awkwardly, one hand still stroking the dog's head while Suzanne stared at her. "We need to talk."

"Yes. Of course. I made coffee." Suzanne gestured toward the living room. "I'm so glad you called. I didn't know, exactly, what to do next." She stopped by the sofa, turned. "I still don't."

"My parents." Callie needed to get that out first, to establish the pattern, and her allegiance. And still she felt miserably disloyal as she sat down in Suzanne's attractive living room with the big, friendly dog flopping adoringly at her feet.

“You spoke with them.”

“Yes, I did. I was adopted in December of 1974. It was a private adoption. My parents are very decent, law-abiding, loving people, Mrs. Cullen—”

“Please.” She wouldn’t let her hands shake. Determined, she picked up the coffeepot, poured without spilling a drop. “Don’t call me that. Could you, would you call me Suzanne at least?”

For now, she thought. Just for now.

“It was a private adoption,” Callie continued. “They hired a lawyer on the advice of my mother’s obstetrician. He placed a baby girl with them very quickly and for a very substantial fee. He gave them some basic information about the birth mother.”

“You told me you weren’t adopted,” Suzanne interrupted. “You didn’t know you were.”

“They had reasons for not telling me. Reasons that have nothing to do with anyone but themselves. Whatever situation we’re in, you have to understand, up front, that they did nothing wrong.”

But her hands did shake, a little. “You love them very much.”

“I do. You have to understand that, too. If I was the child stolen from you—”

“You know you are.” *Jessica. My Jessie.* Everything inside her wept.

“I can theorize, but I can’t know. There are tests we can take to determine the biology.”

Suzanne breathed in deep. Her skin felt so hot, as if it might melt off her bones. “You’re willing to take them?”

“We need to know. You deserve to know. I’ll do what I can to find the answers. I don’t know if I can give you more than that. I’m sorry.” Callie’s heart began to trip as tears swam into Suzanne’s eyes. “This is difficult for everyone. But even if I was that child, that’s not who I am now.”

“I’ll take the tests.” Tears were in her voice, too, thickening it. Slurring the words. “And Jay, your...my ex-husband. I’ll contact him. He’ll take them. How long before we’ll know? Conclusively.”

“My father’s a doctor. He’ll expedite the tests.”

“How can I know he won’t skew the results?”

The first flicker of temper crossed Callie’s face. “Because he is who he is. You’ll have to trust me on this or there’s no point in going any further. I have the information here.” She took a piece of paper out of her bag, set it on the table beside the tray of coffee and cookies. “This explains what you need to do, where to send the blood samples. If you have any questions on the procedure, your own doctor should be able to give you some answers.”

“I can’t think. I can’t seem to think.” She battled with the tears because they blurred her vision. This was her child. She had to see her child. “My life changed in that moment I turned my back on you, while you slept in your stroller. A minute,” Suzanne said as calmly as she could. “Maybe two. No longer than that. And my life changed. So did yours. I want a chance to get some of that back, to know who you are, to share some part of those lost years with you.”

“All I can give you right now are answers. How, why, hopefully who. None of that can make up for what happened to you. None of that will turn things back and make me your daughter again.”

This was *wrong*, Suzanne thought. Desperately, bitterly. To find her child only to have that child speak in that cool, distant voice. To have her own daughter study her as if they were strangers.

“If you feel that way, why did you come? You could have ignored me, or insisted there wasn’t an adoption.”

“I wasn’t raised to lie, or to ignore someone’s pain. What happened wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t mine, it wasn’t my parents’. But someone’s to blame. Someone changed the pattern, and most likely changed it for profit. I want the answers, too.”

“You’re blunt, and you’re honest. I’ve often imagined what it would be like to see you again, to talk to you. None of my imaginings were quite like this.”

“You’re looking for, or hoping for a kind of reunion I can’t give you, a kind of bond I don’t feel.”

Every healing scar on her heart opened and bled fresh. “What do you feel?”

“Sorry. Mrs. Cullen—Suzanne,” she corrected, and wished she could reach out. Wished she could cut through her own barriers and reach. “I feel sorry for you, and your family. And for mine. And I feel a little shaky about the whole thing. Part of me wishes you’d never seen me on the news, because the minute you did, you changed my life again. And I don’t know where it’s going now.”

“I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

“I wish I could say the same, but I’m afraid almost anything I do is going to hurt you.”

“Maybe you could tell me something about yourself. Something you’ve done or wanted to do. Just... something.”

“I found bones today.” When Suzanne blinked, Callie worked up a smile, picked up a cookie. “The dig,” she continued. “I believe what we have was a settlement. A Neolithic settlement by the creek bed, near the mountains where a tribe built homes, raised children, hunted, began to farm. Today, I found evidence I think is going to begin to verify that theory. If it’s as big a settlement as I hope, we may be digging for several seasons.”

“Oh. Well. Ronald Dolan will have a fit about that.”

“Probably. But it’s not going to do him any good. We’re going to have considerable attention, from the media, from the scientific community. Dolan’s going to have to consider his development a loss.”

“If I came out to the site one day, would you show me what it is you do?”

“Sure. Did you make these?” She held up the half-eaten cookie. “Yourself?”

“Yes. Do you like them? I’ll give you a box to take with you. I—”

“They’re great.” It was a kind of reaching out, Callie thought. The best she could do for now. “My... associate,” she finished, decided it was the easiest way to describe Jake. “He recognized your name. Suzanne’s Kitchen? I’ve been snarfing down your baked goods for years.”

“Really?” Tears wanted to swim again, but she willed them back. Some of her pleasure shone in her eyes instead. “I like knowing that. You’re very kind.”

“No, I’m not. I’m single-minded, easily irritated, selfish, driven and very rarely kind. I just don’t think about it.”

“You’ve been very kind to me, and part of you must . . . I hadn’t realized until now. Part of you must resent me.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“And you’re careful with your feelings.” At Callie’s frown, Suzanne fussed with the cookie arrangement. “I mean, it seems to me you don’t give your feelings easily. Douglas is like that. Even when he was a little boy, he was careful. He thought so much, if you know what I mean. You could almost see him wondering, ‘Now what exactly do you mean by that?’”

She laughed, picked up a cookie, set it down again. “There’s so much I want to tell you. So much I . . . I have something I’d like to give you.”

“Suzanne—”

“It’s not a gift, really.” She rose, walked to a side table and picked up a box. “They’re letters. I wrote you a letter every year on your birthday. It helped me get through.”

“We don’t know yet for certain if you wrote them to me.”

“We both know.” She sat again, set the box in Callie’s lap. “It would mean a lot to me if you’d take them. You don’t have to read them, but I think you will. You’re curious about things or you wouldn’t do what you do. So you’re bound to wonder about, well, about this.”

“Okay. Look, I’ve got work,” Callie began, and rose.

“There’s so much I still want to—” Even as Suzanne sprang to her feet, Sadie let out a happy bark and scrambled toward the door.

The door opened and Doug stepped in. “Cut it out.” With an exasperated laugh, he pushed the seventy pounds of cheerful canine off as Sadie leaped on him. “Didn’t we go over this the last time? How about showing a little pride and . . .”

He trailed off as he glanced toward the living room.

A thousand things raced through his mind, his heart, ran over his face before it went blank.

“Doug.” Suzanne’s hand fumbled to her throat, twisted the top button of her blouse. “I didn’t know you were coming by. This is . . . Oh God.”

“Callie.” Though she wanted nothing now but to escape the sudden electric tension in the room, she shifted the box under her arm. “Callie Dunbrook.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” He shifted his gaze to his mother. “I should’ve called.”

“No. Don’t be silly, Doug.”

“I was just leaving. I’ll . . . be in touch,” Callie said to Suzanne.

“I’ll show you out.”

“That’s okay.” Callie kept her eyes on Doug’s face as she started to the door. And though her heart was drumming she kept herself composed as she brushed by him, opened the door.

She made the sprint to her car, wrenched open the door and slid the box over the seat.

“Why did you come here?”

She shoved the wet hair out of her eyes and turned to see Doug standing beside her in the rain. That same electric tension snapped around him, nearly visible. She expected to see the rain sizzle as it hit his skin.

“It wasn’t to piss you off. I don’t even know you.”

“My mother’s in a difficult frame of mind right now. She doesn’t need you adding to it by dropping by for coffee and cookies.”

“Okay, look. If I want to drop by for coffee and cookies, it’s a free world. As it happens, that’s not why I came. I don’t want to upset your mother. I don’t want to mess up your life. But we all need some answers.”

“What’s the point?”

“The answers are the point.”

“Every couple of years since Suzanne’s Kitchen went national, someone’s come along telling her she’s her long-lost daughter. Your line of work, that runs on grants and endowments, right?”

She lifted her chin, stepped forward until her boots

bumped his shoes, and spoke directly into his face. “Fuck you.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt her. Not ever again.”

“And that makes you the good son?”

“It sure as hell doesn’t make me your brother.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Let me remind you, *Doug*, she came to me. Out of the goddamn blue, and now my life’s turned upside down. I left my parents yesterday in a miserable emotional state. I’ve got to go have blood drawn and tests done and deal with something that was none of my doing. And I’m not too fucking happy about it, so back off.”

“She doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“That’s not my fault either.” But the guilt had weight. “Or hers. If you’re worried about your inheritance, relax. I don’t want her money. Now, I’m in a pretty foul mood from watching her try not to fall apart for the last twenty minutes. If you’d like me to take that out on you, I’d be glad to. Otherwise, I’ve got better things to do than stand in the rain arguing with you.”

She turned on her heel, popped up into the Rover, slammed the door.

If that was what it was like having a brother, she thought as she barely resisted running over his feet, she’d been damn lucky for the first twenty-eight years of her life.

By the time she got back to the motel, her temper had reached its peak. Even as she opened the door both her cell phone and the room phone rang.

She yanked her cell phone out of her bag. “Dunbrook, hold on.” Snatched up the room phone. “Dunbrook, what?”

“Well, don’t bite my head off,” Lana told her. “I just called to give you a quick update. But if you’re going to snarl at me, I’ll just up my hourly rate.”

“Sorry. What have you got?”

“I’d prefer talking to you in person. Can you come in?”

“I just got back to the room. I’m a little ragged out.”

“I’ll come there. Give me a half hour.”

“Can you just—”

“No. Half hour,” she said and disconnected.

“Shit.” Callie slammed down the phone and was about to pick up her cell again when someone knocked at the door. “Great, just great.” She yanked open the door and glared at Jake. “Doesn’t anyone have something better to do than bug me?”

She spun away from him, put the phone to her ear. “Yes, what?”

“Just wondered where you were.” Jake’s voice came in stereo, through her ear and at her back. She turned around to see him leaning on the doorjamb with his own cell phone at his ear, rain drumming at his back. “I was just in the restaurant, thought I’d pass on some news. You didn’t answer the phone in here, so I tried your cell.”

“Why the hell are you still talking to me on the phone when you’re standing right there?”

“Why are you?”

She cast a long-suffering look at the ceiling, tossed her phone on the bed. “What news?”

He stepped in, closed the door. And when he just kept walking toward her, she held up a hand like a traffic cop at an intersection. She knew that gleam in his eyes. “Uh-uh.”

“You’re all wet. You know how crazy it makes me when you’re all wet.”

“You’re going to feel really crazy after I bean you with this lamp. Step back, Graystone. I’m not in the mood for games.”

“You look like you could use a good game.”

“That’s a stupid euphemism, and why do men always figure a woman’s in a bad mood because she needs sex?”

“Hope springs eternal?” he suggested and was pleased to see humor light her eyes, however briefly.

“What do you want, other than sex?”

“Everything else comes in a poor second, but—” He broke off, flopped down on her bed, crossed his feet at the ankles. “I’ve just dipped into the local gossip pool. Frieda, my waitress, tells me Dolan’s already heard about today’s find. He went ballistic—a word she passed on from her

nephew who happens to work for Dolan and was there when he got the news.”

It was interesting to hear about a drama separate from her own, but she shrugged for form. “So what?”

“So he’s ranting about taking us to court. Claiming we’re making it all up—that we’re in league with the preservation people and this whole thing is some ploy to screw his development. You got any beer in here?”

“No, I don’t have any beer in here. He can rant and rave all he wants. The bones are there.”

“Another rumor going around—”

“You’re just full of them, aren’t you?”

“People are saying the site’s cursed. You know, the graves of the ancients disturbed by mad scientists.”

Amused now, she picked up a Bic, touched the flame to the wick of her travel candle. “Not the whole mummy deal again?”

“Just another variation. We’re releasing ancient forces and powers beyond our ken and blah blah.” He tracked her with his eyes as she headed into the bathroom for a towel, rubbed it over her hair as she moved restlessly around the room. “This one, according to Frieda, has some legs. You know how people lap that shit up.”

“So we have a cursed site, a pissed-off developer and need to have the Native American consult supervise our work.”

She pulled a dry shirt out of the dresser and, to his deep disappointment, walked back into the bathroom to strip off the damp one, pull on the fresh. “We’re still short-handed, and the field’s going to be a mud pit tomorrow thanks to this rain.”

He angled his head to see if he could catch a glimpse of her half naked in the mirror. A man was entitled to small pleasures. “That about covers it.”

She came back in, dug out a bottle of water. Paced.

No one, Jake thought, could ever accuse Callie Dunbrook of being a restful woman.

“Pretty good deal, all in all,” she decided and grinned. “I love this job.”

“Where’d you take off to?”

The grin died instantly. “Personal business.”

He tapped the oversized shoe box at the foot of the bed with his toe. “Buying footwear? You gone female on me, Dunbrook?”

“I didn’t go shopping.” She grabbed the box, then on a sigh set it down on the dresser. “Letters. Suzanne Cullen wrote them to her daughter every year on her birthday. Jesus, Jake. Jesus, if you could’ve seen her face when I went to see her, to talk to her. All that *need*, and I don’t know what to do with it.”

“I’d’ve gone with you.”

She only shook her head. “Hard enough without adding someone else to the mix. Which happened anyway just as I was leaving. Her son came in, and he is not happy about all this. Blasted me, like I’d just pushed myself off in that damn stroller all those years ago to screw up his life. We stood outside in the rain snarling at each other like a couple of morons. He actually accused me of being after her money.”

“How long will he be hospitalized?”

The comment made her feel marginally better. She lifted her head, and her eyes met his in the mirror. “You’ve got sibs, right? One of each. Do you fight over your parents like dogs over a bone?”

“We just fight,” he said. “It’s the nature of the relationship. Rivalry, competition, petty grievances. It’s a tribal thing—just as the unity is against outsiders. I can kick my brother’s ass, but anybody else tries to, I kick theirs and twice as hard. And if anything happened to my kid sister, I guess I’d go crazy.”

“I was his kid sister for three months. What kind of bond is that?”

“Visceral, Cal. Instinctive. It’s blood and bone. Added to that, he’s the boy child, the older, and it was, most likely, verbalized that it was his job to look out for you.”

He motioned to her for the water. “He would have known that, again instinctively, perhaps resented it, perhaps embraced it, but the verbalization from other relatives

would have confirmed his instincts. You were the defenseless, the weak, and he was to protect.” He paused, took a swig, handed the bottle back to her. “He failed. Now he’s a man, and as the only son, I’d imagine he’s transferred those duties to his mother. You’re both outsider and lost child. He’s in a hell of a primal fix.”

“Sounds like you’re taking up for him.”

“Merely outlining the basic theories. Now if you were to come over here, crawl all over me and ask me to go beat him up for you, I might consider it.”

The knock on the door had her jerking her thumb toward it. “Out.”

But when she went to answer, Jake simply linked his fingers behind his head and settled in.

Eight

Lana shook out an umbrella as she nipped inside the motel room. It looked to Callie as if she hadn't gotten a single drop on her. There was something strange about a woman who didn't get wet in a rainstorm.

"Miserable out there," Lana began. "You can barely . . . Oh." She angled her head when she spotted Jake stretched out on the bed. "Sorry. I didn't realize you had company."

"He's not company, he's an annoyance working his way up to millstone. Jacob Graystone, Lana Campbell."

"Yes, we met the other day when I dropped by the dig. Nice to see you again, Dr. Graystone."

"Jake," he corrected. "How's it going?"

"Fine, thanks." Millstone or Graystone, he looked very much at home. "Listen, Callie, if this is a bad time we can set up an appointment for tomorrow."

"This is as good a time as any. Except it's a little crowded in here," she added with a telling look at Jake.

"Plenty of room." He patted the bed beside him.

"Actually, what I have to discuss with Callie comes under the area of privilege."

"It's okay," he told her. "We're married."

“Divorced.” Callie slapped at his foot. “If you found something out, you can talk in front of the moron. He knows the setup.”

“Which means, at this point, he knows more than I do. Well.” Lana glanced around, decided to risk the narrow chair beside the door. “I got some information on Marcus Carlyle. He did indeed practice law in Boston during the time period you gave me. Prior to that he practiced first in Chicago, fourteen years, then in Houston for thirteen. Subsequently to Boston, where he remained about ten years, he relocated to Seattle, where he practiced another seven years.”

“Guy gets around,” Jake commented.

“Yes. He closed his practice in 1986. That’s where I’ve lost him for now. I can keep looking, or I can hire an investigator who’s free, as I’m not, to travel to Seattle, to Boston, to Chicago, to Houston and gather more information at the source. It’ll cost you considerably more. Before you decide,” she continued before Callie could speak, “you need to know what else I found out.”

“You work this fast, you’re not going to earn that five-hundred-dollar retainer.”

“Oh, I think I will.” Lana opened her briefcase, took out Callie’s adoption papers. “I made a copy of this for my files. I also did a standard check. These papers were never filed.”

“What do you mean they weren’t filed?”

“I mean there was no adoption. No legal proceeding through any court in Boston, or Massachusetts for that matter. There’s no record, anywhere, that Elliot and Vivian Dunbrook adopted a child on this date, any date prior or any date subsequent to the one on these papers.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that Marcus Carlyle did not file the petition with the court. The case number listed on the petition, and the final decree, is bogus. It doesn’t exist. The judge’s signature on the decree and the court seal are most likely bogus as well. As this judge died in 1986, I can’t absolutely verify that end of it. But I can follow the steps. What you

have there, Callie, are papers generated through Carlyle's law office that never went any further than that office. The adoption didn't take place."

All she could do was stare at the papers, at her parents' names. "This doesn't make any sense."

"I might make more sense of it if you told me why you hired me to find this lawyer."

Jake got up, took Callie by the shoulders and moved her to the bed. "Sit down, babe."

He crouched down, rubbing his hands over her thighs. "You want her to know?"

She managed a nod.

He had a way, Callie thought, of lining up the facts, laying them out cleanly, concisely. His mind worked that way—clean and concise—so he could cut through extraneous details to the core of the matter. It was almost like listening to a synopsis of an event that had nothing to do with her.

Which, she supposed, was precisely his intention.

As he spoke, Callie rose, walked into the bathroom and got aspirin out of her travel kit. She downed three, then simply stood at the sink studying her own face in the mirror.

Were you ever what you thought you were? she wondered. Ever really who you thought you were? Whatever, whoever that was, legal papers couldn't change it.

Nothing and nobody could screw you over but yourself. As long as she held on to that, she'd be all right. She'd get through.

When she came back in, Lana was busily scribbling notes on one of her legal pads.

Lana glanced up. "Callie, I have to ask you one vital question, and I need you to set your emotions aside before you answer. Is it possible Elliot and Vivian Dunbrook were involved, in any way, with the kidnapping?"

"My mother feels guilty if she has a book overdue at the library." God, she was tired, Callie thought. If Jake patted the bed now, she'd probably fall on it face first. "My father's love for her made him agree to keep my adoption between them. His integrity had him keeping the docu-

mentation of it safe. They had nothing to do with it. Couldn't have. And setting that aside, I saw their faces when I told them about Suzanne Cullen. They're as much victims as she is."

As you are, Lana thought, but nodded. The Cullen baby, she thought again. Douglas Cullen's sister. Roger's granddaughter. How many lives were going to be turned around yet again?

"You don't know them," Callie continued. "So you're not convinced. You can check the information Jake just gave you. You can check them out if you feel obliged. But I don't want you spending time looking at them when you could spend it finding this son of a bitch."

She tossed the papers on the bed. "He not only stole babies, he sold them. No way, no way in hell I was the only one. He has a system, and he preyed on desperate, childless couples for profit."

"I agree with you, but we'll have to substantiate that."

"Hire the investigator."

"It's going to add considerable expense."

"Just get it started. I'll tell you when I have to pull the plug."

"All right. I'll take care of it tonight. I know someone who did quite a bit of work for the firm my husband was with in Baltimore. If he's unavailable, he'll give me a recommendation. Callie, do the Cullens know?"

"I went to see Suzanne today. We're arranging for tests to confirm."

Lana made another note on her pad, then laid her pen across it. "I should tell you. I have a personal relationship with Roger Grogan. Ah, Suzanne Cullen's father," she explained when Callie's face went blank. "We're friends, good friends. And, as it happens, I had a date with Douglas Cullen last night."

"I thought you were married."

"I was. My husband was killed almost four years ago. I'm interested in Doug on a personal level. If that's a problem for you, we'll need to sort it out before we go any further."

“Jesus.” Callie rubbed her hands over her face. “Small towns. I don’t know what difference it makes, as long as you remember who you’re representing.”

“I know who I’m representing. I can’t begin to understand what this is like for you, or what it’s like for any of the parties involved. But I’m your lawyer.”

“Your boyfriend thinks I’m after his mother’s money.”

“One date doesn’t make him my boyfriend,” Lana said mildly. “And I imagine there’s going to be a certain amount of friction until this is cleared up. He doesn’t strike me as a simple, mild-mannered sort of man.”

“He struck me as a putz.”

Lana smiled as she rose. “Yes, he does give that first impression. I’m going to do some more digging and get the investigator started. I’ll need you to stop by the office sometime tomorrow. Hopefully, I can give you an update, and you can give me a bigger check.”

She took Callie’s hand, gave it a bolstering squeeze. “I won’t tell you not to worry; I certainly would. But I will tell you everything that can be done will be. I’m as good at my job as you are at yours.”

“Then we should wrap this up pretty quick. I’m really good at my job.”

“Come by tomorrow,” she said as she picked up her umbrella. “Good-bye, Jake.”

“Lana.” Because she seemed the type for it, he moved to the door to open it for her.

When he closed it, he hesitated. He wasn’t quite sure what to do about, or for, Callie. She’d put on a good front with Lana, but he could see under it to where she was shell-shocked and unsure. And unhappy.

He’d seen that combination before. Only he’d been the one making her unhappy.

“Let’s get a pizza,” he decided.

She stood where she was, looking kind of dazed. “What?”

“Let’s get a pizza, see if we can get some work done.”

“I don’t . . . You were just in the restaurant.”

“I just had coffee. Okay, pie, too, but that doesn’t count,

as it was mostly a ploy to get gossip out of Frieda. Good pie though. Peach.”

“Just go away.”

“If I go away, you’ll wallow. No point in that. You can’t do anything about any of this until you have more data. Gotta be a pizza parlor in town.”

“Modesto’s, corner of Main and Mountain Laurel.”

He picked up the phone. “Knew you’d already have the priorities in line. I’m getting mushrooms.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Half. I’m entitled to mushrooms on half.”

“You get fungi anywhere near my half, you have to pay for the whole shot.”

“I paid last time.”

“Then hold the damn mushrooms. The number’s right there on the pad by the phone.”

“So it is. Pizza, liquor store, post office.” He started to dial. “You never change.”

He ordered the pizza, remembering her fondness for pepperoni and black olives, added mushrooms to his half. “Thirty minutes,” he said when he hung up. “You know, this place isn’t going to cut it for the long haul. We’re going to have to see about renting a house.”

“It’s almost August. We don’t have that much time left in this season.”

“Time enough. We should be able to score something we can rent by the month.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to tell my parents.” She blurted it out, then just lifted her hands, let them fall. “What can I tell them?”

“Nothing.” He walked to her now. “No point in telling them anything else until you have more facts. You know how to work an excavation, Callie. Layer by layer, point by point. You start jumping into theories too quick, you miss details.”

“I can’t think straight.”

“You will.” He waited a moment, then tapped his knuckles on her cheek. “Why don’t you try holding on to me for a minute. You never tried that one before.”

“I don’t—” But he slid his arms around her, pulled her

in. After a moment's resistance she laid her head on his shoulder, breathed deep.

The spot just under his heart fluttered. Settled. "That's the way."

"I don't know why I'm not mad. I can't seem to find my mad."

"Oh, you will."

"Soon. I really hope I find it soon." She closed her eyes. He was right, she supposed, she hadn't tried this one before. It wasn't so bad. "Is this another friendship deal?"

"Yeah. Well, that and the possibility you'll get hot and want to have sex. Let's see."

He nipped at her ear, then her jaw.

Oh, she knew the moves. He had damn good ones. She could counter, or she could meet them. She met them, turning her head just enough to find those clever lips with hers. To feel that shock of lust and promise.

She pressed her body to his, and felt their hearts slam together. On a moan of approval, she locked her arms around him until he fisted a hand in her shirt the way he often had before. The fierce possessiveness of that grip had always excited and baffled her.

The instant hunger, his, hers, was a kind of relief. That plunge into the heat they made together was a kind of baptism.

She was still whole, still real.

She was still Callie Ann Dunbrook.

And, she thought, she could still want things that weren't good for her.

Then his hands came to her face, cupped her cheeks in a gentle touch that threw her off balance. And his lips rubbed hers in a whisper that spoke more of affection than passion.

"It's still there, Callie."

"That was never our problem."

"It sure as hell wasn't." Still holding her face, he pressed his lips to her forehead. "You want beer to go with that pizza? I've got some next door."

She stepped back, eyed him suspiciously. "You're turning down sex for pizza and beer?"

“Don’t put it that way. It hurts. You want the beer or not?”

“Yeah, fine. Whatever.” She shrugged, then feeling oddly rejected, turned away to her laptop. “I’m going to finish logging in today’s finds.”

“Do that. Be right back.”

He waited until he was in his own room before rapping his head against the wall. He could still taste her, that unique flavor that was Callie. He could still smell her hair—the lingering scent of the rain she’d been caught in.

She was inside him like a drug. No, he mused as he flipped open the lid on his cooler. Like a goddamn virus. There was nothing he could do about it.

Worse, he’d come to the conclusion, months ago, there was nothing he wanted to do about it.

He wanted her back, and he was damn well going to get her back. If it killed him.

He sat on the side of the bed to calm himself down. The timing couldn’t have been much worse, he decided. She was in trouble and needed help. Not the steady, sneaky, subtle pursuit he’d had in mind when he’d joined the team.

Taking her to bed wasn’t the answer—and wasn’t that too damn bad. He had to get her used to having him around again, then make her fall in love with him, *then* take her to bed.

That was the plan. Or it had been the plan before everything had gotten muddled up.

She’d looked as if she’d taken a hard right to the jaw when Lana had told her about the adoption. Still, there hadn’t been any whining, no woe-is-me. That was his girl, Jake thought. Steady as a rock.

But now she needed him. She finally needed him. And he needed to show both of them he wouldn’t let her down.

No matter how much he wanted her, they weren’t going to haze the situation with sex this time around.

He’d been nearly a year without her, and in all those months had run the gamut from rage to stunned hurt, from bitterness to despair, from acceptance to determination.

Some species mated for life, he thought as he stood. By

God, he was one of them. He'd give her some time to figure that out. Meanwhile, he'd help her through this mess she was in.

Then they'd start over.

Feeling better, he snagged the beer and arrived back in her room just ahead of the pizza delivery.

He'd been right about the work, Callie thought as she prepared for bed. Not only had it kept her mind off her worries, it had gotten her brain functioning again. The blurriness had cleared.

She could see what she needed to do, how she needed to do it. She'd have Lana arrange for a local lab to draw her blood and ship the sample to her father's associate in Philadelphia. She'd have Lana witness it, have the sample sealed and labeled. The same precautions—an independent witness—would be on the other end.

There would be no opportunities for tampering. Keep it all very official.

She'd say nothing of what Lana had discovered so far. Jake was right, there was no point until more data was gathered.

She would handle her personal business the same way she handled her professional business. Methodically, scientifically and thoroughly.

Discoveries would be logged. In fact, she would write a report daily. It would help keep everything organized.

And just to keep Douglas Cullen throttled back, she'd have Lana draft out some legal document waiving or refusing, whatever it needed to be, any claim to any portion of Suzanne Cullen's estate.

It was a good plan, Callie told herself. And now it was time to put it away for the night.

She closed her eyes, opened herself to the music as she drew out Bach. The lovely, complicated and romantic notes from his Suite Number 1 in G for Unaccompanied Cello.

Her mind could rest with the music. Flow with it. Quiet.

Here was comfort, the mathematics and the art, blended together into beauty.

For these precious moments, she had and would drag the cumbersome instrument on every plane, truck, train, to every dig no matter how problematic.

Soothed, she set the bow aside. Following routine, she stroked her nightly moisturizer over her face and throat, blew out her candle.

She climbed into bed.

Five minutes after she turned off the light, she was turning it back on, getting out of bed and picking up the box Suzanne had given her.

So she had a curious nature, she told herself. That's why she was good at her work. That's why she would find the answers to this puzzle and put everything back on an even keel once more.

She opened the box, saw the letters, all in plain white envelopes, all neatly lined up according to date.

So Suzanne was another organized soul, she noticed. Another creature of habit. A number of people were.

She'd just read through them. They would give her a better sense of the woman, and very possibly another piece of the puzzle. Just more data, she told herself as she took the first envelope out of the box.

She felt the same sort of anticipation of discovery when she opened the envelope marked "Jessica" as she did when brushing the soil off an artifact.

My darling Jessica,

Today you're one year old. It doesn't seem possible that a whole year has passed since I first held you. This entire year is still like a dream to me. All disjointed and blurry and unreal. There are times when I think it really has been a dream. Times when I hear you crying and start toward your room. Other times when I swear I feel you moving inside me, as though you haven't been born yet.

But then I remember, and I don't think I can stand it.

My own mother made me promise I would write this note. I don't know what I would have done without my mother these past months. I wonder if anyone really understands what I'm going through but another mother. Your daddy tries, and I know he misses you, so much, but I don't think he can feel this same emptiness.

I'm hollow inside. So hollow there are times I think I'll just crumble away to nothing.

Part of me wishes I could, but I have your brother. Poor, sweet little boy. He's so confused. He doesn't understand why you're not here.

How can I explain it to him, when I don't understand it either?

I know you'll come back soon. Jessie, you have to know we'll never, never stop looking. I pray, every day, that you'll be home in your own crib one night. Until you are, I pray, every day, that you're safe and well. That you're not frightened. I pray, every day, that whoever took you from me is kind to you, and loving. That she rocks you the way you like, and sings you your favorite lullabies.

One day she'll realize what she did was wrong, and she'll bring you home.

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry that I turned away from you. I promise you it was only for a moment. If I could go back, I'd hold you so close. No one could ever tear you away.

We're all looking, Jessie. All of us. Mama and Daddy, Grandpa and Grandma, Nanny and Pop. All the neighbors, and the police. Don't ever think we let you go. Because we never did. We never will.

You're right here in my heart. My baby, my Jessie. I love you. I miss you.

Mama

Callie folded the pages neatly, slipped them back in the envelope. She put the lid back on the box, set the box on the floor. Leaning over, she switched off the light.

And lay in the dark, aching for a woman she barely knew.

She spent most of the next day on the painstaking task of uncovering the skeletal remains. It took hours, working with brushes, with dental probes, with tongue depressors to clear the dirt. But the latest find had pried two graduate students out of the university.

She had her photographer in Dory Teasdale, a long, leggy brunette. And her finds assistant in Bill McDowell, who didn't look old enough to buy beer but had five seasons on three digs under his belt.

She found Dory competent and enthusiastic, and tried to ignore the fact she was the same physical type as one Veronica Weeks. The woman who'd been the catalyst, or the last straw, in the shattering of her marriage to Jake.

It didn't matter if Dory had a voice like a sleek, contented cat as long as she did her job.

"Got another one." Jake stopped by Callie's sector, nodded toward the lanky man standing with Digger. "Itinerant, got his own tools. Name's Matt Kirkendal. Heard about the project, wants to dig. Seems to know his ass from a line level."

Callie studied the newest arrival. He had a long braid of streaked gray, worn-down work boots, a tattoo of something that snaked under the sleeve of his T-shirt.

It looked as if he and Digger were already bonding.

"Hands are hands," Callie stated. He appeared strong, she decided, weathered. "Stick him with Digger for a couple of days, see what he's made of."

"That's my plan."

He watched as she ran a string between two nails in preparation for making a record drawing for the vertical slice through the accumulated deposits in her section.

"Want a hand with that?"

"I've got it. What do you think of the new grad students?"

"Girl's easy to look at." Ignoring the fact that she could, indeed, handle it herself, he attached a tape measure to the nails with clothespins. He caught the look Callie shot him, answered it blandly. "Despite the prim name—Teasdale—

she's not afraid to get her hands dirty, either. The guy—he's an eager beaver—more eager, I'd say, because he wants to impress you. Sends you longing glances."

"He does not."

"Serious crush. I know just how he feels."

Now she snorted. "A crush is different from wanting to get a woman naked and onto any available flat surface."

"Oh. Guess I don't know how he feels, then."

She refused to laugh, and only released the faintest of smiles when Jake walked off.

The latest find had also brought more press. Callie gave an interview to a reporter from the *Washington Post* while she knelt beside the two skeletons, resting her back and shoulders.

"The adult bones are female," Callie said. "A female between the ages of twenty and twenty-five."

The reporter was female as well, and interested enough to scoot on her haunches a little too close to the bones until Callie impatiently motioned her back.

"How can you tell the age without lab tests?"

"If you know anything about bones, and I do, you can judge their age." Using the tongue depressor, she pointed out the joints, the fusion, the formation. "And see here, this is interesting. There was a break in the humerus. Most likely in mid-childhood. Probably around the age of ten to twelve. It healed, but knit poorly."

She ran the tongue depressor lightly over the line of break. "This arm would have been weak, and likely caused her considerable discomfort. The break is reasonably clean, indicating to me it was from a fall rather than a blow. Not a defensive wound as she might have received in a fight. Despite the injury she was in good health, meaning she wasn't shunned from the tribe. They cared for their sick and injured. That's illustrated in the way she and her child were buried."

"How did she die?"

"As there are no other injuries, and the remains of the

child indicate newborn, it's probable she, and the child, died in childbirth. You can see they're not just buried together. They were arranged here with her holding the child. This indicates compassion, even sentiment. Certainly ceremony. They mattered to someone."

"And why should they matter to us?"

"They were here first. Who they are, what they are made it possible for us to be."

"There are some who object to the exhuming and studying of the dead. For religious reasons, or simply because human nature often decrees that those we've buried should remain undisturbed. How do you answer that?"

"You can see the care we take in what we do here. The respect given. They have knowledge," Callie said, leaning back to brush at dirt. "Human nature also demands, or should, the seeking of knowledge. If we don't study, we're not honoring her. We're ignoring her."

"What can you tell me about the curse?"

"I can tell you this isn't an episode of *The X-Files*. Sorry, I've got to get back to this. You may want to speak with Dr. Greenbaum."

She worked another hour, steadily, silently. As she reached for her camera Jake came over to join her. "What is it?"

"It looks like a turtle carapace. It's tucked between the bodies. I need photos of the bones, in situ."

"I'll get Dory. You need a break."

"Not yet. Get the documentation. Then I want to find out what this is."

She moved back, stretching her legs as best she could while Dory came over to take the photographs.

She let her mind go blank while Dory's voice and Jake's hummed behind her. They'd gotten into an easy patter already, she noted. Then, annoyed with herself for the knee-jerk resentment, the old habit, she reminded herself he could have an easy patter—or anything else he wanted—with Dory or anyone else.

"Got it," Dory declared. "Not to put down the rest of the dig, but you've got the best spot. It's just fascinating." She

glanced down at the skeletons again. "And sad. Even ancient remains are sad when they're a baby's."

"So we'll do right by them. I'm going to want those pictures as soon as possible."

"You'll get them. In fact, that does this roll. I can go get them developed now if you want."

"Great."

As Dory hurried off, Callie knelt down again and began the painstaking task of excavating the carapace. As she carefully lifted it free, she heard the rattle of stones inside.

"It's a toy," she murmured. "They wanted her to have a toy." Callie sat back on her heels.

Jake took the rattle. "It's likely her father or her grandfather made this for her before she was born. Her birth was anticipated, looked forward to. And her loss, their loss, was mourned."

She picked up her clipboard, carefully logged the find. "I'll tell Leo they're ready for the wet packs and removal. I've got an appointment. I'll be back in an hour."

"Babe." He tapped his knuckles on her cheek. "You're filthy."

"I'll clean up a little."

"Before you do, I came over to tell you Leo just got off the phone with Dolan. Dolan's threatening to go after an injunction to block us from removing anything from the site."

"He's going to look like an idiot."

"Maybe, or if he's smart he can spin it so he's against disturbing the graves of the dead and so on. He can get some backing on that."

"Then how does he plan to build houses?" she inquired.

"Good question, and I'd say he's working on it." He rocked back on his heels, skimmed his gaze over the quiet water of the pond, the thick summer green of the trees. "It's a hell of a nice spot."

"I imagine the people buried here thought so, too."

"Yeah, I bet they did." Absently, he shook the rattle again. "The main thing is he wants the dig stopped. He owns the land. He can block us from removing artifacts if he pushes hard enough."

“Then we push back, harder.”

“We’re going to try reason and diplomacy first. I’ve got an appointment with him tomorrow.”

“You? Why you?”

“Because I’m less likely to take a swing at him than you are. Slightly,” Jake added as he leaned over to touch his lips to hers. “And because I’m the anthro and can spout more nifty terms on culture and ancient societies and their impact on science than you.”

“That’s bullshit,” she muttered as she started toward her car. “You’ve got the penis. Leo figures this guy will relate to you better because you’ve got the right equipment.”

“That’s a factor. We’ll have a little man-to-man and see if I can convince him.”

“Work him, Graystone, so I don’t have to beat him over the head with a shovel.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Dunbrook?” he added as she pulled open her car door. “Wash your face.”

Nine

When Callie stepped out of her motel room the following morning, she saw red.

Crude, vicious graffiti crawled over her Rover, bumper to bumper, in paint as bright and glossy as fresh blood.

DOCTOR BITCH! it announced. Along with GRAVE ROB-BING CUNT, assorted obscenities, suggestions and demands that she GO HOME!

Her first leap was forward, the way a mother might leap to defend a child being bullied in a playground. Unintelligible sounds strangled in her throat as her fingers raced over the shiny letters. With dull disbelief, she traced the splatters on her hood that spelled out LESBO FREAK.

Fury was only a quick step away from shock. As they collided inside her, she stormed back inside her room, grabbed the phone book and looked up the address of Dolan and Sons.

She slammed the door again just as Jake opened his. “How many more times do you plan to slam the door before . . .”

He trailed off when he saw her car. “Well, shit.” Though he was still barefoot, and wearing only jeans, he walked out

to take a closer look. “You figure Austin and Jimmy, or their ilk?”

“I figure I’m going to find out.” She shoved him back, wrenched open the driver’s-side door.

“Hold on. Hold it.” He knew that look in her eye, and it screamed bloody murder. “Give me two minutes and I’ll go with you.”

“I don’t need backup when it comes to a couple of red-neck fuckwits.”

“Just wait.” To be sure she did, he wrestled the keys out of her hand, then strode back into his room for a shirt and shoes.

Thirty seconds later, he was cursing, rushing back out again, just in time to see her drive off. He’d forgotten she always kept spare keys in her glove box.

“Son of a bitch. Son of a goddamn bitch.”

She didn’t look back. Her mind was focused on what lay ahead. She’d had the Rover for six years. It was part of her team. Every ding and scratch was a memory. Was a goddamn badge of honor. And nobody defiled what was hers.

Minutes later, she squealed to a stop in front of Dolan’s Main Street office. Breathing fire, she leaped out, then barely resisted kicking the door down when she found it locked. She hammered on it with her fist instead.

A pleasant-looking woman unlocked the office door from the inside. “I’m sorry. We’re not open for another fifteen minutes.”

“Dolan. Ronald Dolan.”

“Mr. Dolan’s on a job site this morning. Do you want an appointment?”

“What job site?”

“Ah, the one up on Turkey Neck Road.”

Callie showed her teeth. “Point me in the direction.”

It took her twenty minutes, backtracking on one of the windy country roads when she missed the turn. None of the sleepy charm of the morning, the gilded light sprinkling through trees, the silly herald of a rooster could breach her rage.

The longer it stewed, the more potent it became. And

she had only to shift her gaze from the road to the hood to have it spiking again.

Someone, she promised herself, was going to pay. At the moment, she wasn't particular who, or how.

She swung onto a private lane, over a pretty little bridge that spread over the creek, then nearly straight up the cut through the wooded plot.

She could hear the sounds of construction. The hammers, the saws, the music from a radio. Part of her brain registered that whatever else he was or did, Dolan apparently built well.

The skeleton of the house showed potential, and it fit well with the rocky terrain, the picturesque woods. The usual construction debris was scattered into piles, heaped into an enormous Dumpster.

Pickups and other four-wheelers were parked willy-nilly in the mud the night's rain had brewed. And several large men, already sweaty, were at work.

She spotted Dolan, his work pants still pristine, his shirt rolled up at the elbows and a blue Dolan Construction fielder-style hat perched on his head as he stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the progress.

Once again she slammed the door, and the bullet shot of it blasted through the music and noise. Dolan glanced over, then shifted his view and his body as Callie strode toward the house, boosted herself easily onto the decking.

"Austin and Jimmy," she snapped out. "The dickhead twins. Where are they?"

He shifted his weight, scanned the paint splattered over her car. A small, resentful part of his heart did hand-springs. "You got a problem with any of my men, you got a problem with me."

"Fine." It suited her down to the ground. "You see that?" she demanded and pointed toward her Rover. "I'm holding you responsible."

He could feel his men watching, and hooked his thumbs under his suspenders. "You saying I painted that graffiti all over your car?"

"I'm saying whoever did works for you. Whoever did

listened to you and your asinine viewpoints about what my team's doing at Antietam Creek."

"I don't know anything about it. Looks like kids to me. And as far as what you're doing at Antietam Creek, don't expect to be doing it much longer."

"You got a couple of mental giants named Austin and Jimmy on your payroll, Dolan. And this looks like them to me."

Something moved in his eyes. And he made a very big mistake. He smirked. "I've got a lot of people on my payroll."

"You think this is amusing?" She lost what tenuous hold she had on her temper and gave him a light shove. Work around them ceased. "You think malicious destruction of property, vandalism, spray-painting crude insults and threats on my car is a goddamn joke?"

"I think when you're somewhere you're not wanted, doing something a lot of people don't want you to do, there's a price to pay." He wanted to shove her back, wanted to show his men he couldn't be pushed around by a woman. Instead he jabbed a finger in her face. "Instead of crying to me, you ought to take that advice and get the hell out of Woodsboro."

She slapped his hand aside. "This isn't some John Ford western, you moronic, pea-brained rube. And we'll see who pays the price. You think I'm going to let you, any of you," she continued, scraping a disgusted look over the faces of the laborers surrounding them, "get away with this, you couldn't be more wrong. If you think this sort of malicious, juvenile behavior is going to scare me away, you're more stupid than you look."

Someone snickered, and Dolan's face went beet red. "It's my property. I want you off it. We don't need your kind coming around here, taking jobs away from decent people. And you've come whining about a little paint to the wrong man."

"You call this whining? You're the one who's going to whine, Dolan, when I stuff your head up your ass."

That announcement caused a flurry of hoots and catcalls

from the men. And that had her hands balling into fists. What she might have done was debatable, but a hand clamped on her shoulder, hard.

“I think Mr. Dolan and his band of merry men might have more to say to the police,” Jake suggested. “Why don’t we go take care of that?”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Dolan repeated. “And that’s the same damn thing I’m going to tell the sheriff.”

“He gets paid to listen.” Jake pulled Callie back, began to push her toward the cars. “Consider the fact that there are about a dozen men armed with power tools and really big hammers.” He kept his voice low as he steered her toward her Rover. “And consider that they’ll elect to use them on me first, as I’m not a woman. And shut up.”

She shrugged his hand off, yanked open the door. But she couldn’t hold it in. “This isn’t over, Dolan,” she shouted. “I’m going to tie up your precious development. You won’t pour the first yard of concrete for a decade. I’m going to make it my personal crusade.”

She slammed the door, then sent mud splattering as she reversed.

She drove half a mile, then pulled over to the side of the road. Jake stopped behind her. They both slammed their doors after leaping out.

“I told you I didn’t need help.”

“I told you to wait two goddamn minutes.”

“This is my car.” She rapped a fist on the Rover. “This is my situation.”

He lifted her off her feet, dropped her ass on the hood. “And what did your pissing match with Dolan accomplish?”

“Nothing! That’s not the point.”

“The point is you made a tactical error. You confronted him on his turf while he was surrounded by his own men. He’s got a hundred-and-twenty-pound female facing him down under those circumstances, he’s got no choice but to blow you off, no choice but to prove he’s wearing the balls. Jesus, Dunbrook, you know more about psychology than that. He’s the honcho. He can’t be pussy-whipped in front of his men. He can’t afford to lose face in that arena.”

“I’m pissed off!” She started to leap down, then just vibrated when he clamped his hands over hers to keep her in place. “I don’t care about the psychology. I don’t care about the arena. Or about gender dynamics and tribal hierarchy. Somebody takes a shot at me, I take one back. And since when do you back down from a fight? You usually start them.”

Oh, he’d wanted to. He’d wanted to wade in swinging when he’d seen her standing there. Surrounded. “I don’t start them when I’m outnumbered ten to one, and when several of those ten are holding power saws and nail guns. And being forced to retreat doesn’t put me in a sunny mood.”

“Nobody asked you to interfere.”

“No.” He released her hands. “Nobody did.”

Even temper couldn’t blind her to the change in him. From fire to ice, in a finger snap. Shame wormed through the anger. “Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have gone alone, maybe I shouldn’t have run out there until I was a little more controlled. But since you were there anyway, couldn’t you have punched somebody?”

It was, he supposed, as close to an acknowledgment as she could manage. “I don’t have to finish a fight on top, but I damn sure want to finish it in one piece.”

“I love this car.”

“I know.”

She sighed, bumped a heel restlessly against the front tire. She frowned back at the pristine black paint on his Mercedes. “Why the hell didn’t they paint yours?”

“Maybe they didn’t realize your wrath was mightier than mine.”

“I hate when I get that mad. So mad I can’t think straight. I’m going to hate this, too.” She looked back at him. “You were right.”

“Wait. I want to get my tape recorder out of the car.”

“If you’re going to be a smart-ass, I won’t finish thanking you.”

“I get a ‘you were right’ *and* a thank-you? I’m going to tear up in a second.”

“I should’ve known you’d milk it.” She shoved off the hood. Looking down, she studied the cheerful rush of the creek over rocks.

He’d come after her, she thought. And in her heart she knew he’d have mopped up the construction site with anyone who’d laid a hand on her.

It made her feel just a little too warm and gooey inside.

“I’m just saying I probably shouldn’t have gone after Dolan with a dozen of his men standing around and probably shouldn’t be blaming him for this in the first place. So I appreciate you hauling me off before I made it worse. I guess.”

“You’re welcome. I guess. You want to call the law?”

“Yeah.” She hissed out a breath. “Fuck it. I want coffee first.”

“Me too. Follow me in.”

“I don’t need to—”

“You’re driving in the wrong direction.” He grinned as he walked back to his car.

“Give me my keys.” She plucked them out of the air on his toss. “How’d you know where I was, anyway?”

“Went by Dolan’s office, asked the still pale and trembling assistant if a woman with fire spurting out of her ears had been in. The rest was easy.”

He got into his car. “And you’re buying the coffee.”

When Lana pulled up to the site that afternoon, she had Tyler with her. She only hoped Callie had meant it when she’d invited the boy back. He’d been talking about it ever since.

She’d closed the office early and had gone home to change into jeans, a casual shirt and her oldest tennis shoes. If she was going to be chasing her son around an excavation, she needed to be dressed for it.

“If I find bones, can I keep them?”

She went around to unstrap him from his safety seat. “No.”

“Mom.”

“Not only can’t you keep them from my point of view, pal of mine, but I can promise Dr. Dunbrook is going to say the same.” She kissed his sulky mouth, hauled him out. “And do you remember the other rules?”

“I won’t run, I won’t go near the water and I won’t touch nothing.”

“Anything.”

“Either.”

She laughed, boosted him on her hip and walked to the gate.

“Mom? What does c-u-n-t spell?”

Shock stopped her in her tracks, had her mouth hanging open as she whipped her head around to stare at his face. His eyes were squinted up as they were when he was trying to figure something out. She followed their direction, then stifled a gasp when she saw Callie’s Rover.

“Ah, nothing. Nothing, sweetie. They... must’ve left some letters out.”

“How come they wrote stuff on the truck? How come?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to ask.”

“Well, what have we got here.” Leo wiped his hands on the legs of his khakis and walked over to greet them. “You look like a young archaeologist.”

“I can dig. I brought my shovel.” Ty waved the red plastic shovel he’d insisted he’d need.

“Well then. We’ll put you to work.”

“This is Tyler.” Lana breathed easier as his attention was diverted from the obscenities. “Ty, this is Dr. Greenbaum. I hope it’s all right. Callie said I could bring him by sometime. He’s been dying to come back.”

“Sure it is. Want to come along with me, Ty?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Ty reached out, leaning from his mother’s arms into Leo’s.

“Well, I’ve been replaced.”

“Grandparent pheromones,” Leo said with a wink. “He knows he’s got a sucker. We’ve got a nice collection of spear points and arrowheads over in the knapping area. Interested?”

“Actually, I am. But I need to speak to Callie first.”

“Just come on by when you’re done. Ty and I’ll keep busy.”

“Can I have a bone?” Ty asked in what he thought was a whisper as Leo carried him off.

Lana shook her head, then skirted mounds and buckets on her way toward the square hole where Callie worked.

“Hey, pretty lady.” Digger stopped work to give her a wink. “Anything you want to know, you just ask me.”

He was standing in another square, but leaped out nimbly to catch her attention. He smelled, Lana noted, of peppermint and sweat and looked a bit like an animated mole.

“All right. What is it you’re doing here with...” She leaned over to look in the hole, noted it was dug in geometric levels. “Are those bones?”

“Yep. Not human though. What we’ve got here’s the kitchen midden. Animal bones. Got us some deer remains. See the different colors of the dirt?”

“I guess.”

“You got your winter clay, your summer silt. Flooding, get me? The way the bones are layered shows us we had us a settlement here, long-term. Gives us hunting patterns. Got some cow in there. Domesticated. Had us some farmers.”

“You can tell all that from dirt and bone?”

He tapped the side of his nose. “I got a sense for these things. I’ve got a lot of interesting artifacts in my trailer over there. You wanna come by tonight, I’ll show you.”

“Ah...”

“Digger, stop hitting on my lawyer,” Callie called out. “Lana, get away from him. He’s contagious.”

“Aw, I’m harmless as a baby.”

“Baby shark,” Callie called back.

“Don’t you be jealous, Callie sugar. You know you’re my one true love.” He blew her a noisy kiss, gave Lana another wink, then dropped back down in his hole.

“He offered to show me his artifacts,” Lana told Callie when she reached her section. “Is that an archaeologist’s version of the old-etchings ploy?”

“Digger’ll flash his artifacts at the least provocation.

He's a walking boner. And for reasons I've yet to fathom, he bags women with amazing regularity."

"Well, he's cute."

"Christ, he's ugly as the ass end of a mule."

"Yes, that's why he's cute." She looked down at Callie's work. "What happened to your Land Rover?"

"Apparently somebody thought it would be entertaining to decorate it with a variety of crude remarks and suggestions. I figure one of Dolan's men." She shrugged. "I let him know it this morning."

"You've spoken to him about it."

Callie smiled. She thought Lana looked as fresh and pretty as a high school senior out on a summer picnic. "You could call it speaking."

Lana angled her head. "Need a lawyer?"

"Not yet. The county sheriff's looking into it."

"Hewitt? More tortoise than hare, but very thorough. He won't blow it off."

"No, I got the impression he'd cross all the T's. I know he was going to speak to Dolan."

"However sincerely sorry I am about your car, the more complications for Ron Dolan right now, the better I like it."

"Glad I could help. Since you're here, I've got a question. Why do people iron jeans?"

Lana glanced down at the carefully pressed Levi's she wore. "To show respect for the hard work of the manufacturer. And because they show off my ass better when they're pressed."

"Good to know. I see Leo's dragooned Ty-Rex."

"It was instant attraction, on both sides." She looked at Callie's work. Suppressed a shudder. "Those aren't animal bones."

"No, human." Callie reached for her jug, poured iced tea into a plastic glass. "Male in his sixties. Almost crippled with arthritis, poor bastard."

She offered the tea, chugging it down herself when Lana shook her head. "We're getting some intermingling with this area. See this." Callie tapped a long bone with her

dental pick. "That's female, about the same age though. And this one's male, but he was in his teens."

"They buried them all together?"

"I don't think so. I think we're getting scattering and intermingling here due to changes in water level, in climate. Flooding. I think when we get deeper in this section, likely next season, we'll find more articulated remains. Hey, Leo's got Ty digging."

Lana straightened and glanced over to where Tyler was happily digging in a small pile of dirt with Leo beside him. "He's in heaven."

"That pile's been sieved," Callie told her. "Twenty bucks says Leo plants some stone or a fossil he has in his pocket so the kid finds it."

"He's a nice man."

"He's a patsy for kids."

"While they're occupied, I need to talk to you."

"Figured. Let's take a walk. I need to stretch my legs anyway."

"I don't want to leave Ty."

"Believe me," Callie said as she dusted herself off, "Leo'll keep him occupied and happy." She headed off, leaving Lana no choice but to follow.

"I have a little more information on Carlyle."

"The investigator found him?"

"Not yet. But we did find something interesting. While practicing in Chicago and Houston, Carlyle represented couples in over seventy adoptions. Duly decreed through the court. This most certainly comprised the lion's share of his practice *and* income. During his time in Boston, he was the petitioners' council in ten adoptions."

"Which means?"

"Wait. During his practice in Seattle, he completed four adoptions. Through the court," Lana added. "We're now under one per year. What does the pattern say to you?"

"The same as it's saying to you, I imagine: that he found it more profitable to steal babies and sell them than to go through the rigmarole of the system." Callie walked into the trees that ranged along the curve of the river. "It's

a reasonable hypothesis, but there's not enough data to prove it."

"Not yet. If we can find one of the adoptive parents who recommended him to a friend or to someone in a support group, someone who went to him but whose petition and decree weren't filed, we'll have more. There'll be a trail. No matter how careful he was, there's always a trail."

"What do we tell those people, if we find them?" Callie demanded, and booted at a fallen twig. "Do we tell them the child they raised was stolen from another family? That they never legally made that child theirs?"

"I don't know, Callie. I don't know."

"I don't want to involve other families. I can't do it. At least not at this point. Those people made families. It's not their fault that this bastard twisted that, twisted something as loving and honorable as adoption into profit and pain."

His profit, Lana thought. Your pain. "If we find him, and what he's done comes out . . . Eventually—"

"Yeah, eventually." She looked back toward the dig. Layer, by layer, by layer. "I can't see eventually. I have to take it as it comes."

"Do you want me to call off the investigator?"

"No. I just want him focused on finding Carlyle, not putting a case together for what happens after we do. We'll deal with that . . . when we deal with it. She wrote me letters." Callie paused, watched a fat jay spear through the trees. Deeper in the woods, a woodpecker hammered like a maniac while across the road, the hound lay in his usual patch of sun and slept.

"Suzanne wrote me letters every year on my birthday. And she saved them in a box. I read one last night. It broke my heart, and still it doesn't *connect* to me. Not the way she needs it to. She's not my mother. Nothing's ever going to make her my mother."

She shook her head. "But there has to be payment made. We find Carlyle, and he has to pay. He and whoever else was part of it. I can do that for her."

"I'm trying to imagine what it would be like if someone took Tyler from me. And I can't. I can't because it's too

terrifying. But I can imagine that finding you again is both a tremendous joy and tremendously painful for her. I don't know what else you can do than what you're doing. And what you're doing is both very kind and very brave."

Callie laughed, but there was no humor in it. "It's neither. It's just necessary."

"You're wrong, but I won't waste my time arguing with a client. Which is why I won't point out how unnecessary it was for you to have me draft this." She slid the paperwork out of her shoulder bag. "The statement refusing any part of Suzanne's or Jay Cullen's estates. You need to sign it, where indicated. Your signature needs to be witnessed."

Callie nodded, took the papers. They were, at least, a definite step. "Leo'll do it."

"I'd like to advise you to take a few days to think about this."

"She's not my mother, not to me. I'm not entitled to anything from her. I want you to take a copy of this and deliver it, personally, to Douglas Cullen."

"Oh, damn it, Callie."

"Whether or not you shove it down his throat is your option, but I want him to have a copy."

"Thanks a lot," Lana replied. "That's going to really help me get him to ask me out again."

"If he blows you off because of me, then he's not worth your time anyway."

"Easy for you to say." Lana fell into step as Callie started back toward the dig. "You've got a guy."

"I do not."

"Oh, please."

"If you're talking about Graystone, you're way off. That's over, that's done."

"Pig's eye."

Callie stopped, tipped down her sunglasses to stare over the rims into Lana's face. "Is that a legal term?"

"I'd be happy to look up the Latin translation so it sounds more official. I like you," she added, and shifted her shoulder bag as they began to walk again. "So we'll call it

an honest observation, with just a touch of harmless envy. He's gorgeous."

"Yeah, he's got looks." She shifted her attention to where he crouched with Sonya over a section drawing. "Jake and I are associates, and we're working on tolerating each other enough so we can be in the same room without coming to blows."

"You seemed to be doing fine in that area the other night. I know when a man's looking at a woman as if he'd like to slurp her up in one big gulp—hence the envy. I'd catch my husband looking at me that way sometimes. It's something you don't forget, and I saw it when Jake looked at you."

How did she explain it? she wondered as she watched Jake give Sonya an absent pat on the shoulder before he rose. She watched him stride toward the spoil, sling Ty up, hang him upside down until the kid nearly busted a gut laughing.

He was as good with kids as he was with women, she mused. Then, annoyed with herself, she admitted he was just good with people. Period.

"We've got a primal thing. Sex was—well, we were damn good at it. We didn't seem to be much good for each other outside the sack."

"Yet you told him about this."

Callie tapped the papers against her thigh as they walked. "He caught me at a vulnerable moment. Plus you can trust Jake with a confidence. He won't go blabbing your business around. And he's a demon on details. Never misses a trick."

He missed with Ronald Dolan. The man was dug in and dug deep. He'd tried every angle he could think of during their late-afternoon meeting. First the united male front, with a touch of amusement over Callie's performance that morning.

She'd fry his balls for breakfast if she knew he'd apolo-

gized for her, but he needed to get back on some level footing with Dolan. For the good of the project.

Then he tried charm, the deity of science, patience, humor. Nothing budged Dolan from the trench he'd decided to stand in.

"Mr. Dolan, the fact is the County Planning Commission put a hold on your development, and for good reason."

"A few weeks and that ends. Meanwhile I've got a bunch of people out there tearing up my property."

"A dig of this nature is very systematic and organized."

Dolan snorted, kicked back in his desk chair. "I come out there, I see a bunch of damn holes. Lot of college kids pissing around, probably smoking dope and God knows. And you're digging up bodies, hauling them off."

"Remains are treated with both care and respect. The study of prehistoric remains is vital to the project."

"Not my project. And a lot of people around here don't like the idea of you messing with graves. All we've got is your word they're thousands of years old."

"There are conclusive tests—"

"Nothing conclusive about science." Dolan made a fist, then jabbed out with his index finger as if shooting a gun. "Changes its mind all the time. Hell, you scientists can't make up your mind when you figure the world began. And you talk to my wife's old man, he'll give you plenty of reasons why the whole evolution business is bunk." He gave his suspenders a snap. "Can't say I disagree."

"We could spend the next few hours debating evolution versus creationism, but it wouldn't solve our current problem. Whatever side you fall on, there is solid evidence that a Neolithic village existed along Antietam Creek. The bones, the artifacts and ecofacts so far excavated and dated substantiate that."

"Doesn't change the fact whenever those bodies were put there, they weren't asking to be dug up and put under some microscope. Ought to have enough respect to let the dead rest in peace, that's my feeling on it."

"If that's the case, just how do you intend to proceed with your development?"

He had this worked out. Not all the way, but enough to keep the naysayers quiet. “We’ll put up markers, that’s what we’ll do.” He’d thought this angle through carefully, particularly carefully when he’d realized how an extensive delay would wipe out his cash flow. He could afford to cull out an acre, section it off, even put in fancy stones to spotlight a bunch of bones.

He could even use it as a selling point, use the prehistoric impact the same way he often used Civil War history to advertise a development.

But the one thing he couldn’t afford to do much longer was sit and wait.

“We’ve yet to determine the full area we suspect is a Neolithic cemetery,” Jake pointed out. “Where the hell are you going to put the markers?”

“I’ll get my own survey, and we’ll do the right thing. You got some Indian—excuse me, *Native American*—coming out to say some mumbo jumbo and give you the go-ahead. Well, I made some calls myself, and I can get me a Native American out here who’ll protest any tampering with those bodies.”

Jake leaned back. “Yeah, you probably could. There are some disagreements within the tribes on how this sort of thing should be handled. But believe me, Mr. Dolan, we’ll trump you on that score. I’ve been doing this for nearly fifteen years, and I have contacts you couldn’t dream about. Added to that, it so happens I’m a quarter Indian, excuse me, Native American, myself. And while some may feel the graves should be left undisturbed, more are going to feel sympathetic with the sensitivity with which we handle the project than with the idea of having those graves paved and sodded over so you can see a profit on your investment.”

“I paid for that land.” Dolan’s jaw set. “Fair deal. It belongs to me.”

“It does.” Jake nodded. “By law, it does. And in the end, it’s the law that will support what we’re doing on it.”

“Don’t you tell me about the law!” For the first time since they’d started the meeting, Dolan blew. It didn’t surprise Jake, he’d been watching it build all along. “I’m sick

and goddamn tired of having some flatlander come in here and tell me what I can do, what I can't do. I've lived in this county all my life. My father started this business fifty years back and we've spent our lives seeing that people around here have decent homes. All of a damn sudden we got environmentalists and tree huggers coming along and bitching and whining 'cause we put up houses on farmland. They don't ask the farmer why he's selling, why he's had enough of breaking his ass year after year just to get by, and maybe *he's* sick and damn tired of hearing people complain 'cause the cost of milk's too high. You don't know nothing about this place and got no right coming into my office telling me I don't care about anything but the bottom line."

"I don't know what you care about, Mr. Dolan. But I know we're not talking about farmland and the loss of open space anymore. We're talking about a find of enormous scientific and historical impact. To preserve that, we'll fight you every step of the way."

He got to his feet. "My father's a rancher in Arizona, and I watched him bust his butt year after year to get by. He's still doing it, and that's his choice. If he'd sold off, that would've been his choice, too. I don't know your community, but I know fifty acres of it—and I'm going to know it better before I'm done than you know your own backyard. People lived there, worked there, slept there and died there. The way I look at it, that makes it their place. I'm going to make it my business to make sure that, and they, are acknowledged."

"I want the pack of you off my land."

"Talk to the State of Maryland, to your own County Planning Commission, to the court." His eyes were cool and green now, and his voice was no longer lazy. "You take us on, Dolan, and the press is going to bury you long before the courts decide who's right. Dolan and Sons will end up one more artifact."

Jake walked out. As he did, he noted by the secretary's wide eyes and sudden, avid interest in her keyboard that she'd heard at least part of Dolan's rampage.

Word was going to spread, he thought. He imagined they'd have a number of visitors out to the site in the next few days.

He pulled out his cell phone as he got in his car.

"Get the legal wheels greased, Leo. Dolan's got a bug up his ass, and all I managed to do was shove it in deeper. I'm going to swing by and see Lana Campbell, give the Preservation Society's attorney an update."

"She's still out here."

"Then I'm on my way back."

A mile and a half out of town, behind a curving gravel lane, in a house Dolan had custom-built, Jay Cullen sat with his ex-wife and stared at Callie Dunbrook on video.

He felt, as he always did when Suzanne pushed the nightmare in front of him again, a tightness in his chest, a curling in his belly.

He was a quiet man. Had always been a quiet man. He'd graduated from the local high school, had married Suzanne Grogan, the girl he'd fallen in love with at first sight at the age of six, and had gone on to earn his teaching degree.

For twelve years, he'd taught math at his alma mater. After the divorce, after he'd been unable to stand Suzanne's obsession with their lost daughter, he'd moved to the neighboring county and transferred to another school.

He'd found some measure of peace. Though weeks might go by without him consciously thinking of his daughter, he never went through a day without thinking of Suzanne.

Now he was back in the house he'd never lived in, one that made him uncomfortable. It was too big, too open, too stylish. And they were right back in the cycle that had sucked them down, destroyed their marriage and broken his life to pieces.

"Suzanne—"

"Before you tell me all the reasons she can't be Jessica,

let me tell you the rest of it. She was adopted four days after Jessica was taken. A private adoption. She sat where you're sitting right now and explained to me that after some research, she felt it necessary to have tests done. I'm not asking you to agree with me, Jay. I'm not asking for that. I'm asking you to agree to the tests."

"What's the point? You're already convinced she's Jessica. I can see it on your face."

"Because she needs to be convinced. And you, and Doug—"

"Don't drag Doug through this again, Suze. For God's sake."

"This is his sister."

"This is a stranger." Absently, he laid a hand on Sadie's head when she laid it on his knee. "No matter what blood tests say, she's still going to be a stranger."

He turned away from the video image, away from the worst of the pain. "We're never getting Jessica back, Suzanne. No matter how hard you try to turn back the clock."

"You'd rather not know, isn't that it?" Bitterness clogged her throat. "You'd rather close it off, forget it. Forget her, so you can drift along through the rest of your life without hitting any bumps."

"That's right. I wish to God I could forget it. But I can't. I can't forget, but I can't let it drive my life the way you do, Suzanne. I can't stand out there and let myself be slapped down and beaten up again and again the way you have."

He stroked Sadie's head, her silky ears, and wished it were as easy to comfort Suzanne. To comfort himself. "What happened to us on December twelfth didn't just cost me a daughter. I didn't just lose a child. I lost my wife—my best friend. I lost everything that ever mattered to me because you stopped seeing me. All you could see was Jessie."

She'd heard the words before, had seen that same quiet grief on his face when he said them. It hurt, still it hurt. And still, he wasn't enough.

"You gave up." It was tears now, cutting through the bit-

terness. "You gave up on her, the way you would have given up if we'd lost a puppy."

"That's not true." But his anger had already dissolved in weariness. "I didn't give up, I accepted. I had to. You just didn't see what I was doing, what I was feeling. You couldn't, because you'd stopped looking at me. And after seven years of it, there wasn't anything left to see. There wasn't anything left of us."

"You blamed me."

"Oh no, honey, I never blamed you." He couldn't bear it, couldn't stand to see her spiraling back into that despair, that guilt, that grief. "Never once."

He stood up, reached for her. She still fit against him, two parts of one half, as she always had. He held her there, feeling her tremble as she wept. And knew he was as helpless, as useless to her as he'd been from the moment she'd called him and told him Jessica was gone.

"I'll have the tests. Just tell me what you need me to do."

He made the appointment with the doctor before he left Suzanne's. It seemed to settle her, though it had stirred Jay up, left him feeling half sick with the pressure in his chest.

He wouldn't drive by the site. Suzanne had urged him to, almost begged him to go by and speak to this Callie Dunbrook.

But he wasn't ready for that. Besides, what could he say to her, or she to him?

He had come to a revelation on the day of Jessica's twenty-first birthday. His daughter, if she lived, and he prayed she lived, was a grown woman. She would never, never belong to him.

He couldn't face the drive back home, or the evening to come. The solitude of it. He knew it was solitude, and some measure of peace he'd looked for when he'd quietly agreed to the divorce. After years of turmoil and grief, tension and conflict, he'd been willing, almost eager to be alone.

He could tell himself that need for solitude was the reason he'd never remarried and rarely dated.

But in his heart, Jay Cullen was a married man. Jessica might have been the living ghost in Suzanne's life, but his marriage was Jay's.

When he gave in to the pressure from friends, or his own needs, and courted a woman into bed, he considered it emotional adultery.

No legal paper could convince his heart Suzanne wasn't still his wife.

He tried not to think of the men Suzanne had been with over the years. And he knew she would tell him that was his biggest flaw—his instinct to close himself off from what made him unhappy, what disturbed the easy flow of life.

He couldn't argue about it, as it was perfectly true.

He drove into town and felt that familiar pang of regret and the conflicting surge of simple pleasure. This was home, no matter that he'd lived away from it. His memories were here.

Ice cream and summer parades. Little League practice, the daily walk to school down the sidewalk. Cutting through Mrs. Hobson's yard for a shortcut and having her dog, Chester, chase him all the way to the fence.

Finding Suzanne waiting on the corner for him. Then when they got older, finding her pretending not to wait for him.

He could see her, and himself, through all the stages.

The pigtails she'd worn when they'd been in first grade, and the funny little barrettes, pink flowers and blue butterflies she'd taken to sliding into her hair later.

Himself at ten, trudging up the steps to the library to do a report, wearing Levi's so new and stiff they'd felt like cardboard.

The first time he'd kissed her, right there, under the old oak on the corner of Main and Church. Snow had sprung them from school early, and he'd walked her home instead of running off with his friends to have a snowball fight.

It had been worth it, Jay thought now. It had been worth all the terror and cold sweats and aches he'd felt building

up to that one moment. To have his lips on Suzanne's lips, both of them a soft and innocent twelve.

His heart had been beating so fast he'd been dizzy. She smiled even as she'd shoved him away. And when she'd run away, she'd been laughing—the way girls did, he thought, because they know so much more than boys at that age.

And his feet hadn't touched the ground for the three blocks he'd raced to find his friends already at war in the snow.

He remembered how happy they'd been when he'd gotten his degree and they'd been able to move back to Woodsboro. The little apartment they'd rented near the college had never been theirs. More like playing house, playing at marriage.

But when they'd come back, with Douglas just a baby, they'd settled into being a family.

He pulled into a parking spot on the curb before he realized he'd been looking for one. Then he got out and walked the half block to Treasured Pages.

He saw Roger at the counter waiting on a customer. Jay shook his head, held up a hand, then began to wander the shelves and stacks.

He'd been closer to Roger, Jay supposed, than he'd been to his own father, who'd have been happier if his son had scored touchdowns instead of A's.

Just something else he'd lost along with Jessica. Roger had never treated him any differently after the divorce, but everything *was* different.

He stopped when he saw Doug rearranging the stock in the biography section.

He'd seen Doug twice since Doug had been back in Woodsboro, and still it was a shock to realize this tall, broad-shouldered man was his boy.

"Got any good beach reading?" Jay asked him.

Doug glanced over his shoulder, and his solemn face brightened with a grin. "I've got some pretty sexy stuff in my private stash. But it'll cost you. What are you doing in town?"

As soon as he'd asked, he knew the answer. And the grin faded.

"Never mind. Mom pulled you into this."

"You've seen the video."

"I've done more than see the video. I got a close-up look, live and in person."

Jay moved in closer to his son. "What did you think?"

"What am I supposed to think? I didn't know her. She's got Mom stirred up, that's all I know."

"Your mother told me she went to see this woman, not the other way around."

"Yeah, well." Doug shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

"What about Roger?"

"That news segment of her shook him up, but he's holding pretty steady. You know Grandpa."

"Has he been out to this dig to see her?"

"No." Doug shook his head. "He said he was afraid if we started coming at her, started crowding her, she'd just leave, or refuse the tests or something. But he wants to. He's been reading books on archaeology, like he wants to have something to talk to her about once we're all one big, happy family again."

"If she's your sister . . . If she is, we need to know. Whatever the hell we do about it, we need to know. I'm going to go talk to Roger before I head out. Keep an eye on your mom, okay?"

Ten

Full of the thrill of his time at the dig, Tyler broke away from his mother as they came into the bookstore. His face glowed with excitement and innocent sweat as he raced toward the counter to hold up a flattened chunk of rock.

“Look, Grandpa Roger, look what I got!”

With a quick glance of apology toward Jay, Lana hurried over. “Ty, don’t interrupt.”

Before she could scoop up her son, Roger was adjusting his glasses and leaning over. “Whatcha got there, big guy?”

“It’s a part of a spear, an *Indian* spear, and maybe they killed people with it.”

“I’ll be darned. Why, is that blood I see on there?”

“Nuh-uh.” But fascinated by the idea, Ty peered at the spear point. “Maybe.”

“Sorry.” Lana picked Ty up, set him on her hip. “Indiana Jones here forgets his manners.”

“When I get big, I can dig up bones.”

“And won’t that be fun?” Lana rolled her eyes and adjusted Ty’s weight. Not much longer, she thought with a little pang, and she wouldn’t be able to carry him this way.

“But however big we are, we don’t interrupt people when they’re having a conversation.”

“Sit that load on down here.” Roger patted the counter. “Lana, this is my . . .” *Son-in-law* still came most naturally to his lips. “This is Douglas’s father, Jay. Jay, this is Lana Campbell, the prettiest lawyer in Woodsboro, and her son, Tyler.”

Lana set Tyler on the counter, offered a hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Cullen.”

She saw Callie’s eyes, Doug’s nose. Would he, she wondered, feel the same jolt of astonished pleasure seeing those parts of himself in his children as she did seeing her own in Ty? “Tyler and I have just been visiting the Antietam Creek Project.”

He knows, she thought as she saw emotion wash over his face. He knows the daughter taken from him so many years before is standing, right now, only a few miles away.

“And they got skeleton parts and lotsa rocks and fo— What are they?” Ty asked his mother.

“Fossils.”

“Dr. Leo let me have this, and it’s *millions* of years old.”

“Goodness.” Roger smiled, though Lana saw him reach over, touch Jay’s arm. “That’s even older than me.”

“Really?” Ty stared up at Roger’s craggy face. “You can come dig with me sometime. I’ll show you how. And I got candy, too. Dr. Jake pulled it out of my *ear!*”

“You don’t say?” Obliging, Roger leaned down as if to search in Ty’s ear. “I guess you ate it all.”

“It was only one piece. Dr. Leo said it was magic and Dr. Jake has lots of tricks up his sleeve. But I didn’t see any more.”

“Sounds like you had quite a day.” Amused, Jay tapped Ty on one grubby knee. “Is it all right if I see your rock?”

“Okay.” Ty hesitated. “But you can’t keep it, right?”

“No. Just to look.” Just to hold something, Jay thought, that might have a connection with Jessica. “This is very cool. I used to collect rocks when I was a boy, and I had some Civil War bullets, too.”

“Did they kill anybody?” Ty wanted to know.

“Maybe.”

“Ty’s very bloodthirsty these days.” Lana caught a movement out of the corner of her eye, turned. “Hello, Doug.”

“Lana.” He studied the boy who was bouncing on the counter and trying to suppress, Doug imagined, the need to tell an adult to give him back his treasure.

Pretty kid, he thought. Looked like his mother. Absently, Doug ran a hand over Ty’s tumbled hair. “You kill anyone lately?”

Ty’s eyes went wide. “Nuh-uh. Did you?”

“Nope.” He took the spear point from Jay, turned it over in his hand, then offered it back to Ty. “Are you going to be an archaeologist?”

“I’m gonna be . . . what’s the other one?” he asked Lana.

“Paleontologist,” she supplied.

“I’m gonna be that, ’cause you get to find dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are the best. I got a sticker book about them.”

“Yeah, they’re the best. I used to have a collection of dinosaurs. They were always fighting, trying to eat each other. Remember, Dad?”

“Hard to forget the bloodcurdling screams and chomping.”

“Is he your dad?” Ty wanted to know.

“That’s right.”

“My dad had to go to heaven, but he still watches out for me ’cause that’s what dads do. Right?”

“We try.” Jay felt a fresh wave of grief wash through him.

“Do you play baseball?” Fascinated, as always, with the concept of dads, Ty began to swing his legs. “I got to play T-ball, and Mom helped. But she doesn’t catch real good.”

“Well, I like that.” Lana gave Ty a quick drill in the belly with her finger. “Do you have a minute?” Lana asked Doug. “I need to speak with you.”

“Sure.”

Since he made no move to lead her somewhere more private, she turned an exasperated look to Roger.

“Leave the big guy with me,” Roger offered. “Doug, why don’t you take Lana in the back, get her a nice cold drink?”

“Okay.” He gave Ty a tap on the nose. “See you later, Ty-Rex. What?” he demanded as Lana made a choking sound.

“Nothing. Thanks, Roger. Nice to meet you, Mr. Cullen. Ty, behave.” With that, she followed Doug into the back room.

“So.” She brushed back her hair as he dug in the mini-fridge for cold drinks. “I guess you didn’t enjoy yourself as much as I did the other night.”

He felt a little finger of unease tickle its way up his spine. “I said I did.”

“You haven’t called to ask if you could see me again.”

“I’ve been tied up with things.” He held out a Coke. “But I thought about it.”

“I can’t read your mind, can I?”

As she opened the can, he thought about the way she looked in snug jeans. “Probably just as well,” he decided.

She tilted her head. “You probably thought that was a compliment.”

“Well, my thoughts were pretty flattering.” He popped the top, gave her another once-over as he lifted the can. “I didn’t figure you owned a pair of jeans. The other times I’ve seen you, you’ve been all spruced up.”

“The other times I’ve either been working or going out to what I thought was a very nice dinner with an interesting man. Today, I’m playing with my son.”

“Cute kid.”

“Yes, I think so. If you’re going to ask me out, I’d like you to do it now.”

“Why?” He felt his neck muscles tighten when she only arched her brows. “Okay, okay. Man. You want to go out tomorrow night?”

“Yes, I would. What time?”

“I don’t know.” He felt like he was being gently, thoroughly squeezed. “Seven.”

“That’ll be fine.” With what she considered their personal business concluded, she set her briefcase on Roger’s desk. “Now that we’ve settled that, I should let you know I’m Callie Dunbrook’s lawyer.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m representing Callie Dunbrook in the matter of establishing her identity.”

Now those neck muscles bunched like fists. “What the hell does she need a lawyer for?”

“That’s between my client and myself. However, this is one matter she directed me to share with you.” Lana opened her briefcase, took out legal papers. “I drew up these papers, per her request. She instructed me to give you a copy.”

He didn’t reach out. He had to fight back the urge to hold his hands behind his back. First she maneuvers him into a date—date number two, he amended. Then she drops the bomb. And all without breaking a sweat.

All while looking like *Vogue*’s version of the casual, country mom.

“What the hell’s up with you?”

“In what context?”

He slapped the can down on the desk. “Did you come in here to wrangle another date or to serve me with legal papers?”

She pursed that pretty sex-kitten mouth. “I suppose the word ‘wrangle’ is accurate enough, if unflattering. However, I’m not serving you with papers. I’m providing you with a copy, per my client’s request. So if the question is rephrased, and you ask did I come in today to wrangle another date or to provide you with legal papers, the answer is both.”

She picked up his soft drink can, set it on the blotter so it wouldn’t leave a ring on the desk. “And if you’re uncomfortable with the idea of seeing me socially while I’m representing Callie, I’ll respect that.”

She took a small sip of the Coke. Very small, as the gesture was for effect rather than thirst. “Even though I consider it stupid and shortsighted.”

“You’re an operator,” he muttered.

“Calling a lawyer an operator is redundant. And I’ve heard all the jokes. Do you want to retract your request for a date tomorrow at seven?”

Frustration shimmered around him. "Then I'd be stupid and shortsighted."

She smiled, very, very sweetly. "Exactly. And of course, you'd deprive yourself of my very stimulating company."

"Do you carry a ribbon around so you can tie on a bow after you box a guy in?"

"What color would you prefer?"

He had to laugh, just as he had to take a step back. "I'm attracted to you. That's a no-brainer. I like you," he added. "I haven't quite figured out why. But because I do I'm going to be straight with you. I'm not relationship material."

"Maybe I just want mindless sex."

His mouth fell open. He swore he felt his jaw hit his toes. "Well . . . huh."

"I don't." She picked up his drink again, handed it to him. He looked as if he could use something a great deal stronger. "But it's sexist and narrow-minded of you to assume that because I'm female I'm trying to structure a relationship out of a couple of casual dates. Or further, that being a young widow with a small child, I'd be looking for a man to complete my little world."

"I didn't mean . . . I thought I should . . ." He stopped, took a long drink. "There's nothing I can say at this point that won't jam my foot further down my throat. I'll see you at seven tomorrow."

"Good." She held out the papers again.

He'd hoped she'd forgotten about them. "What the hell are they?"

"Very self-explanatory, but if you'd like to read them now, I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have." She solved the matter by pushing them against his hands until he had to take them.

Without his reading glasses he had to squint, but it didn't take him long to get the gist. It was right there in black and white, and clear as glass despite the legal wordsmithing.

Lana watched his face harden, those dark eyes narrow and glint as he read. Anger suited him, she decided. Odd how temper sat so sexily on a certain type of man.

A difficult man, she thought, and one she was probably

foolish to become involved with. But she knew, too well, that life was too short not to enjoy being foolish from time to time.

Her own tragedy had taught her to be careful about taking anything for granted, even if it was a burgeoning friendship with a complicated man.

Life, and all the people who passed through it, was work. Why should he be any different?

He lowered the papers, and that angry glint blasted her. "You can tell your client to kiss my ass."

She kept her expression bland, her voice mild. "I'd prefer you relayed that yourself."

"Fine. I'll do that."

"Before you do." She laid a hand on his arm, felt the muscles quiver. "I don't think it's a breach of client confidentiality to tell you that my impression of Callie is of a strong, compassionate woman who is, at the moment, in a great deal of turmoil and trying to do what's right for everyone involved. I think that would include you."

"I don't care."

"Maybe you don't. Maybe you can't." Lana closed her briefcase. "You might find it interesting that when Callie met Ty, talked to him for a few minutes, she called him Ty-Rex. Just as you did."

He blinked at her, and something moved behind his eyes that had nothing to do with temper. "So? He's talking dinosaurs, his name's Ty. It's an easy jump."

"Maybe. Still interesting though. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I don't think—"

"Uh-uh." She shook her head, put her hand on the door. "A deal's a deal. Seven o'clock. Roger has my address."

Callie worked with Jake, wrapping exhumed bones in wet cloths and plastic to preserve them. They'd been photographed, sketched and logged. Tests would reveal more.

Other scientists, students, specialists would study them and learn.

She knew there were some who would see nothing but a

tibia or a humerus. Nothing but bones, remains and the dead. That was enough for them, knowledge taken was enough for them.

And she found no fault with that approach.

But it wasn't hers.

She wondered. And in her mind from a bone she could build a human being who had lived and died. Who'd had value.

"Who was he?" she asked Jake.

"Which?"

"The femur."

"He was a man, about thirty-five. About five feet, ten inches tall." But he knew what she wanted. "He learned how to farm, how to grow food for himself and his tribe. How to hunt for it, fish for it. His father taught him, and he ran the woods as a boy."

She swiped an arm across her damp forehead. "I think the humerus, those finger bones are his, too. They're the right age, the right size."

"Could be."

"And the hand ax we found here." She squatted down. "That's what killed him. Not that one—they wouldn't have buried him with what killed him, but with one of his own. That slice in the humerus, it's a blow from a hand ax. Was there a war?"

"There's always a war." There was one in her now, Jake thought. He could see it on her face, and he knew she was using the picture of the man they were building together to keep it at bay.

"Another tribe," Jake said. "Or maybe a more personal battle within this one. He'd have had a mate, children. He could have died protecting them."

She smiled a little. "Or he could've been an asshole, gotten himself hyped up on fermented juice, picked a fight and got himself killed."

"You know, Dunbrook, you're too romantic for your own good."

"Ain't it the truth. Macho jerks aren't a modern phenom. They've been around since the dawn. Guys bashing each

other's brains out with a rock because it seems like fun at the time. It wasn't always for food or land or defense. Sometimes it was just for sheer meanness. Respecting remains, studying, learning doesn't mean painting our ancestors in pretty pastels."

"You ought to do a paper on it. 'The Macho Jerk: His Influence on Modern Man.'"

"Maybe I will. Whatever he was, he was someone's son, probably someone's father."

She circled her head to relieve the tension in her neck, then glanced over at the bullet shot of a car door slamming. Her lips twisted into a sneer. "And speaking of jerks."

"You know this guy?"

"Douglas Cullen."

"Is that so?" Jake straightened as Callie did, measured the man, as Callie did. "He doesn't look very brotherly at the moment."

"Stay out of this, Graystone."

"Now, why'd you have to go and say that?"

"I mean it." But as she boosted herself out, so did Jake.

Doug strode across the site like a man striding into a battle he had no intention of losing. He noted the man standing beside Callie, and dismissed him.

He had one purpose, and one only. If anybody wanted to give him grief about it, that was fine, too.

He was in the mood.

He stalked up to her, bared his teeth when she tilted her chin up, planted her hands on her hips. Saying nothing, he yanked the legal papers out of his back pocket.

He held them out so she could see what they were, then ripped them to pieces.

Nothing he could have done would have earned her anger—or her respect—quicker. "You're littering on our site, Cullen."

"You're lucky I didn't stuff it in your mouth then set fire to it."

Jake stepped forward. "Why don't you pick up the pieces, champ, and try it."

“Stay out!” Callie jammed an elbow into Jake’s belly and didn’t move him an inch.

Work around them stopped, reminding her of her confrontation with Dolan. It passed through her mind that she and Douglas Cullen might have more in common than either of them would like.

“This is between her and me,” Doug said.

“That much you got right,” Callie agreed.

“When we’re finished, if you want to go a round, I’m available.”

“Assholes through the ages,” Callie grumbled, and solved the problem by stepping between them. “Anybody goes a round, *we* go a round. Now pick up the mess you made and take a hike.”

“Those papers are an insult to me, and to my family.”

“Oh yeah?” Her chin didn’t just come up, it thrust. And behind her shaded glasses, her eyes went molten. “Well, accusing me of being after your mother’s money was insulting to me.”

“That’s right, it was.” He glanced down at the scraps of paper. “I’d say we’re even.”

“No, we’ll be even when I tramp around where you work and cause a stink in front of your associates.”

“Okay, right now I’m putting in some time at my grandfather’s bookstore. That’s Treasured Pages, on Main Street in town. We’re open six days a week, ten to six.”

“I’ll work it into my schedule.” She tucked her thumbs in her front pockets, stood hip-shot, using body language as an insult. “Meanwhile, get lost. Or I might just give in to the urge to kick your ass and bury you in the kitchen midden.”

She smiled when she said it—a big, wide, mean smile. And the dimples winked out.

“Christ. Jesus Christ.” He stared at her as the ground shifted under his feet.

His face went so pale, his eyes so dark, she worried he might topple over at her feet. “What the hell’s wrong with you? You probably don’t even know what a kitchen midden is.”

“You look like my mother. Like my mother with my father’s eyes. You’ve got my father’s eyes, for God’s sake. What am I supposed to do?”

The baffled rage in his voice, the naked emotion on his face were more than her own temper could hold. It dropped out of her, left her floundering. “I don’t know. I don’t know what any of us . . . Jake.”

“Why don’t you take this into Digger’s trailer?” He laid a hand on her shoulder, ran it down her back and up again. “I’ll finish up here. Go on, Cal.” Jake gave her a nudge. “Unless you want to stand here while everybody on-site laps all this up.”

“Right. Damn. Come on.”

Jake bent down to gather up the torn papers. He glanced to his left, where Digger and Bob had stopped work to watch. Jake’s long, cool stare had bright color washing over Bob’s face, and a wide grin spreading over Digger’s.

They both got busy again.

Shoulders hunched, Callie stalked toward Digger’s trailer. She didn’t wait to see if Doug followed. His face told her he would, and if he balked, Jake would see to it.

She swung inside, stepped expertly over, around and through the debris to reach the mini-fridge. “We’ve got beer, water and Gatorade,” she said without turning when she heard the footsteps climb up behind her.

“Jesus, this is a dump.”

“Yeah, Digger gave his servants his lifetime off.”

“Is Digger a person?”

“That’s yet to be scientifically confirmed. Beer, water, Gatorade.”

“Beer.”

She pulled out two, popped tops, then turned to offer one.

He just stared at her. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to handle this.”

“Join the club.”

“I don’t want you to be here. I don’t want you to exist. That makes me feel like scum, but I don’t want all this pouring down on my family, on me. Not again.”

The absolute honesty, the sentiment she could com-

pletely understand and agree with, had her reevaluating him. Under some circumstances, she realized, she'd probably like him.

"I don't much care for it myself. I have a family, too. This is hurting them. Do you want this beer, or not?"

He took it. "I want my mother to be wrong. She's been wrong before. Gotten her hopes up, gotten worked up, only to get shot down. But I can't look at you and believe she's wrong this time."

If she was walking through an emotional minefield, Callie realized, so was he. She'd gotten slapped in the face with a brother. He'd gotten kicked in the balls with a sister.

"No, I don't think she's wrong. We'll need the tests to confirm, but there's already enough data for a strong supposition. That's part of how I make my living, on strong suppositions."

"You're my sister." Saying it out loud hurt his throat. He tipped back the beer, drank.

It made her stomach jitter, and again engaged her sympathies as she imagined his was doing a similar dance. "It's probable that I *was* your sister."

"Can we sit down?"

"We'll be risking various forms of infection, but sure." She dumped books, porn magazines, rocks, empty beer bottles and two excellent sketches of the site off the narrow built-in sofa.

"I just . . . I just don't want you to hurt her. That's all."

"Why would I?"

"You don't understand."

"No, okay." She took off her sunglasses, rubbed her eyes. "Make me understand."

"She's never gotten over it. I think if you'd died, it would have been easier for her."

"A little rough on me, but yeah, I get that."

"The uncertainty, the need to believe she was going to find you, every day, and the despair, every day, when she didn't. It changed her. It changed everything. I lived with her through that."

“Yeah.” He’d been three, Callie recalled from the newspaper articles. He’d lived his life with it. “And I didn’t.”

“You didn’t. It broke my parents apart. In a lot of ways, it just broke them. She built a new life, but she built it on the wreck of the one she had before. I don’t want to see her knocked off again, wrecked again.”

It made her sick inside, sick and sorry. Yet it was removed from her. Just as the death of the man whose bones she’d unearthed was removed. “I don’t want to hurt her. I can’t feel for her what you feel, but I don’t want to hurt her. She wants her daughter back, and nothing is going to make that happen. I can only give her the knowledge, maybe even the comfort, that I’m alive, that I’m healthy, that I was given a good life with good people.”

“They stole you from us.”

Her hands clenched, ready to defend. “No, they didn’t. They didn’t know. And because they’re the kind of people they are, they’re suffering because now they do know.”

“You know them. I don’t.”

She nodded now. “Exactly so.”

He got the point. They didn’t know each other’s family. They didn’t know each other. It seemed they’d reached a point where they would have to. “What about you? How are you feeling about all this?”

“I’m... scared,” she admitted. “I’m scared because it feels like this is an arc of one big cycle, and it’s going to whip around and flatten me. It’s already changed my relationship with my parents. It’s made us careful with each other in a way we shouldn’t have to be. I don’t know how long it’ll take for us to be easy with each other once more, but I do know it’s never going to be quite the same. And that pisses me off.”

“And I’m sorry,” she added, “because your mother didn’t do anything to deserve this. Or your father. Or you.”

“Or you.” And tossing blame at her, he admitted, had been a way to keep his guilt buried. “What’s your first clear memory?”

“My first?” She considered, sipped her beer. “Riding on

my father's shoulders. At the beach. Martha's Vineyard, I'm guessing, because we used to go there nearly every year for two weeks in the summer. Holding on to his hair with my hands and laughing as he danced back and forth in the surf. And I can hear my mother saying, 'Elliot, be careful.' But she was laughing, too."

"Mine's waiting in line to see Santa at the Hagerstown Mall. The music, the voices, this big-ass snowman that was kind of freaky. You were sleeping in the stroller."

He took another sip of beer, steadied himself because he knew he had to get it out. "You had on this red dress—velvet. I didn't know it was velvet. It had lace here." He ran his hands over his chest. "Mom had taken off your cap because it made you fussy. You had this duck-down hair. Really soft, really pale. You were basically bald."

She felt something from him now, a connection to that little boy that made her smile at him as she tugged on her messy mane of hair. "I made up for it."

"Yeah." He managed a smile in return as he studied her hair. "I kept thinking about seeing Santa. I had to pee like a racehorse, but I wasn't getting out of line for anything. I knew just what I wanted. But the closer we got, the weirder it seemed. Big, ugly elves lurking around."

"You wonder why people don't get that elves are scary?"

"Then it was my turn, and Mom told me to go ahead, go sit on Santa's lap. Her eyes were wet. I didn't get that she was feeling sentimental. I thought something was wrong, something bad. I was petrified. The mall Santa... He didn't look like I thought he was supposed to. He was too big. When he picked me up, let out with the old ho ho ho, I freaked. Started screaming, pushing away, fell off his lap and right on my face. Made my nose bleed.

"Mom picked me up, holding me, rocking me. I knew everything was going to be all right then. Mom had me and she wouldn't let anything happen to me. Then she started screaming, and I looked down. You were gone."

He took a long drink. "I don't remember after that. It's all jumbled up. But that memory's as clear as yesterday."

Three years old, she thought again. Terrified, she imagined. Traumatized, and obviously riddled with guilt.

So she handled him the way she'd want to be handled. She took another sip of beer, leaned back. "So, you still scared of fat men in red suits?"

He let out a short, explosive laugh. And his shoulders relaxed. "Oh yeah."

It was after midnight when Dolan moved to the edge of the trees and looked on the site that he'd carefully plotted out into building lots. Antietam Creek Project, he thought. His legacy to his community.

Good, solid, affordable houses. Homes for young families, for families who wanted rural living with modern conveniences. Quiet, picturesque, historic and aesthetic—and fifteen minutes to the interstate.

He'd paid good money for that land. Good enough that the interest on the loan was going to wipe out a year of profit if he didn't get back on schedule and plant the damn things.

He was going to lose the contracts he already had if the delay ran over the sixty days. Which meant refunding two hefty deposits.

It wasn't right, he thought. It wasn't right for people who had no business here telling him how to run Dolan and Sons. Telling him what he could and couldn't do with land he owned.

Damn Historical and Preservation Societies had already cost him more time and money than any reasonable man could afford. But he'd played by the rules, right down the line. Paid the lawyers, spoken at town meetings, given interviews.

He'd done it all by the book.

It was time to close the book.

For all he knew, for all anyone really knew, Lana Campbell and her tree huggers had arranged this whole fiasco just to pressure him to sell them the land at a loss.

For all he knew these damn hippie scientists were playing along, making a bunch of bones into some big fucking deal.

People couldn't live on bones. They needed houses. And he was going to build them.

He'd gotten the idea when that smart-ass Graystone had been in his office, trying to throw his weight around. Big scientific and historical impact, his butt. Let's see what the press had to say when it heard some of that big impact were deer bones and ham bones and beef bones.

He always kept a nice supply in his garage freezer for his dogs.

With satisfaction, he looked down at the garbage bag he'd carted from the car he'd parked a quarter mile away. He'd show Graystone a thing or two.

And that bitch Dunbrook, too.

The way she'd come to the job site, swaggering around, blasting at him in front of his men. Brought the damn county sheriff down on him. Having to answer questions had humiliated him a second time. He was a goddamn pillar of the community, not some asshole teenager with a can of spray paint.

He wasn't going to let that go. No, sir.

She wanted to accuse him of vandalism, well, by God, he'd oblige her.

They wanted to play dirty, he thought, he'd show them how to play dirty. Every mother's son of them would be laughed out of town, and he'd be back in business.

People needed to live *now*, he told himself as he hauled up the bag. They needed to raise their children and pay their bills, they needed to hang their curtains and plant their gardens. And, by God, they needed a house to live in. Today.

They didn't need to worry about how some monkey-man lived six thousand years ago. All that was just horseshit.

He had men depending on him for work, and those men had families depending on them to bring home the bacon. He was doing this for his community, Dolan thought righteously as he crept out of the woods.

He could see the silhouette of the trailer sitting across the field. One of those dickwads was in there, but the lights were off. Probably stoned on pot and sleeping like a baby.

“Good riddance,” he muttered and shone his little penlight over the mounds and trenches. He didn’t know one hole from the other, and had convinced himself that nobody else did either.

He had to believe it, with the bank breathing down his neck, with the extra crews he’d hired coming by to see when work would start up again, with his wife worrying every day and every night about the money he’d already sunk into the development.

He walked quietly toward one of the squares, glancing at the trailer, then at the trees, when he thought he heard a rustling.

The sudden screech of an owl had him dropping the bag, then laughing at himself. Imagine, an old hand like him being spooked in the dark. Why, he’d hunted the woods around here since he was a boy.

Not these woods, of course, he thought with another nervous glance at the deep shadows in the silent trees. Most tended to steer clear of the woods at Simon’s Hole. Not that *he* believed in ghosts. But there were plenty of places to hunt, to camp, to walk, besides a place that made the hair stand up on a man’s neck at night.

It would be good when the development was done, he told himself as he kept a wary eye on the woods and picked up his bag of bones. Good to have people mowing their lawns and kids playing in the yards. Cookouts and card games, dinner on the stove and the evening news on the TV.

Life, he thought, and swiped at the sweat beading over his top lip as those shadows seemed to sway, to gather, to move closer.

His hand trembled as he reached in the bag, closed his hand over a cool, damp bone.

But he didn’t want to go down into the hole. It was like a grave, he realized. What kind of people spent their time in holes digging for bones like ghouls?

He’d get one of the shovels, that’s what he’d do. He’d

get one of the shovels and bury the bones around the holes and the piles of dirt. That was just as good.

He heard the sounds again—a plop in the water, a shifting of brush. This time he whirled, shining his narrow beam toward the trees, toward the pond where a young boy named Simon had drowned before Dolan was born.

“Who’s out there?” His voice was low, shaky, and the beam bobbed as it zigzagged through the dark. “You got no right to be creeping around out here. This is my land. I’ve got a gun, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

He wanted a shovel now, as much for a weapon as for a tool. He darted toward a tarp, caught the toe of his shoe in one of the line ropes. He went down hard, skinning the heels of his hands as he threw them out to break his fall. The penlight went flying.

He cursed himself, shoved to his knees. Nobody there, he told himself. Of course there was nobody out there at goddamn one in the morning. Just being a fool, jumping at shadows.

But when the shadow fell across him, he didn’t have time to scream. The bright pain from the blow to the back of his head lasted seconds only.

When his body was dragged to the pond, rolled into the dark water, Dolan was as dead as Simon.

PART II



The Dig

Why seek ye the living among the dead?

LUKE 24:5

Eleven



Digger was soaking wet and smoking the Marlboro he'd bummed from one of the sheriff's deputies in great, sucking drags.

He'd ditched cigarettes two years, three months and twenty-four days before. But finding a dead body when he'd gone out to relieve his bladder in the misty dawn had seemed like the perfect reason to start again.

"I just jumped right in. Didn't think, just went. Had him half up on the bank there before I saw how his skull was crushed. No point in mouth-to-mouth. Ha. No point in it then."

"You did what you could." Callie put an arm around his skinny shoulders. "You should go get some dry clothes."

"They said they'd have to talk to me again." His hair hung in tangled wet ropes around his face. The hand that brought the cigarette to his mouth shook. "Never did like talking to cops."

"Who does?"

"Searching my trailer."

She winced as she glanced over her shoulder to the grimy trailer. "You got any pot in there? Anything that's going to get you in trouble?"

"No. I gave up grass, mostly, about the same time I quit tobacco." He managed a wan smile at the Marlboro he'd smoked almost to the filter. "Maybe I'll pick both habits back up again. Jesus, Cal, the fuckers think maybe I did it." The thought of it rattled around in his belly like greasy dice.

"They just have to check things out. But if you're really worried, we'll call a lawyer. I can call Lana Campbell."

He puffed, shook his head. "No, let them look. Let them go on and look. Nothing in there has anything to do with this. If I was going to kill somebody, I'd be better at it. Didn't even know the son of a bitch. Didn't even know him."

"Tell you what, you go on and sit down. I'll see if I can find out what's happening."

He nodded and, taking her literally, lowered himself to the ground right there to stare at the faint fingers of mist that rose up from Simon's Hole.

Callie signaled Rosie to sit with him, then walked over to Jake. "What are they saying?"

"Not a hell of a lot. But you can piece part of it together."

They studied the area. The sheriff and three deputies were on the scene and had already run crime-scene tape, blocking off segments B-10 to D-15. Dolan's body was exactly where Digger had left it, sprawled facedown on the trampled grass beside the pond. The wound had bled out. She could see the unnatural shape of the skull, the depression formed from a blow, she speculated.

Good-sized rock, brought down from behind. Probably a two-handed blow, from over the head. She'd have a better picture if she could examine the skull up close.

She could see the stain of blood on dirt from where he'd fallen, started to bleed out. Then the smear of it leading toward the water.

There were footprints all over the area. Some would be her own, she thought. Some of Jake's, the rest of the team. There were light impressions of Digger's bare feet leading

straight to the pond, then others—deeper, wider apart—that clearly showed his race back to the trailer.

The cops could see that, she told herself. They could see as clearly as she did the way he'd walked to the pond, seen the body floating, dove in to pull it out. Then how he'd run back to the trailer to call nine-one-one.

They'd see he was telling the truth.

And they'd see why Ron Dolan had been on the site.

There was a green Hefty bag on the ground near B-14. Animal bones spilled out of it.

One of the deputies was snapping pictures of the body, of the bag, of the shallow ruts in the ground where, she concluded, Dolan's feet had dug in as he'd been dragged the few feet to the water.

She knew the medical examiner was on his way, but she didn't need to know much about forensics to put it together.

"He must've come out, figuring he'd salt the site with animal bones. Give us some grief. He was pissed off enough for that," she said quietly. "Maybe he thought it would discredit us somehow, stop the dig. Poor sap. Then somebody bashed his head in. Who the hell would do that? If he'd brought somebody with him, it would've been a friend, someone he knew he could trust."

"I don't know." Jake looked back at Digger, relieved to see him sitting on the ground with Rosie, drinking coffee.

"He's in bad shape," Callie stated. "Scared witless they think he did this."

"That won't hold. He didn't even know Dolan. And anybody who knows Digger will swear on a mountain of Bibles he couldn't kill anybody. Shit, some suicidal squirrel ran under his wheels a few weeks ago, and he was wrecked for an hour."

"Then why do you sound worried?"

"Murder's enough to worry anybody. And a murder on-site's going to do a hell of a lot more to delay or stop the dig than planted deer bones."

Her mouth opened and closed before she managed to speak. "Jesus, Jake, you're thinking somebody killed Dolan to screw with us? That's just crazy."

“Murder’s crazy,” he countered. “Just about every time.” Instinctively Jake put a hand on her shoulder, uniting them as Sheriff Hewitt walked toward them.

He was a tall barrel of a man. He moved slowly, almost lumbered. His brown uniform made him look like a large, somewhat affable bear.

“Dr. Dunbrook.” He nodded. “I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“I don’t know what I can tell you.”

“We can start with what you did yesterday. Just to give me a picture.”

“I got to the site just before nine. I worked that segment most of the day.” She gestured to the area, now behind crime tape.

“Alone?”

“Part of the day alone, part of the day with Dr. Graystone, as we were preparing remains for transfer. Took a break, about an hour, midday. Ate lunch and worked on my notes right over there.” She pointed to a couple of camp chairs in the shade by the creek. “We worked until nearly seven, then we shut down for the night. I picked up a sub from the Italian place in town, took it back to my room because I wanted to do some paperwork.”

“Did you go out again?”

“No.”

“You just stayed in your room at the Hummingbird.”

“That’s right. Alone,” she added before he could ask. “Look, you already know about my confrontation with Dolan yesterday, at his job site.” She looked toward her Rover, where the spray-painted graffiti stood out sharply against the dull green. “I was pissed off somebody vandalized my car. I still am. But I don’t kill somebody for vandalizing, or for knowing somebody who vandalized. If you’re looking for an alibi, I don’t have one.”

“She never left her room,” Jake said and had both Callie and the sheriff turning toward him. “Mine’s right next door. You started playing the cello about eleven. Played the damn thing for an hour.”

“So get another room if it bothers you.”

“I didn’t say it bothered me.” Just as he didn’t say he’d lain in the dark, listening to those low, somber notes, wishing for her. “She plays Bach when she’s trying to settle down and turn her head off for sleep,” he told the sheriff.

“You recognize Bach,” Callie said. “I’m impressed.”

“I know your pattern. It rarely deviates. She finally quit about midnight. I imagine if you asked whoever’s in the room on the other side of hers, they’d verify that. Her Rover was parked right outside, next to mine. I’m a light sleeper. If she’d gone out, I’d’ve heard the engine start.”

“I spoke with Mr. Dolan yesterday afternoon, in response to your complaint.” Taking his time, Hewitt reached in his pocket, pulled out a notebook. He licked his index finger, turned a page. Licked, turned, in a methodical rhythm until he found what he wanted. “When you and the deceased argued yesterday, did you physically assault him?”

“No, I—” She broke off, grabbed hold of her temper. “I shoved him, I think. A little push.” She demonstrated, pushing a hand against the solid wall of Hewitt’s chest. “If that’s a physical assault, I’m guilty. He jabbed his finger in my face a few times, so I figured we were even.”

“Uh-huh. And did you threaten to kill him if he didn’t stay out of your way?”

“No,” Callie said easily. “I said I’d stuff his head up his ass if he tried to mess with me again—which is an uncomfortable position, but rarely fatal.”

“You had a set-to with Dolan yourself, just yesterday.” Hewitt turned to Jake.

“I did. Mr. Dolan wasn’t happy with the situation. He wanted us gone, which is why, I assume, he came out here last night.” Jake sent a meaningful look toward the Hefty bag. “If he’d known anything about what we’re doing here, how we do it, why we do it, he’d have known this was useless. Problem was, he didn’t want to know anything about what we’re doing. Maybe that made him close-minded, even self-serving, but he shouldn’t have died because of it.”

“I can’t say I know a hell of a lot about what you’re do-

ing either, but I can tell you you're not going to be doing it for the next couple days, at least. I need you, all of you, to stay available."

"We're not going anywhere," Callie replied. "He didn't understand that either."

"While I got you here." Hewitt licked his finger, turned another page. "I swung by the hardware store in Woodsboro yesterday. Seems somebody bought a couple cans of red spray paint matches what's on your car over there."

"Somebody?" Callie echoed.

"I had a talk with Jimmy Dukes last night." Hewitt's face moved into a sour smile. "And his friend Austin Seldon. Now Jimmy, he claimed he bought that paint to fix up his boy's Radio Flyer, but the fact is the wagon's rusted to hell, and the paint's gone. Didn't take long for them to fess up to it."

"Fess up to it," Callie repeated.

"Now I can charge them, lock them up for it if that's how you want it done. Or I can see to it they pay to have your car fixed up again and come on around here to give you an apology face-to-face."

Callie took a deep breath. "Which one did you go to school with?"

Hewitt's smile warmed a bit. "Austin. And it happens he's married to a cousin of mine. Doesn't mean I won't lock him up, lock both of them up, if you want to press formal charges."

"When I get an estimate on the paint job, I want a certified check in my hand within twenty-four hours. They can keep the apology."

"I'll see to it."

"Sheriff?" Jake waited until Hewitt had slipped the notebook back in his pocket. "You probably know Austin well enough to understand he can be a fuck-up."

"Don't I just."

"And you know, as his friend, and as an observer of human nature, what he's capable of. What he's not."

Hewitt studied Jake, then looked behind him to where

Digger sat on the ground smoking another bummed cigarette. "I'll keep that in mind."

When the ME arrived, Callie and Jake moved to the fence, where they could watch the proceedings and stay out of the way.

"I've never been a murder suspect before," she commented. "It's not as exciting as I figured it would be. It's more insulting. As far as being each other's alibi goes, that sucks. And it's not going to hold."

"Neither is believing either of us crushed Dolan's skull over this dig." He stuck his hands in his back pockets, hit a pack of sunflower seeds he'd forgotten was there. "Hewitt's smarter than he looks."

"Yeah, I'll give you that."

He palmed the pack, slid his hand under her hair, then flicked his wrist as if making it appear from under it. Her dimples fluttered just a little in a hint of a smile as he offered the open pack.

"If he hasn't figured it out, he will, that Dolan's more of an obstacle dead than he was alive."

She munched, considered. "Cold-blooded, but accurate."

"We're going to lose days, in an already short first season. We'll have the town in an uproar, and very likely have gawkers streaming once we're cleared to start again."

Rosie walked over to join them. "They let Digger go in to change. Poor guy's pretty messed up."

"Finding a dead body a few hours old and finding one that's had a few thousand years to cure makes a difference," Callie said.

"Tell me." Rosie puffed out her cheeks, blew out the air. "Look, I don't want to hang around here while this stuff's going on. They're not going to let us work today anyhow. Figured I'd take Digger off somewhere. Maybe tool around the battlefield, maybe take in a movie later. Something. You want part of that?"

"I've got some personal business I can take care of."

Callie looked toward the trailer. "Are you sure you can handle him?"

"Yeah. I'll let him think he's going to talk me into the sack. That'll cheer him up."

"Let me talk to him first." Jake tapped Callie's shoulder. "Don't go anywhere until I get back."

"You and Jake getting tight again?" Rosie asked her when they were alone.

She looked down at the pack of sunflower seeds he'd given her. "It's not like that."

"Sugar, it's always like that with you two. Sparks just fly off the pair of you and burn innocent bystanders. That is one fine piece of machinery," she added, studying Jake's butt as he opened the door to Digger's trailer.

"Yeah, he looks good."

Rosie gave Callie a light elbow butt. "You know you're still crazy about him."

Deliberately, Callie closed the pack, jammed it in her pocket. "I know he still makes me crazy. There's a difference. What, are you trying to cheer me up, too?"

"Gotta do something. Only time I ever had cops on a dig was down in Tennessee. Had a knap-in, and some idiot rockhound fell off a damn cliff and broke his neck. That was pretty awful. This is worse."

"Yeah." Callie watched one of the deputies unzip a body bag. "This is worse."

"I told him you were hot for him," Jake said to Rosie when he came back. In what could have been taken as a casual move, he stepped between Callie and what was going on by the pond. "Perked him up enough, he's taking a shower."

"Aren't I the lucky one?" Rosie answered, and wandered off.

"I've already seen the body, Jake."

"You don't have to keep seeing it."

"Maybe you should go with Rosie and Dig."

"Nope." Jake took Callie's arm, turned her around and started walking for the open gate. "I'm going with you."

"I said I had personal business."

"Yeah, you did. I'll drive."

"You don't even know where I'm going."

"So tell me."

"I'm going to Virginia to see this Dr. Simpson. I don't need company, and I want to drive."

"I want to live, so I'll drive."

"I'm a better driver than you are."

"Uh-huh. How many speeding tickets have you racked up in the past year?"

She felt twin urges to laugh and to snarl. "That's irrelevant."

"It's extremely relevant. Added to that is the fact that I seriously doubt you want to drive to Virginia with nasty graffiti scrawled all over your ride."

She hissed out a breath. "Damn it." But because he had a point, she climbed into his car. "If you're driving, I'm in charge of the radio."

"No way, babe." He settled in, punched in the CD. "Rules of the road are the driver picks the music."

"If you think I'm listening to hours of country music, you're brain-damaged." She clicked off the CD player, tuned in the radio.

"Country music is the story-song of the American culture, reflecting its social, sexual and familial mores." He switched it back to CD. Clint Black managed to get out the first bar before she pushed radio and blasted him back with Garbage.

Arguing about the selection of music for the next fifteen minutes took the edge off the morning.

Henry Simpson lived in an upscale suburban development Callie was certain Ronald Dolan would have approved of. The lawns were uniformly neat and green, the houses on them as trim and tidy as soldiers standing for inspection.

They were all big, spreading over their lot nearly end to

end. Some had decks, some carports, some were fronted with stone while others were as white, as pristine, as a virgin's bridal gown.

But there was a sameness to it all that Callie found depressing.

There were no old trees. Nothing big and gnarled and interesting. Instead there were pretty dwarf ornamentals, or the occasional young maple. Plots of flowers were planted, primarily in island groupings. Now and again she saw one that demonstrated the owner's, or their gardener's, flare for creativity. But for the most part it was back to the soldiers again, with begonias and marigolds and impatiens lined up in static rows or concentric circles.

"If I had to live here, I'd shoot myself in the head."

"Nah." Jake checked house numbers as he crept down the cul-de-sac. "You'd paint your door purple, put pink flamingos in the front yard and make it your mission to drive your neighbors insane."

"Yeah. It'd be fun. That's it there, the white house with the black Mercedes in the driveway."

"Oh, thanks, that really narrows it down."

She had to laugh. "On the left, next drive. Now, we agreed. I do the talking."

"We did not agree. I simply said you're always talking." He pulled into the drive, shut off the engine. "Where would you live if you were picking a place?"

"It sure as hell wouldn't be here. I need to handle this, Jake."

"Yeah, you do." He got out of the car. "Some big, run-down place in the country. Something with history and character that you could fix up some. Leave your mark on."

"What are you talking about?"

"The kind of place I'd pick to live, if I were picking a place."

"You couldn't just fix it up." She dug a brush out of her purse, gave her hair a few whacks. "You'd need to research, to make sure whatever you did respected that history and character. And you'd have to have trees. Real

trees," she added as they walked up the white brick pathway to the white house. "Not these froufrou substitutes."

"The kind that can hold a tire swing."

"Exactly." Still she frowned at him. They'd never talked about houses before.

"What?"

"Nothing." She rolled her shoulders. "Nothing. Okay, here goes." She pressed the doorbell and heard the three-toned chime. Before she could drop her hand to her side, Jake took it in his.

"What are you doing?"

"Being supportive."

"Well...stand over there and be supportive." She slapped at the back of his hand. "You're making me nervous."

"You still want me, don't you?"

"Yeah, I still want you. I want you roasting marshmallows in hell. Let go of my hand before I—"

She broke off, heard his quiet chuckle, as the door opened.

The woman who answered the bell was middle-aged and had found a way to bloom there. Her hair was a glossy chestnut, cut in soft, short layers that flattered her creamy white skin. She wore narrow, cropped pants and a loose white shirt. Salmon-pink toenails peeked out of strappy sandals.

"You must be Callie Dunbrook. I'm Barbara Simpson. I'm so glad to meet you." She offered a hand. "And you're..."

"This is my associate, Jacob Graystone," Callie told her. "I appreciate you and Dr. Simpson agreeing to see me on such short notice."

"Why, it's no problem at all. Please come in, won't you? Hank was absolutely delighted at the idea of meeting you when I called him. He's just cleaning up from his golf game. Why don't we sit in the living room? Just make yourselves comfortable. I'll bring in some refreshments."

"I don't want you to go to any trouble, Mrs. Simpson."

“It’s no trouble at all.” Barbara touched Callie’s arm, then gestured toward the stone-gray leather conversation pit. “Please, have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

There was a huge, exotic and pure white flower arrangement on the lake-sized glass coffee table. The fireplace, filled for summer with more flowers and candles, was fashioned of white brick.

Callie imagined the lacquer black cabinet against the wall held some sort of fancy media center.

There were two other chairs, also in leather, in lipstick red. Her work boots were sunk into wall-to-wall carpeting a few delicate shades lighter than the conversation pit.

She studied, with some unease, the three-foot white ceramic rabbit in the corner.

“No kids,” Jake said as he dropped down on the leather cushions. “And no grandkids with sticky fingers let loose to run around in here.”

“Dad said he had a daughter from the first marriage. A couple grandkids. But they still live up north.” With more caution than Jake, Callie perched on the edge of the long line of sofa. “This, um, Barbara is his second wife. My parents never met her. They got married after my parents moved to Philadelphia. Then Simpson moved to Virginia. Lost touch.”

Jake reached over, laid a hand on Callie’s knee to stop her leg from shaking. “You’re bopping your foot.”

“No, I’m not.” She hated when she caught herself doing that. “Give me a nudge if I start doing it again.”

Then she was getting to her feet as Henry Simpson came in. He had a smooth golfer’s tan, and a little soccer ball-sized pouch under his summer knit shirt. His hair had gone into a monk’s fringe and was pure white. He wore metal-framed glasses.

Callie knew him to be in his early seventies, but he had a young man’s grip when he took her hand between both of his.

“Vivian and Elliot’s little girl, all grown up. It’s a cliché to say you don’t know where the time goes, but I sure as

hell don't. I haven't seen you since you were a few months old. God, I feel creaky."

"You don't look it. This is Jacob Graystone. My—"

"Another archaeologist." Simpson took Jake's hand and pumped. "Fascinating. Fascinating. Please, sit. Barb's just fussing with some lemonade and cookies. So it's Dr. Callie Dunbrook," he said as he took a seat and beamed at her. "Your parents must be very proud."

"I hope so, Dr. Simpson."

"You call me Hank now. Please."

"Hank, I don't know how much my father told you when he contacted you this morning to ask if you'd see me."

"He told me enough. Enough to concern me, to make me sit down and go over everything I can think of that might be of some help to you."

He looked over as his wife came in, wheeling a chrome-and-glass cart. "No, no, sit," she said, waving at Jake when he started to get up. "I'll deal with this. I can tell you've already started to talk."

"I told Barbara about my conversation with your father." Hank sat back with a sigh. "I have to be honest with you, Callie, I believe this woman who approached you is mistaken. Marcus Carlyle had a very good reputation in Boston. I would never have referred your parents to him otherwise."

"Hank." Barbara set down a tray of tiny frosted cakes, then brushed a hand over her husband's arm. "He's been worried that if there's any possibility of this being true, he's somehow responsible."

"I sent Vivian and Elliot to Carlyle. I urged them both to look toward adoption."

He closed a hand over his wife's. "I still remember when I had to tell Vivian she needed a hysterectomy. She looked so young and small, and damaged. She wanted a child, desperately. They both did."

"Why did you recommend Carlyle, specifically?" Callie asked.

"I'd had another patient whose husband was infertile.

We had explored alternate methods of conception, but they were disappointing. Like your parents, they got on waiting lists through adoption agencies. When my patient came in for her annual exam, she was overflowing with joy. She and her husband had been able to adopt a child, through Carlyle. She sang his praises, couldn't say enough about him. With my specialty, I often deal with patients who can't conceive, or can't carry a pregnancy to term. And I'm in contact with other doctors in my field."

He picked up the glass of lemonade Barbara served. "I heard good things about Carlyle. I met him shortly after at a patient's home during a dinner party. He was well spoken, amusing, compassionate and appeared to be committed to helping families form. I recall that's exactly how he put it. Forming families. He impressed me, and when Elliot and I were discussing his concerns, I gave him the recommendation."

"Did you recommend him to others?"

"Yes. Three or four other patients, as I recall. He called to thank me at one point. We discovered a mutual passion for golf and played together often after that." He hesitated. "We became what you could call professional friends. I can't help but think there's some mistake, Callie. The man I knew could not possibly be involved in kidnapping."

"Maybe you could just tell me about him."

"Dynamic." Simpson paused, nodded to himself. "Yes, that would be my first description. A dynamic man. One with a fine mind, exquisite taste, distinguished bearing. He took a great deal of pride in his work. He felt, as I recall him saying, that he was contributing something with the emphasis he'd placed on adoptions in his practice."

"What about his own family," Callie pressed. "People he was close to—personally, professionally."

"Professionally, I couldn't really say. Socially, we knew or came to know dozens of the same people. His wife was a lovely woman, a bit vague. That doesn't sound right," Simpson said with an apologetic nod. "She was quiet, devoted to him and their son. But she seemed . . . I suppose I'd say insubstantial in her own right. Not, now that I think of

it, the sort of woman you'd put with a man of his potency. Of course, it did become common knowledge that he enjoyed the company of other women."

"He cheated on his wife." Callie's voice went cold.

"There were other women." Simpson cleared his throat, shifted uncomfortably. "He was a handsome man, and again, dynamic. Apparently his wife elected to look the other way when it came to his indiscretions. Though they did eventually divorce."

Simpson leaned forward, laid a hand on Callie's knee. "Infidelity may make a man weak, but it doesn't make him a monster. And if you'll indulge me. This child who was stolen was taken from Maryland. You were placed in Boston." He gave her knee an avuncular pat, then sat back again. "I don't see how the two events could be connected."

He shook his head, gently rattled the ice in his glass. "How could he know, how could anyone, that there would be an opportunity to steal an infant at that time and place, just when an infant was desired in another place?"

"That's something I intend to find out."

"Are you still in contact with Carlyle?" Jake asked him.

Simpson shook his head, leaned back. "No, not in several years. He moved out of Boston. We lost touch. The fact is, Marcus was considerably older than I. He may very well be dead."

"Oh, Hank, how morbid." Looking distressed, Barbara lifted the cake plate to press one of the petits fours on Callie.

"Realistic," he countered. "He'd be ninety by this time, or close to it. He certainly wouldn't be practicing law. I retired myself fifteen years ago and we moved here. I wanted to escape the New England winters."

"And play more golf," Barbara added with an indulgent smile.

"Definitely a factor."

"This woman, the one in Maryland," Barbara began. "She's been through a terrible ordeal. I don't have any children, but I think anyone can imagine how she must feel. Wouldn't you think, in that sort of situation, she'd grasp at any straw?"

"I do," Callie agreed. "But sometimes when you're grasping at straws, you get ahold of the right one."

Callie leaned back against the seat in Jake's car and shut her eyes. She was glad he'd insisted on driving now. She just didn't have the energy.

"He doesn't want to believe it. He still thinks of Carlyle as a friend. The brilliant, dynamic adulterer."

Jake shoved into reverse. "And you were thinking that description sounds familiar."

So he hadn't missed that, she thought, and felt the threat of a headache coming on. "Let's just step away from that area."

"Fine." He shot backward out of the driveway.

She couldn't do it, she realized. She couldn't work up the spit for a fight. More, she just couldn't drag herself back over that old, rocky ground.

"I can only be pulled in so many directions at once."

He stopped the car, sat in the middle of the street until he'd fought back the resentment. He'd promised to help her, he reminded himself. Hell, he'd pushed his help on her. He was hardly doing that if he buried her under his own needs.

"Let's do this. We just walked out of the house. Neither one of us said anything yet."

Surprise had her asking a simple question. "Why?"

He reached out, rubbed his knuckles over her cheek. "Because I . . . I care about you. Believe it or not."

She wanted to drag off her seat belt, crawl over and into his lap. She wanted his arms around her, and hers around him. But she would never give in to her desires. "Okay, we just got in the car. My first comment is: We didn't exactly make Hank and Barb's day, did we?"

He put the four-wheeler back in drive. "Did you expect to?"

"I don't know what I expected. But I know, even though he doesn't want to believe me, I've made another person miserable and worried and guilty. And he gets to be

miserable and worried and guilty over the other patients he recommended Carlyle to. Just in case they're in the same situation. Then you figure, gee, how many people did *those* people pass to Carlyle?"

"I've been thinking that would be a vital element of his business. Client word of mouth. Upscale, infertile clients who network with other upscale, infertile clients. You'd even get some repeat customers. All this working, basically, the same base. And you get your product—"

"Jesus, Graystone. Product?"

"Think of it that way," he countered. "He would. You get the product from another pool altogether. Lower- to middle-income. People who can't afford to hire private investigators. Young working-class parents. Or teenage mothers, that kind of thing. And you'd go outside your borders. He wouldn't take his product from the Boston area while he worked in Boston."

"Don't pee in your own pool," she muttered, but she sat up again. "He'd have to have some sort of network himself. Contacts. Most people tend to want infants, right? Besides, older children won't work. Gotta stick with babies. And you wouldn't just go wandering around aimlessly hoping to find a baby to snatch. You'd need to target them."

"Now you're thinking." And the color had come back in her face, he noted. "You'd need information, and you'd want to make sure you were delivering a healthy baby—good product, good customer service, or you'd get complaints instead of kudos."

"Hospital contacts. Maternity wards. Doctors, nurses, maybe social services if we're dealing with unweds and teenagers, or very low-income couples."

"And Jessica Cullen was born?"

"In Washington County Hospital, September 8, 1974."

"Might be worth checking some records, finding Suzanne's OB, maybe jarring her memory some. You've got Lana digging for Carlyle. We can dig somewhere else."

"Maybe I am still hot for you."

"Babe, there was never any doubt. Plenty of motels off

the interstate. I can pull off at one if you really need to jump me.”

“That’s incredibly generous of you, but I still have a little self-control left. Just drive.”

“Okay, but you can let me know when that self-control hits bottom.”

“Oh, you’ll be the first. Graystone?”

He glanced over, saw her studying him with that considering expression. “Dunbrook?”

“You don’t piss me off as much as you used to.”

He caressed her hand. “Give me time.”

At seven, Lana was folding laundry. She’d scrubbed the kitchen from top to bottom, had vacuumed every inch of the house and had, to his bitter regret, shampooed the dog. She’d done everything and anything she could think of to keep her mind off what had happened to Ronald Dolan.

It wasn’t working.

She’d said terrible things to him, she thought as she balled up a pair of Tyler’s little white socks. She’d thought worse things than she’d said. Over the past fourteen months, she’d done everything in her power to ruin his plans for the fifty acres by Antietam Creek.

She’d gossiped about him, complained about him and bitched about him.

Now he was dead.

Every thought, every deed, every smirk and every word she’d said were coming back to haunt her.

The dog went barreling by her as she lifted the hamper to her hip. He set up a din of barks, attacking the front door seconds before someone knocked. “All right, all right, now stop!” She gave his collar a tug with her free hand to pull him down on his haunches. “I mean it.”

Even as she reached for the door, Tyler came streaking down the steps. “Who is it? Who is it?”

“I don’t know. My X-ray vision must be on the blink.”

“Mommy!” He fell on the dog, in a giggling fit.

Lana opened the door. She blinked at Doug as both Tyler and the dog flew at him.

“Stop it! Elmer, down! Tyler, behave yourself.”

“I got him.” To Tyler’s delight, Doug scooped him up under his arm like a football. “Looks like they’re trying to make a break for it.” Holding the squealing boy, he reached down to rub the black-and-white dog between the ears. “Elmer? Is that Fudd or Gantry?”

“Fudd,” Lana managed. “Ty loves Bugs Bunny cartoons. Oh, Doug, I’m so sorry. I completely forgot about tonight.”

“Hear that?” He turned Ty so the boy could grin up at him. “That’s the sound of my ego shattering.”

“I don’t hear nothing.”

“Anything,” Lana corrected. “Please, come in. I’m just a little turned around.”

“You look pretty.”

“Ha. I can’t imagine.”

She was wearing shorts, petal pink ones cuffed at the hem, and a pink-and-white striped T-shirt. There were white canvas shoes on her feet and little gold studs in her earlobes. She’d clipped her hair back at the nape. And automatically reached back to make sure it was in place.

She looked, he thought, like a particularly delectable candy cane.

“Question. Do you always coordinate your outfit for laundry day?”

“Naturally. Ty, would you do me a favor? Would you take Elmer up to your room for a few minutes?”

“Can I show him my room?”

“He’s Mr. Cullen. And maybe later. Just take Elmer up for now.”

Doug set Ty on his feet. “Nice place,” he said as Tyler dragged his feet up the stairs with the dog in tow.

“Thanks.” She looked distractedly around the now spotless living room with its pale green walls and simple child-resistant crate furniture. “Doug, I really am sorry. It just went out of my mind. Everything did after I heard about Ron Dolan. I just can’t get past it.”

“Something like this has everybody in town in shock.”

“I was horrible to him.” Her voice broke as she set the clothes basket on the coffee table. “Just horrible. He wasn’t a bad man. I know that, knew that. But he was an adversary, so I had to think of him as bad. That’s how I work. You’re the enemy, and I’ll do whatever it takes to win. But he was a decent man, with a wife, children, grandchildren. He believed he was right as much as I—”

“Hey.” He put his hands on her shoulders, turned her around. “Unless you want to confess to going out to Simon’s Hole and bashing him over the head, it isn’t your fault. Beating yourself up over doing your job doesn’t accomplish anything.”

“But isn’t it awful that I can think better of him dead than I did alive? What does that say about me?”

“That you’re not a saint and that you need to get out of here for a while. So let’s go.”

“I can’t.” She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture. “I’m not good company. I don’t have a sitter. I—”

“Bring the kid. He’ll like what I had in mind anyway.”

“Bring Ty? You want to bring Tyler?”

“Unless you don’t think he’d enjoy going to see a triple-X feature. But my opinion is, you can never start your sexual explorations too soon.”

“He already has his own video collection,” she replied. “You’re right, I would like to get out awhile. Thanks. I’ll run up and change.”

“You’re fine.” He grabbed her hand, pulled her to the base of the steps. No possible way he was letting her change out of those little pink shorts. “Hey, Ty-Rex! Come on, we’re going out.”

The last place Lana expected to spend her Saturday night was in a batting cage. The amusement center boasted three, and three more for children under twelve. It also held a miniature golf course, an ice-cream parlor and a driving range. It was noisy, crowded and thick with overstimulated children.

“No, no, you don’t want to club somebody with it. You just want to meet the ball.” Behind her, Doug leaned in, covered the hands she gripped on the bat.

“I’ve never played baseball. Just some catch with Ty in the front yard.”

“Don’t try pulling your deprived childhood on me as a bid for sympathy. You’re going to learn to do this right. Shoulders first. Upper body. Then your hips.”

“Can I do it? Can I?” Ty demanded from behind the protective screen.

“One generation at a time, slugger.” Doug winked at him. “Let’s get your mom started, then you and I’ll show her how real men bat.”

“Sexist remarks will not earn you any points,” Lana informed him.

“Just watch for the ball,” Doug told her. “The ball’s going to be your whole world. Your only purpose in life will be to meet that ball with this bat. You’re the bat and the ball.”

“Oh, so this is Zen baseball.”

“Ha ha. Ready?”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, nodded. And hated herself for being such a girl, for actually squealing and cringing as the ball popped out of the machine and flew toward her.

“You missed it, Mommy.”

“Yes, Ty. I know.”

“Strike one. Let’s try again.” This time Doug kept her trapped between his arms and guided her motion with the bat as the ball pitched toward them.

The knock of bat on wood, the faint vibration in her arms from the contact made her laugh. “Do it again.”

She knocked several more, all to Tyler’s wild cheers. Then testing, she leaned back, looked up so her lips nearly grazed Doug’s jaw. She waited until his gaze shifted down to hers.

“How’m I doing?” she murmured.

“You’re never going to play in the Bigs, but you’re coming along.”

He laid a hand on her hip, rested it there, then stepped back. "Okay, Ty, you're up."

Lana watched them, the man's big hands over her child's small ones on a fat plastic bat. For a moment her heart ached viciously for the man she'd loved and lost. And for a moment, she could almost feel him standing beside her, as she sometimes did when she watched their son sleep late at night.

Then there was the muffled crack of plastic on plastic, and Ty's bright and delighted laughter rang out. The ache faded.

There was only her child, and the man who guided his hands on a fat plastic bat.

Twelve

It took three days before the site was cleared for work. During that time, Callie wrote reports, spent a day in the Baltimore lab. She cooperated with the county sheriff, sitting in his office for an hour giving her official statement and answering questions.

She knew they were no closer to finding Dolan's killer. She kept her ear tuned to town gossip, read the reports in the newspaper.

And she knew when she brushed and probed at the earth that she was exploring the place where a man had been killed.

Others had died there, she thought. Through sickness, through injury. Through violence. With them, she could gather data, reconstruct and outline reasonable theories.

With Dolan, she was as much in the dark as the local police.

She could envision the lives, the social order, even the daily routine of people who'd lived thousands of years before she was born. Yet she knew next to nothing about a man she'd met—one she'd argued with.

She could dig here, and she could discover. Yet she

would learn nothing about a man who'd died only a few feet away from where she worked.

She could dig into her own past, and she *would* discover. But it would change nothing.

"You were never happier than when you had a pile of dirt and a shovel."

She turned her head, swiped absently at the sweat that dripped at her temples. And felt her heart give a quick lurch as she saw her father.

"It's a dental pick," she said and held it up. She set it aside, stepped over her camera and other tools, then boosted herself out of the hole. "I'm going to give you a break and not hug you because that's a nice suit." But she tilted her head up to kiss his cheek.

She brushed her hands on the butt of her jeans. "Is Mom with you?"

"No." He glanced around, as much with interest as a means to put off the purpose of his visit. "You look pretty busy around here."

"We're making up for lost time. We had to stop everything on-site for three days until the police cleared the scene."

"Police? Was there an accident?"

"No. I forget this isn't the world. I guess the news reports haven't gone that far north. There was a murder."

"Murder?" Shock covered his face even as he gripped her hand. "My God, Callie. One of your team?"

"No. No." She squeezed his hand, and the initial awkwardness she knew they'd both felt dropped away. "Let's get some shade."

She bent down first, grabbed two water bottles out of her cooler. "It was the guy who owned the land here, the developer. It looks like he came out, middle of the night, to salt the dig with some animal bones. He wasn't too happy with the kink we put in his plans for the land. Somebody bashed in his skull. Probably a rock. Right now we don't know who or why."

"You're not staying here? You're in a motel in town."

"Yes, I'm in a motel. I'm perfectly safe." She handed

him one of the water bottles as they walked away from the site and into the trees. “Digger’s staying here. You remember Digger from that knap-in you and Mom tried out in Montana.” She gestured toward where he worked, practically butt to butt with Rosie.

“He found the body the next morning. He’s really shaken up by it. And the cops are drilling him. He’s got a couple of D and D’s on his record, and a couple of destruction of property or something. Bar fights,” she said with a shrug. “Right now he’s scared brainless they’re going to arrest him.”

“Are you sure he didn’t. . . ?”

“Yes. As sure as I am I didn’t. Dig’s a little crazy, and he likes to mix it up, especially if there’s a female involved. But he’d never really hurt anyone. He’d never walk up behind someone and crush their skull with a rock. It’s likely it was someone from town. Someone with a grudge against Dolan. From what I gather, he had as many enemies as friends, and the sides were divided over this development.”

“What happens now, with your project?”

“I don’t know.” It was a mistake, she knew, to become overly attached to a dig. And she always made the same mistake. “We’re taking it a day at a time. Graystone’s called in an NA rep to approve the removal of remains.”

She gestured again toward Jake and the stocky man beside him. “They know each other, worked together before, so things are pretty smooth in that area.”

He looked at the man who’d been his son-in-law. The man he barely knew. “And how are you dealing with working with Jacob again?”

“It’s okay. As far as the work itself, he’s just about the best. Since I am the best, that works out. On the other front, we’re getting along better than we used to. I don’t know why except he’s being less of a pain in the ass than he was. Which, in turn, makes me less of a pain in the ass. But you didn’t drive all the way down from Philadelphia to see the project or ask me about Jake.”

“I’m always interested in your work and your life. But no, that’s not why I came.”

“You got the results of the blood tests.”

“They’re very preliminary at this point, Callie, but I . . . I thought you’d want to know.”

The Earth did not stop spinning on its axis, but in that one moment Callie’s world took that final lurch that changed everything. “I already knew.” She took her father’s hand, squeezed it hard. “Have you told Mom?”

“No. I will. Tonight.”

“Tell her I love her.”

“I will.” Elliot’s vision blurred. He cleared his throat. “She knows, but it’ll help her to know it was the first thing you said. She’s prepared as much as any of us can be prepared. I realize you’ll need to tell . . . the Cullens. I thought you might want me to go with you when you do.”

She kept staring straight ahead until she was certain she could speak without breaking. “You’re such a good man. I love you so much.”

“Callie—”

“No, wait. I need to say this. Everything I am I got from you and Mom. It doesn’t matter about the color of my eyes or the shape of my face. That’s biological roulette. Everything that counts is from you. You’re my father. And this can’t . . . I’m sorry for the Cullens. I’m desperately sorry for them. And I’m angry, for them, for you and Mom, for myself. And I don’t know what’s going to happen. That scares me. I don’t know what’s going to happen, Daddy.”

She turned into him, pressed her face to his chest.

He gathered her in, clinging as she clung. She rarely cried, he knew. Even as a child tears weren’t her response to pain or anger. When she cried, it was because the hurt went so deep she couldn’t yank it out and examine it.

He wanted to be strong for her, to be solid and sure. But his own tears choked him. “I want to fix this for you. My baby. But I don’t know how.”

“I want it to be a mistake.” She turned her hot, damp cheek onto his shoulder. “Why can’t it just be a mistake? But it’s not.” She let out a trembling breath. “It’s not. I have to deal with it. And I can only do that my way. Step

by step, point by point. Like a project. I can't just look at the surface and be satisfied. I have to see what's under it."

"I know." He dug his handkerchief out of his pocket. "Here." He dabbed at her cheeks. "I'll help you. I'll do everything I can to help."

"I know." She took the handkerchief from him. "Now dry yours," she murmured and gently wiped away his tears. "Don't tell Mom I cried."

"I won't. Do you want me to go with you, to speak to the Cullens?"

"No. But thanks." She laid her hands on his cheeks. "We'll be all right, Dad. We'll be okay."

Jake watched them. He'd known, just as Callie had known, the minute he'd seen Elliot. And when she'd broken down, cried in her father's arms, it had ripped at his gut. He watched the way they stood now, with Callie's hands on his face. Trying to comfort each other, he thought. To be strong for each other.

There was a tenderness between them he'd never experienced in his own family. Graystones, he thought, weren't adept at expressing the more gentle of emotions.

He'd describe his own father as stoic, he supposed. A man of few words who worked hard and rarely complained. He'd never doubted his parents loved each other, or their children, but he wasn't sure he'd ever heard his father actually say "I love you" to anyone. He'd have found the words superfluous. He'd shown love by seeing there was food on the table, by teaching his children, by the occasionally affectionate headlock or pat on the back.

His tribe, Jake thought, hadn't spent much time on the softer aspects of family. That had been his environment, his culture and his learning curve.

Maybe that was why he'd never gotten comfortable telling Callie the things women wanted to hear.

That she was beautiful. That he loved her. That she was the center of his world and everything that mattered.

He couldn't go back and change what had been, but he was going to stick this time. He was going to be there for her through this crisis whether she wanted him or not.

He saw her walk toward the creek. Elliot picked up the water bottles they'd dropped and, straightening, looked over at Jake.

When their eyes met, Elliot walked out of the dappled shade and back into the brutal sun that covered the site.

Jake met him halfway.

"Jacob. How are you?"

"Well enough."

"I'd like to tell you that both Vivian and I were very sorry when things didn't work out between you and Callie."

"Appreciate that. I'd better tell you that I know what's going on."

"She confided in you?"

"You could put it that way. Or you could say I pried it out of her."

"Good. Good," Elliot repeated, and rubbed at the tension at the nape of his neck. "It helps knowing she's got someone close by to lean on right now."

"She won't lean. That's one of our problems. But I'm around anyway."

"Tell me, before she comes over, should I be worried about what happened here? The murder?"

"If you mean does it have anything to do with her, I don't see how. Added to that, I'm sticking pretty close."

"And when you shut down the dig for the season?"

Jake nodded. "I've got some ideas on that." He looked past Elliot as Callie started across the field. "I've got plenty of ideas."

She knew it was a cop-out, she knew it was cowardly. **S**But Callie had Lana call Suzanne and set up a conference, in her office for the following day. She'd have put it off a little longer, but Lana had an opening at three. Making excuses to change the day was just a little more of a cop-out than Callie could justify.

She tried to work on her daily report, but she wasn't getting anywhere. She tried to channel her mind into a book, into an old movie on TV, but she couldn't pull it off.

She thought about going for a drive, but that was foolish. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do once she got there.

She wondered if she'd feel less boxed in if she gave up the motel room and camped on-site.

It was a consideration.

But in the meantime she was stuck in a twelve-by-fourteen-foot room with a single window, a rock-hard bed and her own churning thoughts.

She dropped down on the bed, opened the shoe box. She didn't want to read another letter. She was compelled to read another letter.

This time she plucked one at random.

Happy birthday, Jessica. You're five years old today.

Are you happy? Are you healthy? Do you, in some primal part of your heart, know me?

It's such a beautiful day here. There's just that faintest hint of fall in the air. The poplar trees are beginning to go yellow, and the bush in front of Grandma's house is fire-red already.

Both your grandmothers came by this morning. They know, of course they know, that this is a difficult day for me. Nanny and Pop are talking about moving down to Florida. Next year maybe, or the year after. They're tired of the winters. I wonder why some people want summer all year round.

Grandma and Nanny thought they were helping when they came over, chattering and full of plans for the day. They wanted to take me out. We'd go to the outlets, they said. The outlets over in West Virginia, and we'd start our Christmas shopping. We'd have lunch.

I was angry. Couldn't they see I didn't want to go out? I didn't want company or laughter or outlet malls. I wanted to be alone. I hurt their feelings, but I didn't care.

I don't want to care.

There are times all I want to do is scream. To

scream and scream and never, never stop. Because today you're five years old, and I can't find you.

I baked you a cake. An angel food cake and I drizzled it with pink icing. It's so pretty. I put five white candles on the cake, and I lit them and sang happy birthday to you.

I wanted you to know that, to know that I baked you a cake and put candles on it for you.

I can't tell your daddy about it. He gets upset with me, and we fight. Or worse he says nothing at all. But you and I will know.

When Doug came home from school, I cut him a slice of it. He looked so solemn and sad as he sat at the table and ate it. I wish I could make him understand that I baked you a cake because none of us can forget you.

But he's just a little boy.

I haven't let you go, Jessie. I haven't let you go.

I love you,

Mama

As she folded the letter again, Callie imagined Suzanne lighting candles, singing "Happy Birthday" in an empty house to the ghost of her little girl.

And she remembered the tears on her father's cheeks that afternoon.

Love, she thought as she put the box away, was so often thorny with pain. It was a wonder the human race continued to seek it.

But maybe loneliness was worse.

She couldn't stand to be alone now. She'd go crazy if she stayed alone in that room for much longer. She had her hand on the door when she stopped herself, when she realized where she'd been going.

To Jake, she thought. Next door to Jake. For what? To crowd out the pain with sex? To block off the loneliness with shoptalk? To pick a fight?

Any of the above would do the job.

But she didn't want to go running to him. She pressed her forehead on the door. She had no right to go running to him.

Instead, she opened her cello case. She rosined her bow, settled into the spindly chair. She thought Brahms, and just as she laid the bow on strings, she reconsidered.

She slanted a look at the wall between her room and Jake's.

Just because she couldn't go running to him, did that mean she couldn't make him come running to her?

What was one more cop-out, in the big scheme?

Even the idea of it cheered her up enough to have her smiling, perhaps a bit wickedly as she struck the first notes.

It took only thirty seconds for him to pound a fist on the adjoining wall. Grinning now, she continued to play.

He continued to pound.

A few seconds after the pounding on the wall stopped, she heard his door slam, then the pounding started on hers.

Taking her time, she set her bow aside, braced her instrument on the chair and went to answer.

He looked so damn sexy when he was pissed.

"Cut it out."

"Excuse me?"

"Cut it out," he repeated and gave her a little shove. "I mean it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. And watch who you're shoving." She shoved him back, harder.

"You know I hate when you play that."

"I can play my cello if I want to play my cello. It's barely ten o'clock. It's not bothering anyone."

"I don't care what time it is, and you can play until dawn, just not *that*."

"Oh, now you're a music critic?"

He slammed the door at his back. "Look, you only play that *Jaws* theme to annoy me. You know it creeps me out."

"I don't think there's been a shark sighting in western Maryland in the last millennium. You can sleep easy." She picked up her bow, tapped it lightly on her palm.

His eyes were sharp and green, that handsome raw-boned face livid.

He was, she thought smugly, hers for the taking.

“Anything else?”

He ripped the bow out of her hand, tossed it aside.

“Hey!”

“You’re lucky I didn’t wrap it around your throat.”

She leaned in, the better to snarl in his face. “Try it.”

He slid a hand under her chin, gave her throat a quick, threatening squeeze. “I prefer my hands.”

“You don’t scare me. You never did.”

He hauled her up to her toes. He could smell her hair, her skin. The candle she had burning on the dresser. Lust crawled along with temper in his belly. “I can change that.”

“You know what pisses you off, Graystone? You never could push me into doing everything your way. It burned your ass that I had a mind of my own. You couldn’t tell me what to do then, and you sure as hell can’t tell me what to do now. So take a hike.”

“You said that to me once before. I still don’t like it. And it wasn’t your mind that burned my ass, it was your pigheaded, ego-soaked streak of pure bitchiness.”

He caught her fist an instant before it plowed into his gut. They grappled a moment.

Then they fell on the bed.

She tore at his shirt, ripping cotton as she yanked it impatiently over his head. Her breath was already in rags. He rolled, tearing her shirt down the front and sending buttons spinning. Her teeth were digging into his shoulder, his hands were dragging through her hair.

Thank God, thank God, was all she could think when he flipped her, when his body pinned hers, when his mouth rushed down to take.

Life spurted inside her, so bright and hot she realized she’d been cold and dead. She arched against him, her mind screaming for more. And her hands streaked over him to take it.

She knew the line of bone, the play of muscle, the shape of every scar. She knew his body as well as she knew her

own. The taste of his flesh, the quick scrape of stubble when it rubbed against her.

She knew the single, shocking thrill of him.

He was rough. She'd flicked a switch in him—she'd always been able to—that turned the civilized to the primal. There was a craving in him now, a hunger that bordered on pain. To mate, hard and fast, maybe a little mean. He wanted to invade, to bury himself in wet heat and have her plunging under him.

Months of separation, of denial, of need gathered together inside him like a bruise until everything hurt. Everything ached.

She was the answer. Just as she'd always been.

He took her breast, with hands, then with mouth. She bucked under him, levered her hand between their bodies and fought with his zipper.

They rolled again, gasping for breath as they fought off jeans. The momentum had them pitching off the side of the bed, landing on the floor with a thud. Even as the fall jarred and dazed her, he was driving into her.

She cried out, a short, shocked sound, and her legs wrapped around his waist like chains.

She couldn't speak; she couldn't stop. Each violent thrust fired in her blood until her body was a mass of raw nerves. She clutched at him, her hips pistoning, her vision blurring.

The orgasm seemed to tear up from her toes, ripping her to pieces on the flight through loin, heart, head. For one instant she saw his face, vivid and clear above her. His eyes were nearly black, fixed on hers with the kind of intensity that always made her feel stripped to the bone.

Even as they glazed, as she knew he was falling out of himself, they watched her.

She'd rolled over on her stomach and lay flat out on the floor. He lay beside her, staring up at the ceiling.

A second-rate motel room, Jake thought, a senseless argument, mindless sex.

Did certain patterns never change?

This hadn't been in his plans. All they'd accomplished was a temporary release of tension. Why was it they both seemed so willing to settle for only that?

He'd wanted to give her more. God knew he'd wanted to try to give them both more. But maybe, when it came down to it, this was all there was between them.

And the thought of it broke his heart.

"Feel better now?" he asked as he sat up to reach for his jeans.

She turned her head, looked at him with guarded eyes. "Don't you?"

"Sure." He stood, hitched on his jeans. "Next time you're in the mood for a quick fuck, just knock on the wall." He saw emotion flicker over her face before she turned her head away again.

"What's this? Hurt feelings?" He heard the cruel edge in his own voice, and didn't give a damn. "Come on, Dunbrook, let's not pretty this up. You pushed the buttons, you got results. No harm, no foul."

"That's right." She wished for him to go. Wished for him to crouch down and scoop her up, to hold on to her. Just to hold on to her. "So we'll both sleep better tonight."

"I've got no problem sleeping, babe. See you in the morning."

She waited until she heard the door close, until she heard his open next door. Shut.

Then for the second time that day, she wept.

Callie told herself she was steady when she took a seat in Lana's office the next afternoon. She would do what needed to be done. This was only another step.

"You want coffee?" Lana asked her.

"No, thanks." She was afraid her system would explode if she added any more caffeine. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. In fact, you don't look like you've slept in a week."

"I had a bad night, that's all."

“This is a difficult situation, for everyone. But you, most of all.”

“I’d say it’s tougher on the Cullens.”

“No. Tug-of-war’s harder on the rope than the people pulling it.”

Unable to speak, Callie simply stared. Then she pressed her fingers to her lids. “Thanks. Thanks for getting it, for not just being the objective legal counsel.”

“Callie, have you thought about counseling?”

“I don’t need counseling.” She dropped her hands back in her lap. “I’ll be okay. Finding answers is all the therapy I need.”

“All right.” Lana sat behind her desk. “The investigator’s found a similar pattern in Carlyle’s practice after the mid-fifties. That is, a decrease in adoption petitions after Carlyle establishes himself in an area. Yet from what we’ve gathered, it appears his income and client base increase. It’s fair to assume the main source of that income was in black-market adoptions. We’re still working on tracking him after he left Seattle. There’s no record of him practicing law anywhere in the States after he closed his offices there. But we have found something else.”

“Which is?”

“His son, Richard Carlyle, who lives in Atlanta. He’s a lawyer.”

“Isn’t that handy?”

“My investigator reports he’s clean. Squeaky. He’s forty-eight, married, two children. He got his law degree from Harvard, graduated in the top five percent of his class. He worked as an associate for a prominent Boston firm. He met his wife through mutual friends on a visit to Atlanta. They courted long-distance for two years. When they married, he relocated to Atlanta, took a position as junior partner in another firm. He now has his own.”

Lana set the folder aside.

“He’s practiced in Atlanta for sixteen years, primarily in real estate. There’s nothing to indicate he lives above his means. He would have been nineteen, twenty, when you were taken. There’s no reason to believe he was involved.”

“But he must know where his father is.”

“The investigator’s prepared to approach him on that matter, if that’s what you want.”

“I do.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Her intercom buzzed. “That’s the Cullens. Are you ready?”

Callie nodded her head.

“If you want me to take over, at any time, if you want me to do the talking, or call for a break, you’ve only to give me a sign.”

“Let’s just get it over with.”

Thirteen

It was a strange moment, seeing what would have been her family had fate taken a different turn. She wasn't sure just what to do as they came in. Should she stand, remain in her chair? Where should she look? *How* should she look?

She tried to get a bead on Jay Cullen without staring. He was wearing chinos and a shirt with tiny blue and green checks, and very old Hush Puppies. A blue tie. He looked . . . pleasant, she decided. Quietly attractive and reasonably fit, and very like the fiftyish math teacher she knew him to be.

And if the shadows under his eyes—oh, God, her eyes—were any indication, he hadn't been sleeping well.

There weren't enough chairs in Lana's little office to accommodate everyone. For a moment—seconds, Callie supposed, though it seemed to drag out endlessly—everyone stood in awkward formality, like a posed photograph.

Then Lana stepped forward, her hand outstretched. "Thank you for coming, Mrs. Cullen, Mr. Cullen. I'm sorry, I didn't realize Doug would be joining you. Let me get another chair."

"I'll stand," he told her.

"It's no trouble."

He only shook his head. There was another slice of silence, like a knife cutting through the strained pleasantries. "Sit down, Mrs. Cullen. Please. Mr. Cullen. Can I get you some coffee? Something cold?"

"Lana." Doug put a hand on his mother's shoulder, turned her toward a chair. "We can't make this normal. This is hard on everyone. Let's just get it done."

"It's a difficult situation." And nothing she could do, Lana admitted, could make it less so. She moved back behind her desk, separating herself. She was here only as liaison, as legal assistance. As, if necessary, arbitrator. "As you know," she began, "I'm representing Callie's interests in the matter of her parentage. Recently, certain questions and information have come to light regarding—"

"Lana." Callie braced herself. "I'll do this. The preliminary results on the tests we agreed to have taken are in. These are pretty basic. The more complex DNA studies will take considerably more time. One of the tests, standard paternity, is really a negative test. It will show if an individual isn't the parent. That isn't the case here."

She heard Suzanne's breath catch and curled her hand tight. She had to keep level on this, logical, even practical. "The results so far give a strong probability that we're . . . biologically related. Added to those results is the other information and the—"

"Callie." Doug kept his hand on Suzanne's shoulder. He could feel her trembling under it. "Yes or no."

"Yes. There's a margin for error, of course, but it's very slight. We can't know conclusively until we locate and question Marcus Carlyle, the lawyer who handled my adoption. But I'm sitting here looking at you, and it's impossible to deny the physical similarities. It's impossible to deny the timing and the circumstance. It's impossible to deny the scientific data gathered to date."

"Almost twenty-nine years." Suzanne's voice was hardly more than a whisper, but it seemed to shake the

room. "But I knew we'd find you. I knew you'd come back."

"I—" Haven't come back, Callie wanted to say. But she didn't have the heart to say the words out loud as the tears spilled down Suzanne's cheeks.

She got to her feet, an instinctive, almost defensive move when Suzanne leaped up. It seemed her heart and mind collided, left her with shattered pieces of both when Suzanne flung her arms around her.

We're the same height, Callie thought dully. Almost exactly the same. And she smelled of some breezy summer scent that didn't suit the drama of the moment. Her hair was soft, thick, a few shades darker than her own. And her heart was hammering, hard and fast, even as she trembled.

Through her own blurred vision, Callie saw Jay get to his feet. For an instant their eyes met and held. Then, unable to bear the storm of emotion on his face, the shine of tears in his eyes, the horrible regret, Callie closed her own.

"I'm sorry." She could think of nothing else to say, and didn't know if she was speaking to Suzanne or herself. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right now." Suzanne stroked Callie's hair, her back. She crooned it, softly, as she might to a child. "It's going to be all right now."

How? Callie fought a desperate urge to break away from the hold and run. Just keep running until she found the normal cycle of her life again.

"Suze." Jay touched Suzanne's shoulder, then drew her gently away. He was there, arms ready when she turned to him.

"Our baby, Jay. Our baby."

"Ssh. Don't cry now. Let's sit down. Here, you need to sit down." He eased her down, then took the glass of water Lana held out to him. "Here, honey, come on, drink some water."

"We found Jessica." She gripped his free hand, ignored the glass. "We found our baby. I told you. I always told you."

"Yes, you always told me."

“Mrs. Cullen, why don’t you come with me?” Lana slipped a hand under Suzanne’s arm. “You’ll want to freshen up a bit. Why don’t you come with me?” she repeated, and drew Suzanne to her feet again.

It was, Lana thought, like picking up a doll. She hooked an arm around Suzanne’s waist, and gazed at Doug as she led Suzanne out of the room. His face was blank.

Jay waited until the door closed, stared at it a second longer before he turned to Callie. “But we haven’t, have we?” he said quietly. “You’re not Jessica.”

“Mr. Cullen—”

He set the glass down. His hand was shaking. He’d spill it in a minute if he didn’t put it down. But then his hands were empty. “It doesn’t matter what the tests say. The biology doesn’t matter. You know that—I can see it on your face. You’re not ours anymore. And when she finally understands that—”

His voice broke, and she watched him gather the strength to finish. “When she finally comes to grips with it, it’s going to be like losing you all over again.”

Callie lifted her hands. “What do you want me to say? What do you want me to do?”

“I wish I knew. You, um, didn’t have to do this. Didn’t have to tell us. I want . . . I don’t know if it makes sense to you or not—but I need to say that I’m proud that you’re the kind of person who didn’t just turn away.”

She felt something loosen inside her. “Thank you.”

“Whatever else you decide to do, or not do, just don’t hurt her any more than you have to. I need some air.” He walked quickly to the door. “Doug,” he said without looking back. “Take care of your mother.”

Callie dropped back in her chair, and because her head felt impossibly heavy, let it fall back. “Do you have something profound to say?” she asked Doug.

He walked over, sat down, leaning forward with his hands dangling between his knees. His gaze was sharp on her face. “All my life, as long as I can remember, you’ve been the ghost in the house. Doesn’t matter which house, you were always there, just by not being there. Every holi-

day, every event, even ordinary days, the shadow of you darkened the edges. There were times, plenty of times, I hated you for that.”

“Pretty inconsiderate of me to get myself snatched that way.”

“If it weren’t for you, everything would’ve been normal. My parents would still be together.”

“Oh Christ.” She said it on a sigh.

“If it weren’t for you, everything I did growing up wouldn’t have had that shadow at the edges. I wouldn’t have seen the panic in my mother’s eyes every time I was five minutes late getting home. I wouldn’t have heard her crying at night, or wandering around the house like she was looking for something that wasn’t there.”

“I can’t fix that.”

“No, you can’t fix it. I get the impression you had a pretty good childhood. Easy, normal, a little upscale, but not so fancy you got twisted around by it.”

“And you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t have easy or normal. If I do a quick, two-dollar analysis, it’s probably what’s kept me from making a life, up until now. Still, maybe, I don’t know, but just maybe that’s why I’m going to be able to handle this better than any of the rest of you. Easier for me, I think, to deal with flesh and blood than it was with the ghost.”

“Jessica’s still a ghost.”

“Yeah, I get that. You wanted to push her away when she hugged you, but you didn’t. You didn’t push my mother away. Why?”

“I don’t have any problem being a bitch, but I’m not a heartless bitch.”

“Hey, nobody calls my sister a bitch. Except me. I loved you.” The words were out before he realized they were there. “Hell, I was only three, so it was probably the way I’d have loved a new puppy. I hope we can try to be friends.”

She let out a shaky breath. Drawing another in, she studied him. His eyes were direct, she thought. And a deep brown. Mixed with the turmoil she saw in them was a kindness she hadn’t expected.

“It’s not as hard to deal with having a brother as it is . . .” She shot a glance toward the door.

“Don’t be too sure. I’ve got time to make up for. Such as, what’s with that Graystone character? You’re divorced, right, so why’s he hanging around?”

She blinked. “Are you kidding?”

“Yeah, but I might not be later.” He leaned a little closer. “Tell me about this son of a bitch Carlyle.”

Callie opened her mouth, then shut it again as the door opened. “Later,” she murmured and rose again as Lana brought Suzanne back in.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall apart that way. Where’s Jay?” she asked, looking around.

“He went outside, for some air,” Doug told her.

“I see.” And her lips firmed and thinned.

“Give him a break, Mom. It’s a lot for him to take in, too.”

“This is a happy day.” She took Callie’s hand as she sat down. “We should all be together. I know you’re overwhelmed,” she said to Callie. “I know you’ll need some time, but there’s so much I want to talk to you about. So much I want to ask you. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Suzanne.” Callie looked down at their joined hands. “What happened to you, to all of you, was despicable. There’s nothing we can do to change any of it.”

“But we know now.” Her voice bubbled, a kind of joyful hysteria. “We know you’re safe and well. You’re here.”

“We don’t know. We don’t know how, we don’t know why. We don’t know who. We have to find out.”

“Of course we do. Of course. But what’s important is you’re here. We can go home. We can go home now and . . .”

“What?” Callie demanded. Panic snapped into her. No, she hadn’t pushed Suzanne away before. But she would now. She had to. “Pick up where we left off? I had a whole life between then and now, Suzanne. I can’t make up for all you lost. I can’t be your little girl, or even your grown daughter. I can’t give up what I am to be what you had. I wouldn’t know how.”

“You can’t ask me to just walk away, to just close it off, Jessie—”

“That’s not who I am. We need to find out why. You never gave up,” she said as Suzanne’s eyes filled again. “That’s something we have in common. I don’t give up either. I’m going to find out why. You can help me.”

“I’d do anything for you.”

“Then I need you to take some time, to think back. To remember. Your doctor when you were pregnant with me. The people in his office, the people you had contact with during the delivery. The pediatrician and his office staff. Who knew you were going to the mall that day? Who might have known you or your habits well enough to be there at the right time. Make me a list,” Callie added. “I’m a demon with lists.”

“Yes, but what good will it do?”

“There’s got to be a connection somewhere between you and Carlyle. Someone who knew about you. You were a target. I’m sure of it. It all happened too quickly, too smoothly for it to have been random.”

“The police . . .”

“Yes, the police,” Callie said with a nod. “The FBI. Get me everything you can remember from the investigations. Everything you have. I’m good at digging. Good at putting what I uncover into a cohesive picture. I need to do this for myself, and for you. Help me.”

“I will. Of course I will. Whatever you want. But I need some time with you. Please.”

“We’ll figure something out. Why don’t I walk you down to your car?”

“Go ahead, Mom.” Doug walked to the door, opened it. “I’ll be right there.”

He closed the door behind them, leaned back on it as he looked at Lana. “Sort of takes ‘dysfunctional family’ to a whole new level. I want to thank you for helping my mother pull herself together.”

“She’s very strong. She was entitled to break down. I nearly did myself.” She let out a breath. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t know yet. I don’t like change.” He walked to her window, stared out at her pretty view of the park. “Life’s less complicated if people just leave things alone.”

“Take it from me, nothing stays the same. Good, bad or indifferent.”

“People won’t let it. Callie isn’t the type to leave anything alone, not for long. She shoots off energy, a kind of restlessness even when she’s standing still. What happened here is just . . . a domino effect. One domino pushed over, to bump into the rest. To change the whole pattern.”

“And the old pattern was more comfortable for you.”

“I understood the old pattern.” He shrugged. “But it’s been knocked to hell. I just sat here and had a conversation with . . . with my sister. The second one I’ve had in the last few days. Before that, the last time I saw her, she was bald and toothless. It’s all just a little surreal.”

“And they all need you to varying degrees.”

He frowned, turned back toward her. “I don’t think so.”

“It was very obvious to this objective observer. And it explains to me why you keep going away, and why you keep coming back.”

“My job takes me away, and brings me back.”

“Takes you away, to a point,” she agreed. “You wouldn’t have to come back. Oh, a visit now and again, as family members do. But you also come back for them, for yourself. I like that about you. I like a lot of things about you. Why don’t you take a break from all this tonight. Come over. I’ll fix you a home-cooked meal.”

He didn’t know if he’d ever seen a prettier woman. At least not one so perfectly put together. Or one who managed to have a soothing way about her even as she pushed a man into a corner.

“I’m not planning to stay. You need to know that.”

“I was offering to grill some chicken, not clean out a closet so you could move in.”

“I want to sleep with you.”

Since he looked almost angry when he said it, Lana lifted her eyebrows. “Well, that’s not on tonight’s menu. It

may very well be on it sometime in the near future. But I'm still not cleaning out a closet."

"I tend to screw up relationships, which is why I stopped getting in them."

"I'll let you know when you're screwing this one up." She stepped toward him, brushed her lips lightly over his. "Grilled chicken, Doug. Sex, unfortunately, can't be for dessert as I have Ty to consider. But I might be seduced into heating up the peach cobbler I have in the freezer. It's Suzanne's Kitchen," she added with a smile. "And always a hit in our house."

It was going to get complicated, he thought. It was bound to get complicated. The woman, the child, the buttons each of them pushed in him. But he wasn't ready to walk away from it. Not yet.

"I've always had a thing for my mother's peach cobbler. What time's dinner?"

Jay was staring at the pot of geraniums on the porch when Callie brought Suzanne out. His gaze went to Suzanne's face first, Callie noted. The way a man might look at a barometer to prepare for expected climatic conditions.

"I was just coming back up."

"Were you?" Suzanne said coolly.

"I needed a moment to clear my head. Suzanne." He reached out to touch her arm, but she moved back in a gesture as clear as a slap.

"We'll talk later," she said, in that same icy tone. "I'd think you'd have something to say to your daughter."

"I don't know what to say, or what to do."

"So you walk away." Deliberately, Suzanne turned, pressed her lips to Callie's cheek. "Welcome home. I love you. I'm going to wait in the car for Doug."

"I'll never make it up to her," he said softly. "Or you."

"You don't have anything to make up to me."

He turned to her then, though he kept a foot between them, kept his hands at his sides. "You're beautiful. It's the

only thing I can think of to say to you. You're beautiful. You look like your mother."

He started down the steps just as Doug came out the door.

"You're going to be in the middle of that." Callie nodded toward the car as Jay strode toward it.

"I've been in the middle of that all my life. Look, I wasn't going to ask anything, but will you go by sometime and see my grandfather? The bookstore on Main."

She massaged her temples. "Yeah. Okay."

"Thanks. See you around."

"Doug." She walked down a step as he reached the sidewalk. "Maybe we can have a beer sometime. We can give that being friends a try, and you can fill me in on Cullen family dynamics. I don't know where to step around them."

He gave a short laugh. "Join the club. Family dynamics? We'd better get a keg."

She watched him get in the car, and got a reflection of those dynamics from the positions the family took. Doug at the wheel, Suzanne riding shotgun and Jay in the back.

Where would they have put her? she wondered. She started toward her own car, then spotted Jake leaning on the hood.

It put a hitch in her stride, and though she recovered quickly she was sure he'd noticed. He rarely missed anything. Deliberately, she took out her sunglasses, put them on as she walked up to him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Happened to be in the neighborhood."

She rocked back on her heels. "Where's your ride?"

"Back at the dig. Sonya dropped me off. Great pins on that girl. They go all the way up to her clavicle." He offered a broad grin.

"Her legs, and the rest of her, are twenty."

"Twenty-one. And Dig's already staked his claim, so my hopes there are dashed."

Callie took out her keys, jingled them. "Does your being here, in the neighborhood, mean you're not mad at me anymore?"

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Maybe I used you, but you didn’t exactly put up a fight.”

He took her arm before she could stalk by him. “We used each other. And maybe I’m just a little pissed it was so easy for both of us. Want to fight about it?”

“I haven’t got a good fight in me just now.”

“Figured.” He moved his hands to her shoulders, rubbed. “Rough in there?”

“Could’ve been worse. I don’t know how, but I’m sure it could’ve been. What the hell are you doing here, Jake? Riding to the rescue?”

“No.” He plucked the keys away from her. “Driving.”

“It’s my car.”

“And I’ve been meaning to ask you. When are you going to take it in and have this crap dealt with?”

She frowned at the spray paint. “I’m getting kind of used to it. It makes a statement. What are you doing?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Dunbrook, I’m opening the car door for you.”

“Is my arm broken?”

“It could be arranged.” He decided to wipe the amusement off her face a different way, and turned it to shock as he scooped her off her feet and dumped her in the car.

“What’s got you lathered up?”

“The same thing that always lathers me up.” He lectured himself as he walked around the car, yanked open the driver’s door, got in.

“Fuck it,” he decided, and dragged her across the seat, pinned her arms and plundered her mouth.

She bucked, wiggled and tried to find some level ground as her system spun in mad circles. “Stop it.”

“No.”

She was strong, but he’d always been stronger. It was just one of the things about him that both infuriated and attracted her. His temper was another. It could spike out of nowhere and simmer in some hidden pot until it exploded all over the unwary.

Like now, she thought as his mouth ravished hers.

You could never be sure about Jacob. You could never be quite safe. And that fascinated her.

She fought to get her breath back as his mouth tore down to her throat.

“A minute ago you’re mad because we used each other last night. Now you’re ready to do it again, in broad daylight on a public street.”

“You’re inside me, Callie.” He took her lips again, took the kiss long and hot and deep. Then shoved her away. “Like a goddamn tumor.”

“Get me a scalpel. I’ll see what I can do about it.”

He tapped his fingers on the wheel as he turned his head and studied her, coolly now, through his shaded lenses. “Took your mind off things for a couple minutes, didn’t it?”

“A right jab would’ve done the same.”

“Since I don’t hit women, even you, that was the best I could do. Anyway, I didn’t come here to fool around in the car or trade insults, as entertaining as both are.”

“You started it.”

“Keep pushing, and I’ll finish it. We rented a house.”

“Excuse me?”

“Our own little love nest, sugarplum. Punch me with that fist and I might just change my policy on hitting women.” He started the car. “The motel rooms are too small, and too inconvenient. The team needs a local base.”

She’d been thinking the same herself, but it annoyed her he’d gotten to the details of it quicker. “We’ll be shutting down for the season in a few months. The motel’s cheap, and it’s only you, me and Rosie who’re staying there nightly.”

“And all three of us need more room to work. Dory, Bill and Matt will be bunking there, too. And we got us a pair of horny kids from West Virginia this afternoon.”

“And these horny kids are going to . . .”

“Bang each other as often as possible. He’s got some digs under his belt, and he’s working on his master’s. Anthro. She’s green as grass, but willing to do what she’s told.”

She propped her feet on the dash and thought about it. “Well, we need the hands.”

“We do indeed. And Leo could use a place to stay if and when he needs one. Temporary or visiting diggers and specialists can use it. We need storage. We need a kitchen.”

He headed out of town knowing she was stewing and trying to think of a better argument.

“And,” he added, “you need a base here after the season. We’ve got other digging to do.”

“We?”

“I said I was going to help you. So we’ll have a base of operations for that, too.”

She frowned as he turned off the road onto a bumpy gravel lane. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to make of you, Jake. One minute you’re the same annoying jackass you always were, and the next you’re an annoying jackass who’s trying to be nice.” She tipped down her glasses, peered at him over the rims. “You gaslighting me?”

He only smiled and gestured by jerking up his chin. “What do you think?”

It was big, and sheltered by trees. Part of the creek snaked alongside it. An active part, Callie thought as she got out of the car and heard the water gurgling. It was a frame structure that looked as if it had been built in three parts. A basic sort of ranch style, then the second-story addition, then an offshoot to the side that boasted a short deck.

The lawn needed to be mowed. The grass brushed her ankles as she walked across it toward the front of the house.

“Where’d you find it?”

“One of the towners who came by to see the dig mentioned it to Leo. It’s her sister’s place. Marriage busted up a few months ago, and they’re renting the house until they figure out what they want to do. There’s some furniture. It’s not much, just stuff neither of them took. We got a six-month lease that comes in cheaper than the motel.”

She liked the feel of the place, but wasn’t ready to admit it. “How far are we from the site? I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Six miles.”

“Not bad.” She strolled, casually, to the door, tried to turn the knob. “Got the key?”

“Where’d I put that?” He came up behind her, showed her an empty hand, snapped his wrist, showed her the key.

He tugged a reluctant grin out of her. “Just open the door, Houdini.”

Jake unlocked the door, then once again scooped her off her feet.

“What is *with* you?”

“Never did carry you across the threshold.” He closed his mouth over hers for ten hot, humming seconds.

“Cut it out. And we didn’t have a threshold.” Her stomach muscles were balled into a knot, and she shoved against him. “The hotel room in Vegas where we spent our wedding night doesn’t count.”

“I don’t know. I’ve got some fond memories of that hotel room. The big, heart-shaped tub, the mirror over the bed, the—”

“I remember it.”

“I remember you, lying in that tub with bubbles up to your chin and singing ‘I’m Too Sexy.’”

“I was drunk.”

“Yeah, you were plowed. I’ve had a soft spot for that song ever since.” He dropped her to her feet, gave her butt a casual pat. “So what we’ve got is the living room—common area—here.”

“What the hell happened to that sofa?”

He glanced toward the shredded arm of a couch covered with a brown, beige and red checked print. “They had cats. It was in the half-finished family room downstairs. Kitchen’s back there, appliances come with it. There’s an eating area. Bath and a half on this level, another upstairs along with three bedrooms. Another bedroom or office space over there, and over here . . .”

He crossed the living room, turned and gestured toward a good-sized room with a sliding glass door and the pretty little deck beyond it. Even as Callie opened her mouth, he shook his head.

“Too late, babe. I already called dibs on this.”

“Bastard.”

“Nice, especially after I saved you the biggest bedroom upstairs. We can move in tomorrow.”

“Fine.” She walked through the room and onto the deck. “Quiet here.”

“It won’t be once we’re in it.”

It felt normal, she realized. Weird as it was, this felt normal after the hour in Lana’s office. “Remember that place we stayed in outside Cairo? We were only there a few weeks.”

“A few too many.”

“It was only a little snake.”

“It didn’t look so little when it slithered into the bathroom with me.”

“You screamed like a girl.”

“I certainly did not. I bellowed like a man. And though I was bare-assed naked, I dispatched it with my bare hands.”

“You beat it to a pulp with a towel rod.”

“Which I ripped from the wall with my bare hands. Same thing.”

She could still see him, gloriously naked, not a little wild-eyed, with the limp snake draped over the towel bar.

Those were the days.

“We had a good time, anyway. We had some good times.”

“Plenty of them.” He laid a hand on the base of her neck. “Why don’t you let it out, Callie? Why do you have such a hard time letting anything out but your mad?”

“I don’t know. She fell apart, Jake. She just went to pieces up there in Lana’s office. She was holding on to me so tight I could barely breathe. I don’t know what I felt, what I feel. I can’t identify it. But I started thinking, what would they be like, what would my parents be like, what would I be like if none of this had happened? If she hadn’t turned away for that few seconds, and I’d grown up... here.”

When she started to move away, Jake tightened his grip, held her in place. “Just keep talking. Pretend I’m not here.”

“That minor in psych’s showing,” she told him. “I just

wondered, that's all. What if I'd grown up Jessica? Jessica Lynn Cullen would have a keen fashion sense. She'd drive a minivan. Probably working on her second kid by now. Maybe a fine arts degree, which she uses to decorate her house, tastefully. She thinks she'll go back to work when the kids are older, but for now she's president of the PTA and that's enough for her. Or maybe she's Jessie. Maybe Jessie stuck. That'd be different."

"How?"

"Jessie, she'd have been a cheerleader. Bound to be. Captain of the squad. Probably had a crush on the captain of the football team, and they were a pretty hot item through high school, but it didn't last. Jessie, she'd've married her college sweetheart, picking him out of the several guys who liked to sniff around her because she was so exuberant and fun. Jessie keeps scrapbooks and works part-time, retail, to help supplement the income. She's got a kid, too, and enough energy to handle all the balls she has to juggle."

"Is she happy?"

"Sure. Why not? But neither of those women would spend hours digging, or know how to identify a six-thousand-year-old tibia. They wouldn't have a scar on their left shoulder where they fell on a rock in Wyoming when they were twenty. They sure as hell wouldn't have married you—points for them."

She glanced back over her shoulder. "You'd have scared the shit out of them. And for all those reasons, including having the bad judgment to marry you, I'm glad I didn't turn out to be either one of them. I could think that even when Suzanne was sobbing in my arms. I'm glad I'm who I am."

"That makes two of us."

"Yeah, but we're not very nice people. Suzanne wants one of those two women—her Jessica, her Jessie. More, she wants the child back. I'm using that to push her to help me get the answers I need."

"She needs them, too."

"I hope she understands that when we get them."

Fourteen



Callie worked like a demon, logging ten-hour days in the sweltering heat, probing, brushing, detailing. She dug in the muck churned up by a vicious thunderstorm and stewed in the summer soup August poured into Maryland.

At night she composed reports, outlined hypotheses, studied and sketched sealed artifacts before they were shipped to the Baltimore lab. She had a room of her own, with a sleeping bag tossed on the floor, a desk she'd picked up at a flea market, a Superman lamp she'd snagged from a yard sale, her laptop, her mountain of notes and her cello.

She had everything she needed.

She didn't spend much time downstairs in what they called the common area. It was, she'd decided, just a little too cozy. As most of the team spent evenings in town or at the site, Rosie tended to make herself scarce—obviously and regularly—leaving Callie alone with Jake.

It was just a bit too much like playing house, just a bit too much the way it had once been when they'd burrowed in together in a rental or a motel during a dig.

Her feelings for him were much closer to the surface than she'd wanted to admit. And managed to be dug deeper

as well. The fact was, she realized, she'd never gotten over Jacob Graystone.

He was, unfortunately, the love of her life.

The son of a bitch.

She'd known they'd be tossed together again on a dig. It was inevitable. But she'd thought she'd have more time to resolve her emotions where he was concerned, and she'd been so sure she could handle those emotions. Handle Jake.

But he'd stirred up everything again, then added the unexpected to the mix. He was offering friendship.

His own brand of friendship, she mused as she doodled on a pad. You could never be sure if he'd pick on you, kiss you or pat your head as if you were a child. But it was a different path from the one they'd traveled before.

Maybe it was because of all that had happened to her since coming here, but she wondered where she and Jake might have ended up if they'd tried a couple of other paths the first time around. If they'd taken time to be friends, to talk about who they were instead of assuming they knew.

A single moment could change a life. She knew that firsthand now. What if instead of that last blowup where they'd accused each other of everything from stupidity to unfaithfulness, where they'd slapped the word *divorce* in each other's faces before he'd stormed off, they'd stuck it out?

If they'd passed through that one moment together, would they have fought for their marriage, or stepped back from it?

No way to know for sure, but she could speculate, just as she speculated about the tribe who'd built their settlement along the creek. As she speculated about what turns her life might have taken if she'd grown up with the Cullens.

If she and Jake had gotten through that moment intact, if they'd continued to scrape at the surface, digging down, they might have found something worth keeping.

Marriage, family, partnership and yes, even the friendship he seemed determined to forge this time around.

She hadn't trusted him, she admitted now. Not where

other women were concerned. He'd had a reputation with women. She'd heard of "Jake the Rake" before she met him.

It wasn't something she'd held against him until she'd fallen for him. Then, she admitted, it had become something lodged in her mind, something she hadn't been able to pry out and discard.

She hadn't believed he loved her, not as much as she loved him. And that had made her crazy.

Because, she thought with a sigh, if she loved him more, it gave him more control. It gave him the power. So she'd pushed, determined to make him *prove* he loved her. And every time he'd come up short, she'd pushed harder.

But who could blame her? The close-mouthed son of a bitch had never told her. Not straight out, not plain and simple. He'd never once said the words.

Thank God the whole thing had been his fault.

Since the conclusion made her feel better, she worked another thirty minutes before her stomach announced the can of Hormel's chili she'd nuked for dinner had worn off.

She glanced at her watch and slipped downstairs to see what she could grab for her habitual midnight snack.

She didn't switch on any lights. There was enough of a moon to guide her and she'd always had good instincts where food was concerned.

She padded barefoot into the kitchen on a direct line with the fridge. As she reached for the handle, the lights flashed on.

Her heart leaped up to her throat and popped out of her mouth in a thin scream. She managed to turn it into a curse.

"Goddamn it, Graystone," she said as she whirled on him. "What's the matter with you? Why'd you do that?"

"Why are you skulking around in the dark?"

"I'm not skulking. I'm moving quietly in consideration of others as I seek food."

"Yeah." He glanced at his watch. "Twelve-ten. You're a creature of habit, Dunbrook."

"So what?" Spotting a bag of Suzanne's Kitchen

chunky-chip cookies on the counter, she bypassed the fridge and snatched them up.

“Hey, I bought those.”

“Bill me,” she mumbled with her mouth full.

She pulled open the fridge, took out a jug of orange juice. He waited while she poured a glass, washed down the first cookie.

“You know, that’s a revolting combination. Why don’t you drink milk?”

“I don’t like it.”

“You should learn. Give me the cookies.”

She wrapped her arms around the bag possessively. “I’ll buy the next bag.”

“Give me a damn cookie.” He pulled the bag away, dug in.

With one clamped between his teeth, he got out the milk, poured a short glass.

He was wearing nothing but black boxers. She wasn’t going to mention it or complain. Even an ex-wife was entitled to enjoy the view. He had some build on him, she thought. Lanky and tough at the same time, with a few interesting scars to keep it from being too pretty.

And she knew he was that same dusky gold color all over.

There’d been a time when she wouldn’t have resisted—couldn’t have resisted—jumping him at a moment like this and sinking her teeth into whatever spot was the handiest.

Then they’d have made love on the kitchen table, or the floor, or if they’d been feeling a little more civilized, they’d have dragged each other into bed.

Now she grabbed the bag back, ate another cookie and congratulated herself on her stupendous personal control.

“Come take a look at this,” he told her and started out of the kitchen. “Bring the cookies.”

She didn’t want to go with him, to be around him at midnight when he was all but naked and the smell of him had her system quivering. But banking on that stupendous personal control, she followed him into his makeshift office.

He hadn’t gone for a desk, but had jury-rigged a long work space out of a sheet of plywood and a couple of saw-

horses. He'd set up a large display board and pinned various photographs, sketches and maps to it.

Even with a cursory glance she could see his thought process, his organization of data. When it came to the work, at least, she knew his mind as well as her own.

But it was the drawing on his worktable, one he'd anchored with an empty beer bottle and a chunk of quartz, that grabbed her attention.

He'd taken their grid, their site survey, their map and had created the settlement with paper and colored pencils.

There was no road now, no old farmhouse across it. The field was wider, the trees ranging along the creek, spreading shadows and shade.

Around the projected borders of the cemetery he'd drawn a low wall of rock. There were huts, grouped together to the west. More rocks and stone tools collected in the knapping area. Beyond, the field was green with what might have been early summer grain.

But it was the people who made the sketch live. Men, women, children going about their daily lives. A small hunting party walking into the trees, an old man sitting outside a hut, and a young girl who offered him a shallow bowl. A woman with a baby nursing at her breast, the men in the knapping area making tools and weapons.

There was a group of children sitting on the ground playing a game with pebbles and sticks. One, a young boy who looked to be about eight, had his head thrown back and was laughing up at the sky.

There was a sense of order and community. Of tribe, Callie noticed. And most of all, of the humanity Jake was able to see in a broken spear point or a shattered clay pot.

"It's not bad."

When he said nothing, just reached in the bag for another cookie, she gave in. "Okay, it's terrific. It's the kind of thing that reminds us why we do it, and will help Leo make points when he shows this along with the gathered data to the money people."

"What does it say to you?"

"We lived. We grew and hunted our food. We bore our

young and tended the old. We buried our dead, and we didn't forget them. Don't forget us."

He trailed a finger down her arm. "That's why you're better at lecturing than I am."

"I wish I could draw like this."

"You're not too bad."

"No, but compared to you, I suck." She glanced up. "I hate that."

When he touched her hair, she shifted away, then opened the screen on the sliding doors and stepped out on his deck.

The trees were silvered from the moon, and she could hear the gurgle of the creek, the chorus of cicadas. The air was warm and soft and still.

She heard him step out behind her and laid her hands on the rail. "Do you ever . . . When you stand on a site, especially if you've focused in so it's like you're alone there. You know?"

"Yes, I know."

"Do you ever feel the people we're digging down to? Do you ever hear them?"

"Of course."

She laughed, shook back her hair. "Of course. I always feel so privileged when I do, then after, when it passes, I just feel dopey. Hating the dopey stage, I've never said anything about it."

"You always had a hard time being foolish."

"There's a lot to live up to. My parents, my teachers, the field. No matter how much lip service is paid, if you're a woman in this, you're always going to be outnumbered. A woman acts foolish in the field, starts talking about hearing the whispers of the dead, guys are going to dismiss her."

"I don't think so." He touched her hair again. "One thing I never did was dismiss you."

"No, but you wanted me in the sack."

"I did." He brushed his lips over the back of her neck. "Do. But I was nearly as aroused by your mind. I always respected your work, Cal. Everyone does."

Still, it warmed her to hear it when he'd never said it to

her before. "Maybe, but why take the chance? It's better to be smart and practical and dependable."

"Safer."

"Whatever. You were the only foolish thing I ever did. Look how that worked out."

"It's not finished working out yet." He ran his hands down her arms in one long, possessive stroke. Pressed his face into her hair.

She heard his breath draw in. Draw her in.

Her body poised for more, for the flash and grab. Struggled to resist it. It would be a mistake, she knew it would be yet another mistake.

"I love your hair, especially when you let it fall all over the place like this. I love the way it feels in my hands, the way it smells when I bury my face in it."

"We're not going to have a repeat of the other night." Her hands white-knuckled on the deck rail. "I initiated that, and I take responsibility for it. But it's not going to happen again."

"No, it's not." He scooped her hair to the side and rubbed his lips at the nape of her neck, nibbled his way to her ear. "This time it's going to be different."

A hot tongue of lust licked along her skin until she dug her fingers into wood to keep them from reaching back and grabbing him. Her knees were going shaky, and the long, liquid pull in her belly nearly made her moan. "Whatever the approach, Tab B still fits into Slot A."

His chuckle was warm against her throat. "It's all the getting there, Cal. Did you ever think the sex was always the easy part for us? We just fell into it, into each other. Fast, hard, hot. But you know what we never did?"

She stared straight ahead, fighting to keep the moan trapped. She told herself to turn and push him away. To walk away. But then he wouldn't be touching her like this. She wouldn't feel like this.

God, she'd missed feeling like this.

"I don't think we skipped anything."

"Yeah, we did." His arms came around her waist. She waited for his hands to stroke up to her breasts. She

wouldn't have stopped him. She ached for that first rough grip of possession, that one instant of shock before she knew she would take, and be taken.

Instead he only drew her back against him, nuzzling. "We never romanced each other."

Her pulse kicked in a dozen places in her body even as she felt herself starting to melt back against him. "We're not romantic people."

"That's where you're wrong." He brushed his cheek over her hair. He wanted to wallow in the scent, in the texture. Wanted, more than he'd ever imagined, to feel her yield. "Where I was wrong. I never seduced you."

"You never had to. We didn't play games."

"All we did was play." He brushed his lips over her shoulder, back along the curve of her neck. And felt her tremble. "Why don't we get serious?"

"We'll just mess each other up again." Her voice went thick, surprising them both. "I can't go through that again."

"Callie—"

Her hand closed tight over his, squeezed. "There's someone out there," she whispered.

She felt his body stiffen. He kept his lips close to her ear, as if still nibbling. "Where?"

"Two o'clock, about five yards back, in the cover of the trees. I thought it was just another shadow, but it's not. Someone's watching us."

He didn't question her. He knew she had eyes like a cat. Still holding her, he tilted his head so he could scan the dark, gauge the ground. "I want you to get pissed off, push away from me and go inside. I'll come after you."

"I said we're not doing this. Not now, not ever." She shoved back, twisted away. Though her voice was pitched toward anger, her eyes stayed steady and calm on his. "Go find one of the eager grad students who like to worship you. God knows, there are plenty of them."

She turned on her heel and strode back into the house.

"You're not throwing that in my face again." He stormed in behind her, slammed the glass door shut. He

gave her a light shove to keep her moving, and snagged a pair of jeans on the way.

“Make sure all the doors are locked,” he ordered, and slapped off the lights in his office. “Then go upstairs. Stay there.”

“Like hell.”

“Just do it!” He dragged on the jeans in the dark, grabbed shoes. “I’m going out the back. Lock the door behind me, then check the rest of them.”

She saw him close his hand over the Louisville Slugger he’d propped against the wall.

“For God’s sake, Jake, what do you think you’re going to do?”

“Listen to me. Somebody killed Dolan just a few miles from here. What I’m not doing is taking any chances. Lock the goddamn doors, Callie.” He kept moving, as agile as she in the dark. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, call the cops.”

He eased open the back door, scanned the dark. “Lock it,” he repeated, then slipped out.

She thought about it for about five seconds, then streaked through the house, bolted into the bathroom to grab her own version of a weapon. A can of insect repellent.

She was out the front door barely a minute after Jake was out the back.

She kept low, peering into the dark, measuring the shadows as she strained to hear any whisper of movement over the cicadas. It wasn’t until she was off the lawn and into the trees that she cursed herself for not stopping to get shoes as Jake had done.

But despite the rocky terrain, she wasn’t going back for them.

It slowed her progress, but she had a good bead on where she’d seen that figure standing in the trees. From the direction Jake had taken, they’d come up on whoever was watching the house on either side. Flank him, she thought, biting back a hiss as another rock jabbed the bare arch of her foot.

One of those jerks—Austin or Jimmy again—she figured, pausing to listen, listen hard. Or someone like them. The type that spray-painted insults on a car. Probably waiting until the house was dark and quiet so they could sneak up and screw with another of the cars, or pitch a rock through a window.

She heard an owl hoot, a pair of mournful notes. In the distance a dog was barking in incessant yips. The creek gurgled to her right, and the tireless cicadas sang as though life depended on it.

And something else, something larger, crept in the shadows.

She eased back from a sliver of moonlight, thumbed off the cap on the can.

She started to shift when she heard a sudden storm of movement to the left, back toward the house. Even as she braced to spring forward and give chase, a gunshot exploded.

Everything stilled in its echo—the barking, the humming of insects, the mournful owl. In those seconds of stillness, her own heart stopped.

It came back in a panicked leap, filling her throat, exploding out of her as she shouted for Jake. She ran, sprinting over rocks and roots. Her fear and focus were so complete she didn't hear the movement behind her until it was too late.

As she started to whirl around, to defend, to attack, the force of a blow sent her flying headlong into the trunk of a tree.

She felt the shocking flash of pain, tasted blood, then tumbled into the dark.

More terrified by hearing Callie scream his name than by the gunshot, Jake reversed directions. He raced toward the sound of Callie's voice, ducking low-hanging branches, slapping at the spiny briars that clogged the woods.

When he saw her, crumpled in a sprinkle of moonlight, his legs all but dissolved.

He dropped to his knees, and his hands were shaking as he reached down to check the pulse in her throat.

“Callie. Oh God.” He hauled her into his lap, brushing at her hair. There was blood on her face, seeping from a nasty scratch over her forehead. But her pulse was strong, and his searching hands found no other injury.

“Okay, baby. You’re okay.” He rocked her, holding tight until he could battle back that instant and primal terror. “Come on, wake up now. Damn it. I ought to knock you out myself.”

He pressed his lips to hers and, steadier, picked her up. As he carried her through the woods toward the house, his foot kicked the can of insect repellent.

All he could do was grit his teeth and keep going.

She began to stir as he reached the steps. He glanced down, saw her eyelids beginning to flutter.

“You may want to stay out cold, Dunbrook, until I calm down.”

She heard his voice, but the words were nothing but mush in her brain. She moved her head, then let out a moan as pain radiated from her crown to her toes.

“Hurts,” she mumbled.

“Yeah, I bet it does.” He had to shift her, to open the door. Since his temper was starting to claw through the concern, he didn’t feel any sympathy when she moaned again at the jarring.

“What happened?”

“My deduction is you ran into a tree with your head. No doubt the tree got the worst of it.”

“Oh, ouch.” She lifted a hand, touched the focal point of pain gingerly, then saw the mists closing in again when her fingers came back red and wet.

“Don’t you pass out again. Don’t you do it.” He carried her back to the kitchen, set her down on the counter. “Sit where I put you, breathe slow. I’m going to get something to deal with that granite skull of yours.”

She let her head rest back against a cabinet as he yanked open another, one they'd earmarked for first-aid supplies.

"I didn't run into a tree." She kept her eyes closed, tried to ignore the vicious throbbing in her head. "Someone came up behind me, shoved me into it, right after I—"

She broke off, jerked straight. "The gunshot. Oh my God, Jake. Are you shot? Are you—"

"No." He grabbed her hands before she could leap down from the counter. "Hold still. Do I look shot to you?"

"I heard a shot."

"Yeah, me too. And I saw what I cleverly deduce was a bullet hit a tree about five feet to my left." He ran water onto a cloth. "Hold still now."

"Someone shot at you."

"I don't think so." It was a nasty scrape, he thought as he began to clean it, more gently than she deserved. "I think they shot at the tree, unless they were blind as a bat and had piss-poor aim. He wasn't more than ten feet ahead of me when he fired."

She dug her fingers into his arm. "Someone shot at you."

"Close enough. I told you to lock the doors and stay inside."

"You're not the boss. Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt. But I can promise, you're going to be when I put this antiseptic on that scrape. Ready?"

She took a couple of cleansing breaths. Nodded. The sting took her breath away. "Oh, oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"Almost done. Keep swearing."

She did, viciously, until he blew on it to ease the burn. "Okay, worst is over. Now look at me. How's your vision?" he asked her.

"It's okay. I want some pain meds."

"Not yet, you don't. You were out cold. Let's go through the routine. Dizziness?"

"No."

"Nausea?"

"Only when I remember how I let that jerk get the jump

on me. I'm okay. I just have the grandmother of all headaches." She reached out. "Your face is scratched up some."

"Briars."

"Could use some of that nice antiseptic."

"I don't think so." But he put it back in the cupboard so she didn't get any ideas. "It couldn't have been just one guy. You were down and out a good fifty feet from where I was when he plugged the tree."

"And he came up behind me," she agreed. "I heard the shot, and I took off."

"You screamed."

"I did not. I called out in understandable concern when I thought you'd been shot."

"You screamed my name." He positioned himself between her legs. "I always liked that."

"I called out," she corrected, but her lips twitched. "And I took off running. But I didn't get far. I'm thinking it was ten, fifteen seconds between the shot and when the lights went out. So there had to be at least two of them. Our old pals Austin and Jimmy?"

"If it was, they've upped the ante."

"I want to kick their asses."

He touched his lips, very gently, to the unbroken skin beside the scrape. "Get in line."

"I guess we call the cops."

"Looks like."

But they didn't move, not yet, just continued to look at each other. "Scared me," Callie said after a moment.

"Me too."

She put her arms out, drew him in. Funny, she thought, how much shakier she felt now that she was holding on to him than she'd felt before. But she didn't let go. "If anybody gets to shoot at you, it's going to be me."

"Only fair. And I'm, obviously, the only one entitled to knock you out cold."

Oh yeah, she thought as she kept her cheek pressed to his. The irritating son of a bitch was the love of her life. Just her bad luck.

“Glad we agree on those points. Now let’s call the sheriff.”

“In just a minute.”

“You know, what you were talking about before we were so incredibly rudely interrupted? About how we never took the time to, like, romance each other? How you never seduced me? I never seduced you either.”

“Callie, you seduced me the minute I laid eyes on you.”

She let out a half laugh, nearly as shocked by the statement as everything that had come before. “I did not.”

“You never believed it.” He eased back, touched his lips to her cheek, then the other in a gesture that had her staring at him in equal parts surprise and suspicion. “I could never figure out why you didn’t. I’ll call the sheriff, then get you something for that headache.”

“I can get it.” She started to boost herself down, but he gripped her arm. There was frustration on his face now, something she’d rarely seen unless it was laced with anger.

“Why can’t you let me take care of you? Even now, when you’re hurting.”

Baffled, she gestured to the cupboard. “It’s just . . . right there.”

“Fine. Great.” He let her go, turned his back. “Get it yourself.”

She started to shrug it off, scoot down. Then stopped herself. She wasn’t sure of the steps of this new dance they seemed to have begun, but at least she could try to find the rhythm.

“Look, maybe you could give me a hand down. If I jar something, I think my head’ll fall off. And I guess I banged up my feet some, too.”

Saying nothing, he turned back, lifted her feet one at a time. He swore under his breath, then caught her at the waist, lifted her down to the floor. Gently, she noted. He’d been gentle several times that night—more in that single night than she could recall him being with her since they’d met.

His face was scratched, his hair was wild, and his eyes

annoyed. Everything inside her softened. "I guess you carried me all the way inside."

"It was either that or leave you out there." He reached over her head, took the bottle of pills out of the cabinet. "Here."

"Thanks. You know what, I think I need to sit down." She did, right on the floor, as much to see how he'd react as for necessity.

She saw it, that quick concern that raced over his face before it closed down again. He turned on the faucet, poured her a glass of water, then crouched down to give it to her.

"You dizzy?"

"No. It just hurts like the wrath of God. I'll just sit here, take drugs, wait for the cops."

"I'll call this in, then we'll put some ice on that head. See how it does."

"Okay." Thoughtfully, she shook out pills as he went to the phone. She wasn't sure what this new aspect of Jacob Graystone meant. But it was certainly interesting.

Fifteen

Callie didn't trust herself to dig on three hours of spotty sleep. The knot on her forehead brought a dull, constant ache that made paperwork unappealing.

Napping was a skill she'd never developed, and was only one step below her least-honed ability. Doing nothing.

For twenty minutes, she indulged herself by experimenting with various ways to disguise the scrape and bruise. Swooping her hair down made her look like a low-rent copy of Veronica Lake. Tying on a bandanna resulted in a cross between a time-warped hippie and a girl pirate.

None of those were quite the effect she was looking for.

Though she knew she'd probably live to regret it, she snipped off some hair to form wispy bangs.

They'd drive her crazy as they grew out, but for now they met the basic demands of vanity. With her sunglasses and hat, she decided, you could hardly make out the sun-burst of color and patch of raw skin.

If she was going out, and she was, she didn't want the goose egg to be the focus of attention.

She'd put off going by Treasured Pages as Doug had asked, and it was time to stop procrastinating. She under-

stood why he'd asked it of her, and she could admit to her own curiosity about another member of the Cullen family.

But what was she supposed to say to the old guy? she asked herself as she hunted up a parking spot on Main. Hey, Grandpa, how's it going?

So far her time in Woodsboro had been just a little too interesting. Old family secrets, crude graffiti all over her Rover—which was why she was driving Rosie's enormous Jeep Cherokee—murder, mystery and finally gunshots and mild concussions.

It was enough to drive a person back to the lecture circuit.

Now, she thought, she was forced to parallel park in an unfamiliar vehicle, on a narrow street that had, to spite her, suddenly filled with traffic.

She didn't see how it could get much worse.

She muscled the car in and out, back and forth, dragging the wheel, cursing herself and the town's predilection for high curbs until sweaty, frustrated and mildly embarrassed, she finessed the Jeep between a pickup and a hatchback.

She slid out, noted that now that she'd completed the task, traffic was down to three pokey cars and a Mennonite with a horse and carriage.

It just figured.

But the mental bitching kept her from being nervous as she walked down the block to the bookstore.

There was a woman at the counter when Callie walked in, and a man behind it with wild gray hair and a white shirt with pleats so sharp they could have cut bread. Callie saw the instant shock run over his face, heard him stop speaking in the middle of a sentence as if someone had plowed a fist into his throat.

The woman turned and glanced at Callie, frowned. "Mr. Grogan? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Sorry, Terri, my mind wandered there. Be with you in just a minute," he said to Callie.

"It's okay. I'll just look around."

She scanned book titles, finding ones she'd read, others she wondered why anybody would read, and listened to the conversation behind her.

"These are very nice, Terri. You know Doug or I would have come to appraise them for you."

"I thought I'd bring them in, let you make me an offer. Aunt Francie loved her books, but I've just got no place for them now that she's gone. And if they're worth anything, I could use the money." She glanced back over her shoulder again, toward Callie. "What with work slowing down for Pete. This one here's worth something, isn't it? It's leather and all."

"It's what we call half-bound," he explained, and tried not to track Callie's every movement. "See here, the leather's over the spine, then about an inch over the front and back. The rest of the binding's cloth."

"Oh."

The disappointment on her face had him reaching out to pat her hand. "You've got some fine books here, Terri. Francie, she took care of them. And this *Grapes of Wrath* is a first edition."

"I didn't think that would go for much. Cover's torn."

"The dust jacket's got some rubbing, a tear or two, but it's still in very good condition. Why don't you leave these with me for a few days, and I'll call you with a price?"

"Okay. I'd sure appreciate that, Mr. Grogan. The sooner you can let me know, the better. Tell Doug my Nadine's asked after him."

"I'll do that."

"Nice to have him back in town. Maybe he'll stay this time."

"Could be." Wanting her gone, he started around the counter, prepared to walk her to the door, but she wandered out of reach, toward Callie.

"You with those archaeologist people?"

Callie shifted. "That's right."

"You look sort of familiar to me."

"I've been around for a few weeks."

She looked at the bruising under the curtain of bangs, but couldn't find a polite way to ask about it. "It was my brother-in-law dug up that skull that started things off."

"No kidding? That must've been a real moment for him."

“Cost him a lot of work. My husband, too.”

“Yes. It’s hard. I’m sorry.”

Terri frowned again, waited for some argument or debate. Then she shifted her feet. “Some people around think the place is cursed because you’re disturbing graves.”

“Some people watch too many old movies on *Chiller Theater*.”

Terri’s lips quirked before she controlled them. “Still and all, Ron Dolan’s dead. And that’s a terrible thing.”

“It is. It’s shaken us all up. I never knew anyone who was murdered before. Did you?”

There was just enough sympathy, just enough openness to gossip in Callie’s attitude to have Terri relaxing. “Can’t say I did. Except my grandson goes to preschool three days a week with the Campbell boy, and his daddy was shot dead in a convenience-store robbery up in Baltimore. Poor little thing. Makes you stop and think, doesn’t it? You just never know.”

She hadn’t known that, Callie realized with a jolt. She’d spoken with Lana about intimate details of her own life, but she hadn’t known how she’d been widowed. “No, you don’t.”

“Well, I got to get on. Maybe I’ll bring our Petey out to see that place y’all are digging up. Some of the other kids’ve gone by.”

“Do that. We’re always happy to show the site, to explain what we’re doing and how we do it.”

“You sure do look familiar,” Terri said again. “Nice talking to you anyway. Bye, Mr. Grogan. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

“A day or two, Terri. Best to Pete now.”

Roger waited until the door shut. “You handled her very well,” he said.

“Maintaining friendly relations with locals is part of the job description. So.” She gestured to the cardboard box, and the books spread on the counter. “Does she have anything spectacular?”

“This Steinbeck is going to make her happy. It’ll take

me a while to go through the rest. I'm going to put the Closed sign up, if that's all right with you."

"Sure."

She slid her hands into her back pockets as Roger walked to the door, flipped the sign, turned the locks. "Ah, Doug asked me if I'd come by. I've been pretty busy."

"This is awkward for you."

"I guess it is."

"Would you like to come into the back? Have some coffee?"

"Sure. Thanks."

He didn't touch her, or make any move to take her hand. He didn't stare or fumble. And his ease put Callie at hers as they stepped into his back room.

"This is a nice place. Comfortable. I've always thought of bibliophiles as stuffy fanatics who keep their books behind locked glass."

"I've always thought of archaeologists as strapping young men who wear pith helmets and explore pyramids."

"Who says I don't have a pith helmet," she countered and made him laugh.

"I wanted to come out to the site, to see your work. To see you. But I didn't want to . . . push. It's so much for you to deal with all at once. I thought an extra grandfather could wait."

"Doug said I'd like you. I think he's right."

He poured coffee and brought it to the tiny table. "Milk, sugar?"

"Why mess with a good thing?"

"How did you hurt your head?"

She tugged at her new bangs. "I guess these aren't doing the job after all." She started to tell him something light, something foolish, then found herself telling him the exact truth.

"My God. This is madness. What did the sheriff say?"

"Hewitt?" She shrugged. "What cops always say. They'll look into it. He's going to talk to a couple of guys who hassled me and Jake when we first got here, and decorated my car with creative obscenities and red spray paint."

“Who would that be?”

“Some morons named Austin and Jimmy. Big guy, little guy. A redneck version of Laurel and Hardy.”

“Austin Seldon and Jimmy Dukes?” He shook his head, nudged his glasses back up the bridge of his nose when they took a slide. “No, I can’t imagine it. They’re not the brightest bulbs in the chandelier, but neither of them would shoot at a man or manhandle a woman, for that matter. I’ve known them all their lives.”

“They want us off the project. And they’re not alone.”

“The development is no longer an issue. Kathy Dolan contacted me last night. That’s Ron’s widow. She wants to sell the land to the Preservation Society. It’ll take some doing for us to meet the asking price, but we’re going to meet it. There will be no development at Antietam Creek.”

“That’s not going to make you preservation guys popular either.”

“Not with some.” His smile was quiet, smug and very appealing. “And very popular with others.”

“Just speculation, but could someone have killed Dolan so his wife would be pressured into selling?”

“Again, I can’t imagine. Then again, I don’t want to imagine. I know this town, its people. It’s not the way we do things here.”

He rose to get the pot to top off their coffee. Out in the shop, the phone rang, but he let it go. “There were a lot of people who thought highly of Ron, and a lot who didn’t. But I don’t know one of them who’d crack his head open and dump him in Simon’s Hole.”

“I could say the same thing about my team. I don’t know some of them as well as you know your neighbors, but diggers don’t make a habit of knocking off towners because of a site disagreement.”

“You love your work.”

“Yeah. Everything about it.”

“When you do, every day’s an adventure.”

“Some a little more adventurous than others. I should get back to it.” But she didn’t rise. “Can I ask you a question first? On the personal front?”

“Of course you can.”

“Suzanne and Jay. What happened between them?”

He let out a long breath, sat back. “I think, too often, tragedy begets tragedy. We were wild when you were taken. Terrified in a way I can’t fully describe.”

He took off his glasses as if they were suddenly too heavy for his face. “Who would take an innocent child that way? What would they do to you? How could this have happened? For weeks, there was nothing but you to think of, to worry about, to pray for. There were leads, but they never went anywhere. The simple truth was you’d vanished, without a trace.”

He paused a moment, folded his hands tidily on the table. “We were normal people, living ordinary lives. This sort of thing isn’t supposed to happen to normal people living ordinary lives. But it did, and it changed us. It changed Suzanne and Jay.”

“How? I mean, other than the obvious.”

“Finding you was Suzanne’s entire focus. She hounded the police, she went on television, talked to newspapers, to magazines. She’d always been a happy girl. Not brilliantly happy, if you understand me. Just content, cozy in the life she was making. She had no extraordinary and driving ambitions. She wanted to marry Jay, raise a family, make a home. She’d wanted that, only that, most of her life.”

“Ordinary ambitions are the foundation of society. Without home, we have no structure on which to build the more complex levels.”

“An interesting way to put it. Structure was certainly the goal. For both of them. Jay was, and is, a good man. Solid, dependable. A fine teacher who cares about his work and his students. He fell in love with Suzanne, I think, when they were about six.”

“That’s sweet,” Callie said. “I didn’t realize they grew up together.”

“Suze and Jay. People said their names as if they were one word.” And it hurt his heart that they were no longer one. “Neither of them dated anyone else seriously. Even more than she, Jay preferred the smooth and quiet road,

which is what they had. They were married, had Doug, Jay taught, Suzanne made the home. They had their daughter. A perfect picture. The young couple, two children, a nice little house in their hometown.”

“Then it dropped out from under them.”

“Yes.”

He’d never forget the sound of her voice when she’d called him. *Daddy, Daddy, somebody took Jessie. Somebody took my baby.*

“The stress broke something in her, and broke something between her and Jay neither knew how to mend. Oh, they’d fight now and again when they were dating.”

He put his glasses on again. “I can remember how she’d come storming into the house after a date, vowing never to speak to that Jay Cullen ever again. And the next day, he’d be at the door with that sheepish smile on his face.”

“But this wasn’t a fight.”

“It was a transformation. It drove Jay into himself even as it drove Suzanne out. Suddenly this young woman was an activist, now she was a woman with a mission. And when she wasn’t actively working to find you, attending support groups or seminars, she was horribly depressed. Jay wasn’t able to keep up, not the way she needed him to. He wasn’t able to fuel her, not the way she needed.”

“It had to be hard on Doug.”

“It was. Being caught between the two of them. They would create an illusion of normality for a while, but it would never last. They tried.”

He touched her then, had to. He laid his fingertips lightly on the back of her hand. “They’re both decent, loving people who adored their son.”

“Yes, I understand that.” And because she understood, she turned her hand over, hooked her fingers with Roger’s. “But they couldn’t rebuild that ordinary life when a piece of it was missing.”

“No.” He let out a sigh. “Something would set Suzanne off—a new lead, a news report on another missing child, and it would all start again. Last couple of years they were living like strangers, keeping it together for Doug. I don’t

know what made them cross over that line into divorce. I never asked.”

“He still loves her.”

Roger pursed his lips. “Yes, I know. How do you?”

“Something he said when she was out of the room. The way he said it. I’m sorry for them, Mr. Grogan. But I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Nothing you or anyone else can do. I don’t know the people who raised you, but they must be decent and loving people, too.”

“Yes, they are.”

“For everything they gave you, I’m grateful.” He cleared his throat. “But you were also given something at birth from Suzanne and Jay. If you can accept that, can value that, it can be enough.”

She looked down at their joined fingers. “I’m glad I came in today.”

“I hope you’ll come back. I wonder... Maybe we’d both be more comfortable with each other if you called me Roger.”

“Okay.” She rose. “So, Roger, do you have to open up again right now?”

“One of the perks of owning your own place is doing what the hell you want some of the time.”

“If you feel like it, you could ride out to the site with me. I’ll give you a tour.”

“That’s the best offer I’ve had in a long time.”

Callie, hey!” She’d barely pulled up at the dig when Bill McDowell rushed over, hastily combing his fingers through his disordered hair to smooth it. “Where you been?”

“I had some things to do.” She climbed out. “Roger Grogan, Bill McDowell. Bill’s one of our grad students.”

“Yeah, hi,” Bill offered before his focus zeroed back on Callie. “I was hoping I could work with you today. Wow! What happened to your face?”

She didn’t snarl. It would be too much like snarling at a

big, sloppy puppy who couldn't stop himself from humping your leg. "I ran into something."

"Gee. Does it hurt? Maybe you want to sit down in the shade. I could get you a drink." He swung the gate open for her.

"No, thanks. I'm going to show Roger around, then..." She trailed off when she saw Jake standing nose to nose with the big man from the bar. The big one who'd given her Rover a new paint job. "What the hell's going on there?"

"Oh, that guy? He was looking for you. Jake got in his face." Bill barely glanced back at Jake, his imagined rival for Callie's affections. "We've had enough trouble around here without Jake starting more."

"If Jake was starting trouble, that idiot gorilla would be on his ass. Sorry, Roger, I need to take care of this. Bill, why don't you show Mr. Grogan the knapping area?"

"Sure, sure, if you want me to, but—"

"I could speak to Austin," Roger offered. "I used to sneak him peppermints when he was a boy."

"I can handle it. Won't take long." She strode across the site, giving a quick head shake when anyone spoke her name. But Dory popped up, tugged her sleeve.

"Do you think we should call the police?" she hissed. "Do you think we should call the sheriff? If they get into a fight—"

"Then it's their business. Go help Frannie with the spoil for a while. Stay out of the way."

"But don't you think... What happened to your face?"

"Just stay out of the way."

Callie was ready to rock by the time she reached Jake and Austin.

"I hear you're looking for me," she began.

"I got a check for you. I just came to bring you the check. For the damages."

Silently, she held out her hand. After he'd dug it out of his pocket, dropped it on her palm, Callie unfolded it, read the amount. It matched the total of the estimate she'd given Hewitt.

“Fine. Now go very far away.”

“I got something to say.” He rolled his shoulders. “I’m gonna tell you just like I told him.” He jerked a thumb at Jake. “And just like I told Jeff, Sheriff Hewitt. I was home last night. In bed with my wife by eleven o’clock. Didn’t even watch the late news or Leno because I had a job this morning. A job I’m missing to be here and tell you up front. Now maybe me and Jimmy were out of line with your four-wheeler—”

“Maybe?” Jake’s voice was much, much too quiet for safety.

The muscles in Austin’s jaw quivered. “We were out of line, and we’re making restitution for it. But I don’t knock women around, or go out shooting at people, for Christ’s sake. Neither does Jimmy. Jeff, he comes out to where we’re working today, tells us we’ve gotta say where we were last night, ’round midnight, and what we were doing and can anybody swear we’re telling the truth.”

It was the mortification on his face that had Callie throttling back her temper.

“If you hadn’t vandalized my car, Hewitt wouldn’t have embarrassed you at work. I figure we’re even, because it’s pretty damned embarrassing to drive around with ‘lesbo freak’ on my hood.”

Austin flushed until his face looked like a bloodstained moon. “I’m apologizing for it. For me and Jimmy.”

“You draw the short straw?” Jake asked.

The slight twitch of Austin’s lips was acknowledgment. “Flipped a coin. I don’t know what happened last night, but I’m telling you I never raised my hand to a woman in my life. Not once,” he said with a quick glance at Callie’s forehead. “Never shot at anybody either. I don’t want you here, and I’ll say it plain to your face. Ron Dolan, he was a good man, and a friend of mine. What happened to him... It ain’t right. Just ain’t right.”

“We can agree on that.” Callie tucked the check into her pocket.

“Seems to me maybe what people are saying is true. About this place having a curse on it.” He shot an uneasy

glance toward the pond. "Can't say I'd work here now anyway."

"You can leave that to us then. Bygones," she added and held out a hand.

Austin looked momentarily confused, then took her hand gingerly in his. "A man who hits a woman that way," he said with a nod toward her forehead, "he deserves to get his hand broke for it."

"Another point of agreement," Jake told him.

"Well . . . that's all I got to say." He gave another nod, then lumbered back across the dig.

"Well, that was entertaining." Callie patted her pocket. "No way that goofball shot at you. Why were you about to challenge him to the best two out of three throws?"

"He walked in with a chip on his shoulder I felt obliged to knock off. Said he didn't have dick to say to me, and so on, which, naturally, meant we had to insult each other for a little while. What might have been some good, bloody fun was spoiled when you walked up and he saw your face."

Jake reached out, gently fluttered her bangs. "I hope this is a new look and not an attempt to disguise that knot."

"Shut up."

"Because it's not a bad look, but it's a pitiful disguise." He leaned down, touched his lips gently to the bruise. "How's it feel today?"

"Like I got hit with a tree."

"I bet. Who's the old guy?"

She looked back to see Roger hunkered down at a segment between Bill and Matt. "Roger Grogan. Suzanne's father. I went by to talk to him this morning. He's . . . he's pretty terrific. I'm going to show him around."

"Introduce me." He took her hand. "We'll show him around." He only tightened his grip when she tried to tug away. "Be a sport. It drives Bill crazy when I touch you."

"Leave the kid alone. He's harmless."

"He wants to nibble on your toes while he worships at your feet." Deliberately he brought her hand to his lips. "If he had a gun, I'd be bleeding from multiple wounds right now."

“You’re a mean son of a bitch.”

He laughed, released her hand only to sling an arm around her shoulders. “That’s what you love about me, babe.”

Callie was just setting out her tools the next morning, mentally reviewing her sector for the day when Lana pulled up.

Mildly amused, Callie watched her go through the gate, look down at her pretty heels, roll her eyes and begin to cross the field.

“Isn’t this a little early for a lawyer to be up and about?” Callie called out.

“Not when the lawyer has a kid to get to preschool and a dog to get to the vet.” She tipped her sunglasses down as she got closer and winced as she studied Callie’s forehead. “Ouch.”

“You can say that again.”

“I’d like to point out that hearing about my client’s nocturnal adventures second- and third-hand is a bit embarrassing. You should’ve called me.”

“I don’t know who to sue over it.”

“The police don’t have any suspects?”

“They dug a slug out of a poplar. They find the gun it came from, I guess they’ll have a suspect.”

“Why aren’t you scared?”

“I am. Jake said the shot missed him by five feet, and I have to believe he’s being straight about that. But the fact is, someone was out there shooting. Somebody was out here, doing worse than that.”

“Do you think they’re connected incidents?”

“The sheriff doesn’t seem to think so but he’s pretty tight-lipped. It’s just speculation. Some people don’t like having us here. One way to get us gone is to mess up the project. A dead body and gunfire mess it up pretty good.”

“I have some news that’s not going to make you any happier.”

“The investigator.”

“We’ll start there. Carlyle’s son isn’t being forthcoming. He told the investigator he doesn’t know where his father is, and if he did, it wouldn’t be any of the investigator’s business.”

“I want him to keep at it.”

“It’s your nickel.”

“I’ve got a few more to spare.” She blew out a breath. “Just a few,” she admitted. “But I can handle it for another couple of weeks.”

“Just let me know when you need to reevaluate the expenses. I like the bangs, by the way.”

“Yeah?” Callie gave them a little tug. “They’re going to annoy me when they get in my eyes.”

“That’s why salons were invented. The next portion of my morning’s agenda has to deal with town gossip.”

“Should I get the coffee and cookies?”

“You could come up here. If I come down there, these shoes are toast.” She glanced around the dig as Callie set her tools aside.

There was, as always, the clink of tools on rock, the swish of them in dirt. Running over it was a babble of music. It was hot, the kind of hot that made her feel sticky two minutes after she stepped outside.

She could smell sweat, insect repellent, earth.

She’d had no idea it would all progress so uniformly. So many squares and rectangles taken out of the ground. And trenches being formed foot by measured foot.

There were tools in piles, shovels and trowels, wide brushes. Canvas duffels were tossed here and there. Someone had laid a clipboard over a camera. To shade it, she imagined. Near every segment were jugs and water bottles, and shirts that had been stripped off lay baking in the sun.

“What’re they doing over there?”

Callie looked over to where Jake and Dory stood close together. “Jake’s flirting with the sexy project photographer.” Then she shrugged, surprised that it no longer brought a green cloud of jealousy over her vision when she noted the easy way he touched Dory’s shoulder, her arm.

“He’s probably explaining what he wants out of the pic-

tures, which angles.” Absently, she rubbed at a shallow scratch on the back of her hand. “They’ve been finding potsherds in that area.”

“I’ll have to take a look before I go. So . . .” She turned her attention back to Callie. “You went to see Roger yesterday.”

“That’s right. So what? I liked him.”

“So do I. Very much. Afterward, you took him somewhere.”

“I brought him out to see the dig. What difference does it make?”

“There was someone in the store when you were there.”

“Yeah, she had some books she wanted to sell.” Callie bent down for her jug of iced tea. Since she’d misplaced her cup, she drank straight from the jug. “She said she was the guy who dug up the first artifact’s sister-in-law. Why is this interesting?”

“She recognized you.”

“What, from TV?” It only took a beat for it to sink in. “That’s just not possible. No way she talked to me for two minutes and pegged me as Jessica Cullen.”

“I don’t know how long it took, but she started putting it together. Noticed that Roger closed the store after she left. And happened to see him go with you later. From what I can gather, she mentioned it to someone else, and that someone else had seen you come out of my office with Suzanne. Saw Jay there. It’s a small town, Callie. People know people, and people remember. The talk’s already getting up some steam that you’re Suzanne and Jay’s lost daughter. I thought you should know so you can decide how you want to handle it. How you want me to handle it.”

“For Christ’s sake.” Callie dragged off her hat, flung it onto the ground. “I don’t know. ‘No comment’ is not going to work. ‘No comment’ just makes people think they know just what you’re not commenting on.”

“Word gets out to the media and it’s inevitable. You’re going to need a statement. The Cullens are going to need a statement. So are your parents. And you’re all going to have to decide what tack you’re going to take.”

She stared across the dig. Jake had moved on, she noted, crouched down to where Frannie worked with Chuck. Jake's hand rested lightly on the small of Frannie's back.

Bill was with Dory now, running his mouth. From the looks of it Dory wasn't nearly as pleased with his company as she'd been with Jake's.

She wished she had nothing more pressing to think about than the small dramas of her team. "I don't want to talk to the media. I don't want to put my parents through that."

"You're not going to have a choice, Callie. This was a big story at the time. And Suzanne's a local celebrity. You need to prepare."

"Nobody prepares for a clusterfuck. You just get through it. Does Suzanne know?"

"I've got an appointment with her in an hour. What she doesn't already know, I'll tell her."

Callie picked up her hat, jammed it back on her head. "I need that list. The names of her doctor, the nurses, whoever shared her hospital room when she delivered. I haven't wanted to push her about that."

"But you'd like me to." Lana nodded. "No problem."

"Get me Carlyle's son's address and phone number. I might have a way to convince him to talk to us. I need to call my mother, give her some warning. My mother," she said when Lana remained silent. "I'll leave Suzanne to you."

"I understand."

"It helps to have someone who does. Roger seemed to. He made it easy on me."

"He's a special man. And maybe, I don't know, genetically something like this is less emotionally fraught for a man than it is for a woman. For a mother. I know Doug's twisted up about it, but he's able to stay level."

"You and he got a thing going?"

"Hmm. The definition of 'thing' is still nebulous, but yes. I think we do. Is that a problem?"

"Not for me. It's just weird, just one more strange connection. I pick a lawyer who's got a thing going with my birth brother. I cop what could be one of the most impor-

tant projects of my career. First my ex-husband gets hauled into it, then I find out I was born almost within spitting distance of where I'm working. My biological mother happens to be the driving force behind my favorite chocolate chip cookies and person or persons unknown throw murder and mayhem into the mix. Any one of those factors would be strange. But put them all together and—”

“A clusterfuck.”

“Doesn't have the same ring when you say it, but yeah, there you go. Get that list from Suzanne,” Callie said after a moment. “It's time to segment this project and start some serious digging.”

Suzanne listened to everything Lana had to say. She served tea and coffee cake. She provided a neatly organized computer-generated list of names from the past. She remained absolutely calm as she showed Lana to the door.

Then she whirled around at Jay. “I asked you to be here this morning because Lana said it was important to speak with both of us. Then you say nothing. You contribute nothing.”

“What did you want me to say? What did you want me to do? You'd already taken care of everything.”

“Yes, I took care of everything. Just like always.”

“You wouldn't let me help. Just like always.”

She balled her hands into fists, then walked past him toward the kitchen. “Just go, Jay. Just go.”

He nearly did. She'd said that to him years before. Just go, Jay. And he had. But this time he strode after her, taking her arm as they reached the kitchen.

“You shut me out then, and you're shutting me out now. And after you do, you look at me with disgust. What do you want, Suzanne? All I've ever tried to do is give you what you want.”

“I want my daughter back! I want Jessie.”

“You can't have her.”

“You can't, because you won't do anything about it.”

You barely spoke to her in Lana's office. You never touched her."

"She didn't want me to touch her. Do you think, do you really think that this isn't killing me?"

"I think you wrote her off a long time ago."

"That's bullshit. I grieved, Suzanne, and I hurt. But you didn't see, you didn't hear. There was nothing for you but Jessie. You couldn't be my wife, you couldn't be my lover. You couldn't even be my friend because you were too determined to be her mother."

The words were like quick, sharp arrows thudding into her heart. He'd never said this sort of thing to her before. Never looked so angry, so hurt. "You were a grown man. You were her *father*." She wrenched free and began to gather the tea things with shaking hands. "You closed off from me when I needed you most."

"Maybe I did. But so did you. I needed you, too, Suzanne, and you weren't there for me. I wanted to try to keep what we had together, and you were willing to sacrifice it all for what we lost."

"She was my baby."

"Our baby. Goddamnit, Suze, *our* baby."

Her breath began to hitch. "You wanted to replace her."

He stepped back as if she'd slapped him. "That's a stupid thing to say. Stupid and cruel. I wanted to have another child with you. Not a replacement. I wanted to be a family again. I wanted my wife, and you wouldn't let me touch you. We lost our daughter, Suzanne. But I lost my wife, too. I lost my best friend, I lost my family. I lost everything."

She swiped at tears. "There's no point in this. I need to go out and see Jessica—Callie."

"No, you're not."

"What are you talking about? Didn't you hear what Lana said? She's been hurt."

"I heard what she said. She also said that people are starting to talk, and this is going to put her in a difficult position. You go out there to the site, people see you, and you're just adding fuel to the gossip."

"I don't care if people gossip. She's my daughter. Why shouldn't people know it?"

"Because she cares, Suzanne. Because if you go out there you'll push her that much further away. Because if you don't wait for her to come to you, if you don't let her draw the lines you're going to lose her a second time. She doesn't love us."

Her lips trembled. "How can you say that to me? She does. Deep inside, she does. She has to."

"I hate saying it to you. I hate hurting you. I'd rather step aside again, walk away again, than cause you a single moment's pain. But if I don't say it, it'll only hurt you more."

He took her arms, firmed his grip when she tried to step away. As he should've done, he thought now, all along. He should have firmed his grip on her. "She feels sorry for us. She feels obligated to us. And maybe, if we give her enough time, enough room, she'll feel something more."

"I want her to come home."

"Honey." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "I know."

"I want to hold her." Wrapping her arms tight around her waist, Suzanne rocked. "I want her to be a baby again so I can just hold her."

"I wanted that, too. I know you don't believe me, but I wanted that with all my heart. Just to . . . just to touch her."

"Oh God, Jay." She lifted her hand, brushed a tear from his cheek with her finger. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Maybe, just this once, you could hold me instead. Or let me hold you." He slipped his arms around her. "Just let me hold you, Suzanne."

"I'm trying to be strong. I've tried to be strong all these years, and now I can't stop crying."

"It's all right. It's just us. Nobody has to know." It had been so long, he thought, since she'd let him get this close. Since he'd felt her head on his shoulder. Since she'd put her arms around him.

"I thought . . . the first time I went to see her, I thought it was enough to know that our baby was safe and well. That she'd grown up so pretty, so smart. I thought it

would be enough, Jay. But it wasn't. Every day I want more. Five minutes back, then an hour. A day, then a year."

"She's got beautiful hands. Did you see? They're kind of nicked up—from her work, I guess. But she has those narrow hands, with long fingers. And I thought, when I saw them, I thought, Oh, we'd have given her piano lessons. With hands like that she ought to play the piano."

Slowly, carefully, she eased back. Then she framed his face in her hands and lifted it. He was weeping—silent tears. He was always silent, she remembered, when you expected a storm of grief or of joy.

She remembered now he'd wept just like this at the birth of each of their children. With his hand clinging to hers, with tears running down his cheeks, he'd made no sound.

"Oh, Jay." Going with her heart, she touched her lips to his damp cheeks. "She plays the cello."

"She does?"

"Yes. I saw it in her motel room, and there's a little biography of her on the web, attached to some of the projects she's worked on. It says she plays the cello. And that she graduated with honors from Carnegie Mellon."

"Yeah?" He tried to compose himself, but his voice was thick and broken as he dragged out a handkerchief. "That's a tough school."

"Would you like to see the printout? There's a picture of her. She looks so intellectual and serious."

"I'd like that."

She nodded, started to walk to the computer. "Jay, I know you're right, about her coming to us, about her defining what we're going to be to each other. But it's just so hard to wait. It's so hard when she's this close, to wait."

"Maybe it wouldn't be so hard if we waited together."

She smiled, as she once had smiled when her best friend gave her her first kiss. "Maybe it wouldn't."

It took some maneuvering. It always did when it came to Douglas, Lana thought. Yet she'd not only engineered

another date, but had talked him into letting her meet him in the apartment over the bookstore.

She wanted to see where he lived, however temporary it might be. And she thought they might start working on defining what this *thing* was they had going between them.

He called out a “come in” when she knocked on the outside entrance. It was, she surmised, a Woodsboro habit not to lock doors. It wasn’t one she’d picked up, even after more than two years. Too much city girl, she decided, as she opened the door.

The sofa in the living room had a baggy navy blue slipcover, and the single chair with it was a hunter green with worn arms. The choices seemed to have nothing to do with the rug, which was a brown-and-orange braid.

Maybe he was color-blind.

There was a waist-high counter separating living area from kitchen. And the kitchen, she noted with approval, was spotless.

Either he valued cleanliness or didn’t cook. She could live with either option.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” he shouted from the next room. “I just need to finish this.”

“No hurry.”

It gave her time to poke around. There were a few mementos scattered about. A trophy for MVP in his high school baseball’s championship year, a very broken-in ball glove, what seemed to be a scale model of a medieval catapult. And, of course, the books.

She approved all of these as well, but it was the selection of art on the walls that won her envy, and made her wonder more about the man.

There were prints of Mucha’s *The Four Seasons*, a Waterhouse mermaid, and Parrish’s *Ecstasy* and *Daybreak*.

A man who put fancy art on his walls and kept a high-school baseball trophy was a man worth getting to know better.

To get started, she walked to the bedroom doorway.

A very plain bed, she noted. No headboard and a wrinkled blue spread pulled over it haphazardly. And the

dresser looked like an heirloom, dark, aged mahogany with brass pulls. No mirror.

He was working at a laptop on a battered metal desk, his fingers moving efficiently over the keys.

He wore a black T-shirt, jeans and, to her fascination, tortoiseshell glasses.

She felt a little curl of lust in her belly and stepped into the room.

His hair was damp, she noticed, just a bit damp yet. She could smell a lingering whiff of soap from the shower he must have taken a short time before.

She gave in to impulse and, stepping behind him, trailed her fingers through all that dark, damp hair.

He jerked, swiveled around in the chair and stared at her through the lenses. "Sorry. Forgot. I just wanted to get this inventory... What?" he said as she continued to stand, continued to smile.

"I didn't know you wore glasses."

"Just to work. On the computer. And to read. Stuff. Are you early?"

"No, right on time." He seemed just a bit nervous to have her there, in his bedroom. And because he did, she felt powerful. "No hurry though. The movie doesn't start for an hour."

"An hour. Right." She still had on her lawyer suit. Pinstripes. What was there about pinstripes on a woman? "We were going to grab something to eat first."

"We were." She loved the way his eyes widened when she slid into his lap. "Or we could stay in. I could fix something here."

"There's not much to..." He trailed off when she lowered her head and teased his mouth with hers. "Not much, but we could probably make do. If that's what you want."

She ran her hands up his chest, linked them around his neck. "Hungry?"

"Oh yeah."

"What're you in the mood for?" she asked, then laughed when he crushed his mouth to hers.

Sixteen

She wound herself around him. Surrounded him, was all she could think as her taste, her scent, her shape dazzled his senses.

It was like being possessed, and it had started the instant she'd risen to her toes and touched her lips to his outside the restaurant.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to burn this need out of his system or steer it in. He only knew he needed more of her. Now.

"Let me..." The chair creaked ominously under their combined weight. A car backfired on the street. But all he could think was how quickly he wanted to get his hands between them, deal with the buttons of her shirt and find her.

"I intend to." Her heart was thudding, a thick, pounding beat in her breast, her throat. She loved the feel of it—that hard pump of life. She eased back to give his hands room to work. "The glasses were the kicker, you know."

"I'll never take them off again."

"That's okay." She feathered her fingers through his hair, then slid the glasses off, folded the earpieces neatly.

She set them on the desk as he undid the buttons on her white oxford shirt. "They've already done the job."

"I could say the same about the pinstripes. They just kill me."

"It's Brooks Brothers."

"God bless them." She was so perfect—almost tiny, with skin smooth and white as milk. He could have lapped at it like a cat. "But why don't we . . ." He tugged the jacket off her shoulders, let it catch at her elbows. Her shirt was open, and the bra beneath was a slick of silk over a soft, subtle swell. "That's a nice look for you," he told her and assaulted her throat with his teeth.

She smelled fresh, and utterly female. The fast spike of her pulse under his lips was a brutal thrill.

Her arms were pinned and her flesh exposed. There was something dark and erotic about that quick change of control, about surrendering that moment of power to him. She let herself ride on it, and on the giddy panic when his mouth came back to claim hers.

He rose in a move so smooth and fluid her breath snagged. There was a strength here she hadn't anticipated, and one that had her pulse skipping as he carried her, as his mouth continued its assault.

Then she was under him on the bed, her arms tangled in her jacket, her body captive and wonderfully helpless. He tugged, and her arms were free. Before she could reach for him, he rolled, then flipped her onto her stomach.

"Nothing against Brooks Brothers," he said as he slowly slid down the zipper of her skirt. "But it's a little too crowded with them here. We'll just get rid of them."

She looked back over her shoulder, and a wing of hair fell over her eye. "I could say the same about the Levi's."

"We'll give them a minute." He slid the shirt off, trailed a fingertip down her spine. "Nice back, counselor."

He drew the skirt over her hips, down and away. She wore stockings that stopped at the thigh with little bands of lace, and a white satin thong he seriously doubted had come from the dignified brothers Brooks.

“The rest of you holds up, too.”

She laughed, started to say something quick and smart. And only moaned when his lips made that same trail down her spine. His fingers brushed up from the back of her knee to the edge of the stocking, and hers dug into the bedspread.

“You know, I’m never going to be able to see you in one of those lawyer suits again without thinking about what’s going on under it.”

His mouth was at the small of her back, and working down. “Okay by me.”

He was nudging her along a plateau of pleasure so that her muscles went lax, her limbs limp. It was like sliding through a soft gray mist, sinking into it without a thought to destination.

Who needed power, she wondered as those mists closed in, when you could just . . . sink.

He heard her sigh, felt her go boneless. Her body was his to explore, to sample, to savor. The narrow waist, the long thighs, that fragrance that clung to her skin at the shoulder blades. He flicked open her bra, rubbed his lips over her skin.

She all but purred.

He turned her over slowly, tasted her lips, her throat, then her breasts.

Soft, scented, silky, and with a heat just beginning to flush along that lovely skin. Her hands stroked over him—his hair, his shoulders, his back. As she sighed into him, she tugged his shirt up, drew it over his head, tossed it aside.

And the slide of flesh to flesh made her tremble.

Patient, she thought dreamily, and oh so thorough. Here was a man who sought to give as much as he took, to please as well as to take pleasure. One who could make her body quiver and her heart stand still.

And because of it, she arched to offer him more. Moaned his name when his lips, his hands grew more impatient. Faster now, just a little faster, stoking the fires al-

ready simmering, teasing patience to urgency and dreamy to demanding.

He pressed his hand against her, tormenting them both until he slid a finger under the satin and into her.

Her nails dug into his shoulders. He watched her eyes go opaque, and that beautiful flush rush out on her skin. He caught her cry with his mouth, feasting on her lips as she came.

Sensations tumbled through her, too quickly now to separate, too huge to hold. She fought with the button of his jeans. God, she wanted all of him, wanted that mindless plunge. Her hips moved restlessly as she freed him, as she closed her hand over him.

“Doug. Douglas,” she repeated, and guided him to her.

Pleasure shot through him like a missile, the sheer glory of filling her, of having the wet heat of her surround him. He fought back the urge to plunder and moved slowly, savoring each trembling rise, each shuddering fall of their bodies.

The light was going. The last quiet streaks of it shimmered through the open window, over her face. He watched her lashes flutter, and the pulse beat in her throat as her head arched back. As the pleasure built stroke by slow, deep stroke.

He knew she clung, as he did, to that last slippery edge of reason. When he felt her clutch around him, he lowered his mouth to hers again and took the fall.

Doug?” Lana let his hair sift through her fingers, and looked out the window. From where she lay she could see the glow of the streetlights as they came on.

“Um. Yeah.”

“I have one thing to say about this.” She gave a long sigh, stretched as best she could with his weight pinning her to the mattress. “Mmmmm.”

His lips curved against her throat. “That pretty much covers it.”

“Now I guess I owe you dinner.”

“I guess you do. Does that mean you’re going to put the pinstripes back on and get me hot again?”

“Actually, I was going to ask if you had a shirt I could borrow while I see what I can do with whatever you’ve got in the kitchen.”

“I’ve got a shirt, but I’m warning you, there isn’t much in the kitchen.”

“I can do a lot with very little. Oh, and I have one more thing to say.”

This time he lifted his head and looked down at her. “What?”

“I’ve got the baby-sitter until midnight. So I hope you’ve got some protein in the kitchen, because I’m not done with you yet.”

He grinned down at her—delighted, flattered, aroused. “How’d I manage to miss you whenever I came back to town?”

“I guess it wasn’t time yet. Now you’re going to miss me whenever you leave town.”

Because that rang true, entirely too true, he rolled away and got up. “There’s a library I need to assess,” he said as he walked to the closet. “In Memphis.”

“Oh.” She sat up, kept her tone very casual. “When are you leaving?”

“A couple of days.” He pulled out a shirt. “I’m coming back right after I’m done.” He turned now, walked back and handed her the shirt. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be away for an extended period with all that’s going on.”

She nodded, scooted off the bed to slip into the shirt. “I have to agree. Your family needs you.”

“Yeah. And there’s another thing.”

She glanced over her shoulder as she did up the buttons. “Yes?”

“It doesn’t look like I’m finished with you yet either.”

“Good.” She stepped to him, rose on her toes and brushed her lips to his. “That’s good.”

Leaving it at that, she walked out to the kitchen.

He dragged a hand through his hair and followed her. "Lana, I don't know what you're looking for."

She opened the fridge and with his shirt skimming her thighs peered inside. "Neither do I, until I find it."

"I wasn't talking about food."

"I know what you were talking about." She looked back at him. "You can relax, Doug. I'm really good at living in the moment, dealing with a day at a time." She looked back in the fridge and shook her head. "As, obviously, you are, judging by the fact that you have half a six-pack of beer, a quart of milk, two lonely eggs and an unopened jar of mayo."

"You forgot the deli ham in the drawer there."

"Hmm. Well, I love a challenge." She started opening cupboards and found a set of four mismatched plates, three water glasses, one wineglass and a box of Cap'n Crunch, which had her sending Doug a pitying glance.

"It's a childhood weakness," he offered. "Like the Pop-Tarts."

"Uh-huh. You also have potato chips, a jar of pickles, a half a loaf of squishy white bread and a half-eaten bag of cookies."

Uncomfortable, and afraid she'd poke in his freezer and find the half gallon of ice cream and the frozen pizza, he stepped in to block the fridge with his body.

"I told you there wasn't much. We can still go out or we can get some carryout."

"If you think I can't make a meal out of this, you're very much mistaken. I need a pot so I can hard-boil these eggs. You do have a pot, don't you?"

"I've got a pot. You want one of those beers?"

"No, thanks."

He got out the pot, handed it over. "Be right back."

Lana rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

The eggs were starting to boil when he returned, just a little out of breath and carrying a bottle of wine. "Ran across to the liquor store," he told her.

"That was very sweet, and yes, I'd like a glass of wine."

“What’re you making?”

“Ham and egg salad sandwiches. We’ll have them with the chips and consider it a picnic.”

“Works for me.” He opened the wine, poured some for her in his lonely wineglass.

“How does your mother feel about the fact that you don’t cook?”

“We try not to discuss it, as it’s a painful subject. You want some music?”

“I would. Got any candles?”

“Nothing fancy, just some for power outages.”

“They’ll do.”

She took the picnic idea seriously and spread a blanket on the living room floor. With the candles glowing, the music as background, they ate sandwiches, drank wine. They made love again, lazily, on the blanket, then curled up together in contented silence.

Neither of them stirred when the sounds of sirens wailed. “It’ll be hot in Memphis,” she said after a time.

“Pretty sure bet.”

“Are you going to Graceland while you’re there?”

“No.”

She rolled so she could lie over him and study his face. “Why not?”

“Because . . . first, it’s a cliché, and second, I’m there to do a job, not to pay homage to The King.”

“You could do both.” She angled her head. “You should go, just for the fun and the experience. Then you should buy me something incredibly silly.”

She kissed the tip of his nose. “I have to go.”

He didn’t want her to go, and the urge to pull her back, hold her to him, with him, was more than a little frightening. “Want to try for the movies again, when I get back?”

It pleased her he’d asked first this time. “Yes.” As she started to rise, the cell phone in her briefcase across the room began to ring.

He saw the instant, primal fear flash into her eyes as she scrambled up. “It must be Denny, the baby-sitter.”

She tore open the briefcase, was ordering herself not to be an alarmist when she snagged the ringing phone.

“Hello? Denny, what... What? My God. Yes. Yes, I will.”

She was already running toward the bedroom as she disconnected.

“Tyler. What’s wrong with Tyler?” Doug demanded as he sprinted after her.

“Nothing. He’s fine. Ty’s fine.” She grabbed her shirt. “God, Doug. My God. My office is on fire.”

There was nothing to do but stand and watch. To stand across the street from the smoke and the flames and watch a part of her life burn.

She’d lost far worse, she reminded herself. Far worse than an office, than equipment and papers and some furniture. She could replace everything. She could rebuild. There was nothing in wood or brick that couldn’t be replaced or repaired.

And still she grieved for the old townhouse with its funny rooms and pretty views.

The fire department had soaked the houses on either side of hers, and what had been trim lawns were now churned-up mud filthy with debris. Smoke pumped out of broken windows, out of the roof and into the clear summer night sky.

Dozens of people had come out of their homes or stopped their cars to watch.

She saw the young family of four who lived in the second-floor apartment of the house next door. They looked terrified as they huddled together with whatever belongings they’d grabbed on the way out. As they waited to see if their home would be destroyed.

“Lana.”

“Roger.” She nearly broke. Seeing him there with his pajama top stuffed into trousers, with slippers on his feet, nearly broke her. Instead she gripped his hand and held on.

"The sirens woke me," he told her. "I got up, got a glass of water. Finally glanced out the window. I could just see the smoke. Were you in there?"

"No. I was with Doug. Somebody called the house, told my baby-sitter. He called me. Oh God, don't let it spread. Just don't let it spread."

Roger glanced over at Doug. "Maybe we should find a place for you to sit awhile."

"She won't," Doug said. "I already tried that."

"I don't know how it could've happened. I had everything inspected when I rented the building. The wiring was brought up to code. I've been careful."

"We'll just wait and see," Doug said, and Roger felt a little weight lift off his heart when he saw his grandson lean down to press his lips to Lana's hair.

Callie heard about the fire at six-fifty the following morning when Jake shook her out of sleep.

"Go away or I'll kill you."

"Wake up, Dunbrook. Your lawyer's office burned down last night."

"What? Huh?" She flipped over on her stomach, shoved at her hair and blinked up at him. "Lana? Jesus. Where is she?"

"She's okay." He stopped her from leaping up by clamping a hand on her shoulder. "I didn't get a lot of deets, just what they came up with for the early local news, but they reported no one was in the building when the fire started."

"God." She rubbed her hands over her face, plopped back down. "If it's not one thing around here, it's two dozen. Do they know how it started?"

He sat down beside her sleeping bag. "Arson's suspected. They're investigating."

"Arson? Well, who the hell would..." She trailed off as her mind caught up with the rest of her. "She's my lawyer."

"That's right."

"Records of our search would have been in that office."

“You got it.”

“It’s still a big leap.”

“Not so big from where I’m sitting. Maybe it’ll turn out to be kids playing with matches, or it’ll come out that the landlord’s got a gambling problem and torched it for the insurance money. And maybe, somebody doesn’t like the idea of you digging up information about what happened to you twenty-nine years ago.” He touched a fingertip to the raw skin on her brow. “We’re already not so popular around here.”

“I guess I should go see how she is, then fire her. She’s got a kid, Jake. I don’t want her or that little boy in any sort of danger because she’s helping me find answers.”

“I don’t know her very well, but my impression is she’s not the type to back off easily.”

“Maybe not, but I’m going to give her the first shove. Then I’m going to Atlanta. Go away, I need to get dressed.”

“I’ve seen you get dressed before.” He sat where he was as she rolled out of the bag. “You want to tackle Carlyle’s son, face-to-face.”

“You got a better idea?”

“No, which is why I know there’s a Delta flight to Atlanta in just over two hours, with a couple of seats.”

She looked at him as she reached for jeans. “I only need one seat.”

“Good thing, as that’s all you’re getting. I’m in the other one. I’m going, Callie,” he said before she could speak. “I don’t need your permission. We can waste time arguing and I will win this one, or you can accept defeat gracefully for a change. You’re not going alone. That’s all there is to it.”

“We need you here on the dig.”

“The dig can wait. Deal with it, or I’ll make sure you miss the flight. I’d enjoy that,” he said as he got fluidly to his feet. “Because I remember just how interesting a sleeping bag can be when I get you naked in one.”

Since she was wearing nothing but an oversized basketball jersey, she figured he already had the advantage. “If

we're going, you'd better contact Leo. I'll be packed and ready in ten. We can swing by Lana's on the way to the airport."

"Sounds like a plan." He started for the door, then paused. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. That's all there is to it. That's another thing you'll have to deal with."

"We both know I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, we know it. What you never figured out is that it doesn't always have to be that way."

No, it wasn't kids playing with matches." Lana sat in her kitchen drinking the latest cup of an endless stream of coffee. Her voice was raw with fatigue.

"They're telling me the point of origin was my second-floor office. They were even able to tell that the point of entry was the rear door. The lock was jimmied. What they can't tell me is what, if anything, might have been taken out of my files, off my computer, before the son-of-a-bitching firebug doused the floor and the desk with accelerant, laid a trail of it and paper into the hall, down the stairs, then lit a match and walked out."

"That's how they see it?" Callie asked her.

"Arson one-oh-one, according to the firefighters I was able to talk to. The arson inspector may have a little more. Good news is, it didn't do more damage to the neighboring buildings. The bastard didn't think about the families sleeping next door, the businesses that might have been ruined when he decided to screw with me."

She shoved the coffee aside. "Something else he didn't think about was the fact that I have a copy of every single file here at home. That I back up everything on my computer daily, on disk, and bring them home."

"So." Jake stepped behind her, rubbed her shoulders. "You're saying he didn't know you were anal."

"Exactly. Oh, thanks." She breathed a sigh of pleasure as he unknotted the first layers of tension. "I'd kiss you for

that, but I can't get up. And I don't think Callie would like it anyway."

"His lips are his business," Callie said. And yet she watched the way he kneaded Lana's shoulders. It was instinctive, she realized. She had a problem, he automatically stepped up to lend a hand.

"I'm sorry about all this, Lana. Really sorry. And you're fired."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Send me a bill for services rendered, and I'll cut you a check. I'm sorry to drag Sven the masseur away, but we've got a plane to catch."

Under Jake's hands, Lana's shoulders turned to rock.

"If you think you can pay me off and lock me out because you're speculating the fire was related to the work I'm doing for you, then you hired the wrong lawyer to begin with. Keep your goddamn money. That way you don't tell me what to do or what not to do."

"The rock meets the hard place," Jake declared, and kept rubbing. Behind her, he decided, was the safest place for a man to be.

"If I don't want you poking around in my business, then you don't poke around in my business."

"If I don't work for you, you have no say in it."

"For Christ's sake, Lana, if this is connected to me, you don't know what might happen next. You've got a kid to think about."

"Don't presume to tell me how to be a mother or how to care for my son. And don't assume I'll step away from an agreement because it's getting sticky. Somebody burned down my goddamn office, and I'm going to make sure they pay for it. One way or the other."

Callie sat back, drummed her fingers on the table. "So what the hell am I paying you for if you're going to do the work anyway?"

"Fair play."

"Graystone will tell you I don't mind playing dirty."

"She loves it," he agreed. "But she'll play fair with you

because she likes you. She's just pissed off right now because I told her you wouldn't shake off."

"Shut up." Callie shot him a single hot glance. "Who asked you?"

"You did."

"Children, no bickering at the table. What plane are you catching?"

"I'm—we're," Callie corrected as Jake scowled, "heading down to Atlanta to talk to Carlyle's son."

"Why do you think he'll talk to you when he wouldn't talk to the investigator?"

"Because I'm not going to give him a choice."

Jake leaned down, spoke in a stage whisper close to Lana's ear. "She nags until you either run screaming or give in."

"I do not nag. I persist."

"I hate to tell the two of you this, but you're still very married." She felt Jake's fingers dig and jerk on her shoulders, and saw Callie grimace. "In any case, I think it's a very good idea. It'll be more difficult for him to refuse to give you information. If he wants to speak to me, give him my cell and the number here. I'll be working at home until I can find other office space."

They didn't speak on the drive to the airport. Had nothing but the most cursory conversation through the airport. The minute they were airborne, Jake kicked back his seat.

He'd be asleep in about ten seconds, Callie knew. It was one of his most enviable skills, in her opinion. He could drop into sleep instantly on a flight, whether they were in a full-sized jet or in a five-seater tuna can with props. If he went by his usual pattern, he wouldn't stir until they announced the final descent, then he'd sit up, alert, refreshed.

It just killed her.

She pushed her seat back, folded her arms and tried to think of something besides the next two hours in the air.

Beside her, Jake kept his eyes closed. He was as aware of her thoughts as if she'd spoken them. And he knew in

about two minutes she'd be sitting up again, restless with the inactivity. She'd flip through one of the in-flight magazines. She'd curse herself for forgetting a book, then poke around in his bag to see if he had one.

She'd check her watch every five or six minutes, and think dark thoughts at him because he was asleep and she wasn't.

... you're still very married.

Lana, he thought, and tried to tune out his hyperawareness of the woman who sat beside him, you don't know the half of it.

Carlyle's offices in tony Buckhead had the hue of Southern grace and pricey exclusivity. The reception area was done in dark wood and deep tones, appointed with antiques all polished to a glossy sheen.

There was a hum of quiet efficiency in the air.

The woman manning the huge oak desk looked as graceful and pricey as the furnishings. Her smile was warm, her tone molasses-sweet. And her spine steel.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Carlyle's calendar is completely full. I'd be happy to make an appointment for you. He has an opening on Thursday of next week."

"We're only in town today," Callie told her.

"That's very unfortunate. Perhaps I can schedule a phone consultation."

"Phone conversations can be so impersonal, don't you think"—Jake glanced down at the brass nameplate on the desk, boosted up his smile, looked back at her—"Ms. Biddle?"

"That would depend on who's doing the talking. Maybe if you gave me an idea of the nature of your business, I could direct you to one of Mr. Carlyle's associates."

"It's personal business," Callie snapped, and earned a mild glare of reproof from Ms. Biddle.

"I'll be happy to give Mr. Carlyle a message for you and, as I said, to make an appointment for you on Thursday of next week."

“Personal family business,” Jake added. Deliberately he stepped on Callie’s foot, kept his boot planted there while he gave Ms. Biddle his full attention. “It has to do with Marcus Carlyle, Richard’s father. I think if you could free up just a few minutes for him today, he’ll want to talk to us.”

“You’re family to Mr. Carlyle?”

“There’s a connection. We’re only in Atlanta a short time. Those few minutes would make a big difference to us and, I think, to Richard. I’m sure he wouldn’t want us to fly all the way back to Maryland without seeing him.”

“If you give me your names, I’ll tell him you’re here. That’s all I can do.”

“Callie Dunbrook and Jacob Graystone. We certainly appreciate that, Ms. Biddle.”

“If you’d like to wait, I’ll tell Mr. Carlyle as soon as he’s off his conference call.”

The minute her foot was free, Callie gave Jake a quick kick in the ankle, then walked over to sit in one of the wing-back chairs. “I don’t see how lying’s going to get us through the door,” she grumbled at him.

“I didn’t lie. I prevaricated. And it loosened her up enough to have her tell him we’re here.”

She picked up a magazine, immediately tossed it down again. “Why do you have to flirt with every female you come in contact with?”

“It’s genetic imprinting. I’m a victim of my own physiology. Come on, babe, you know you’re the only one for me.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.”

“You heard it, but you never listened. Callie, we’ve got a lot to straighten out. After you find the answers you need on this score, we’re going to find the answers between us.”

“We found the answers between us.” But the trouble was, she thought on a spurt of panic, she was beginning to think some of the answers she’d found had been the wrong ones.

“We never even asked the damn questions. I’ve spent the best part of a year asking them.”

Anxiety curled up in the center of her chest. “Don’t start

this with me, Jake. I've got enough messing up my head right now."

"I know. Callie, I want you to know—" He broke off as Ms. Biddle approached.

Bad timing, he thought in disgust. It had been nothing but since he'd managed to get back to Callie again.

"Mr. Carlyle can give you ten minutes. If you'll take the stairs to the second floor, his assistant will show you in."

"Thank you." Jake took Callie's arm as they started up a staircase. "See? Never underestimate the power of prevarication."

The second floor was as graceful and charming as the first. She'd pegged Carlyle as rich, classy and successful.

Both his appearance and that of his office seemed to bear that out.

The office resembled a gentleman's study. A large study, to be sure, but with what Callie thought of as a manly and intimate tone. Shelves of books and mementos lined two walls. There were paintings by American artists as well as American antiques.

The masculine theme was continued in colors of burgundy and navy, the use of leather and brass.

Richard Carlyle stood behind his desk. He was tall and well built. His hair, streaked with gray, was well cut and brushed back from a high forehead. Both his nose and mouth were thin. When he extended his hand she noted the monogrammed cuffs. The Rolex. The glint of diamonds in his wedding ring.

She remembered Henry Simpson describing Marcus Carlyle as a handsome man, a dynamic man of exquisite taste.

Like father, she decided, like son.

"Ms. Dunbrook, Mr. Graystone. I'm afraid you have the advantage on me. I'm unaware of any family connection."

"The connection's with your father," Callie said. "And his involvement with my family. It's very important that I locate him."

"I see." He steeped his fingers, and over them his face

lost its polite interest. "As this is the second inquiry about my father in the last few days, I have to assume they're connected. I can't help you, Ms. Dunbrook. And I'm very pressed for time, so—"

"Don't you want to know why?"

He let out what might have been a sigh. "Quite frankly, Ms. Dunbrook, there's little you could tell me about my father that would interest me. Now, if you'll excuse me?"

"He arranged for babies to be stolen, transported, then sold to childless couples who paid him large fees without being aware of the kidnappings. He drew up fraudulent adoption papers in these cases, which he never filed with any court."

Richard stared at her without blinking. "That's ludicrous. And I'll warn you such an allegation is libelous as well as preposterous."

"It's neither when it's the truth. It's neither when there's proof."

He continued to watch her with that cool blue gaze that told her he must have been a killer in court.

"What proof could you possibly have?"

"Myself, for a start. I was stolen as an infant and sold to a couple who were clients of your father. The exchange was made in his Boston office in December of 1974."

"You have misinformation," he countered.

"No I don't. What I have are a lot of questions for your father. Where is he?"

He was silent for a moment, so silent she heard him draw in a breath. "You can't expect me to believe these criminal accusations, to stand here and take your word."

Callie reached in her bag. "Copies of the adoption papers. You can check. They were never filed with the court. Copies of the fees your father charged for my placement. Copies of the initial tests run to substantiate that I am the biological daughter of Jay and Suzanne Cullen, whose infant daughter was stolen, December of 'seventy-four. Police reports," she added, nodding at the pile of papers she put on his desk. "Newspaper accounts."

“You should read them,” Jake suggested, then took a seat. “Take your time.”

Richard’s fingers trembled lightly as he reached in his pocket for gold-framed reading glasses. Saying nothing, he began to go through the file.

“This is hardly proof,” he said after a time. “You’re accusing a man of trafficking in children, of kidnapping, fraud.” He took the glasses off, set them aside. “Whatever personal problems my father and I might have, I don’t believe this of him. If you persist in these accusations, I’ll take legal action.”

“Take it then,” Callie invited. “Because I’m not going to stop until I have all the answers. I’m not going to stop until the people responsible for what happened to the Cullens, and other families, are punished. Where’s your father?”

“I haven’t seen my father in more than fifteen years,” Carlyle shot back angrily. “If I knew where he was, I wouldn’t tell you. I intend to look into this personally, of that you can be quite sure. I don’t believe there’s any validity in your allegations. But if I find differently, I’ll do what I can to locate my father and . . . I’ll do what I can.”

“There have been some attempts to stop us from finding him, and those answers,” Jake stated calmly. “Physical attacks, arson.”

“For God’s sake, he’s ninety.” As Richard’s composure wavered, he patted a hand over his hair. “The last time I saw him he was recovering from a heart attack. His health is poor. He’d hardly be in any shape to physically attack anyone or start fires.”

“Anyone who could organize a black-market system for babies could easily hire someone to do the heavy work.”

“I haven’t agreed that my father had anything to do with a black market. Everything I see here is supposition and circumstantial. The man I knew was a mediocre father, a complete failure as a husband and often a difficult human being. But he was a good lawyer, with a strong respect for the system and a dedication to the institution of adoption. He helped create families. He was proud of that.”

“Proud enough to destroy some families to make others?” Callie put in. “Proud enough to play God?”

“I said I’d look into it. I’m going to insist you cease and desist making any libelous or slanderous statements about my father. If you’ll give my assistant numbers where you can be reached, I’ll be in touch once I’ve made a determination.”

Jake got to his feet before Callie could speak. “It’s strange, isn’t it, Carlyle, to have your perception of your family, your sense of self shaken in one blinding moment?”

He took Callie’s hand, drew her to her feet. “That’s exactly what happened to her. We’ll see if you have half the guts she does. Half the spine. So you look into it, you make your determination. And you remember this: We’ll find him. I’ll make it my goddamn life’s work to find him. Because nobody’s going to get away with making Callie unhappy.”

He squeezed her hand as she stared at him. “Except me. Let’s go.”

She didn’t say anything to him until they were outside. “That was some closing speech, Graystone.”

“You liked it?”

“Pretty effective. I haven’t thought much about being unhappy. Mad, determined, confused, but not unhappy.”

“But you are.”

“Doesn’t seem like the most important thing, in the big scheme.”

“I made you unhappy. That’s something I’ve thought about quite a bit over the last year.”

“We made each other unhappy.”

He put a hand under her chin, turned her face to his. “Maybe we did. But I know one thing for damn sure. I was happier with you than I was without you.”

Thoughts tumbled together in her head, refused to make sense. “Damn it, Jake,” was all she could say.

“Figured you should know. Being a smart woman you’ll be able to conclude I prefer being happy to unhappy. So I’m going to get you back.”

“I’m not a . . . a yo-yo.”

“A yo-yo comes back, if you’ve got the right hand-eye coordination. You’re no toy, Dunbrook. You’re work. Now, do you want to stand here on the sidewalk in Atlanta discussing my future happiness?”

“No, I don’t.”

“We can hang around, try to give this guy another push—or let him simmer. Braves are in town. We might be able to catch a game. Or we can go back north and back to work.”

“What’s this? You’re not going to tell me what I’m supposed to do?”

He winced. “I’m trying to cut down on that. How’m I doing?”

“Actually, not too bad.” She gave in to impulse, touched his face, then immediately turned away to stare back at Richard Carlyle’s office. “He said he hadn’t seen his father in over fifteen years, but his first instinct was to stand up for him.”

“It is instinct—cultural, societal, familial. Close ranks against the outsider.”

“I don’t believe he doesn’t know where his father is. Maybe he doesn’t have the exact address stored in his head, but he has to know how to get to him. If we push, his instinct would be to barricade, wouldn’t it?”

“Probably. Following that, to either confront his father with the information we just put in his hands, or to warn him.”

“We don’t have to worry about the warning, because Carlyle already knows we’re looking. I’m sure of that. Let’s give him a few days. I say we go back to work, on the site and on the list of names Suzanne gave me.”

“I guess that shoots any chance of a suite at the Ritz here, and my fantasy of getting you drunk and naked.”

“Pretty much.” Maybe she was an idiot, she thought, but she, too, was happier with him than she was without him. “But you can buy me a drink at the airport bar and make sexual innuendos.”

“If that’s the best I can do, let’s find a cab and get started.”

You're back." Bill McDowell trotted up to Callie the minute he arrived at the dig. His young, earnest face was still shiny from its morning scrub.

Callie grunted as she looked through the dumpy level to the surveyor's staff West Virginia Frannie held. "We were only gone a day, Bill."

"Yeah, I know, but nobody was sure when you'd be back. I had a dentist appointment first thing this morning or I'd've been here sooner."

"Um-hmm. How'd it go?"

"Good. Great. No problems. You've got really nice teeth."

She managed to swallow the chuckle. "Thanks." She noted the height on the staff that gave her vertical distance. "Next point, Frannie."

Jake had been right, again, about the couple from West Virginia. Frannie was skinny, silly and obsessed with Chuck, but willing to follow instructions.

And unlike Bill, didn't breathe down her neck and continually ask questions.

She rotated the movable telescope until she focused on the new position, took the second reading. All the while Bill hovered behind her.

She could smell his aftershave, the lacing of bug repellent and a whiff of Listerine.

"I found potsherds yesterday," he told her. "I got the photographs if you want to see. I took Polaroids for my own records. Dory took the others. Hey, Dory! How's it going?"

"Hi, Bill. Any cavities?"

"Nah. Anyway . . . um, Callie?"

"Huh?"

"I wrote up the report last night. They're really cool—the potsherds. Digger said they were probably from a cooking pot. They were scribed and everything."

"That's good." She noted down the measurements. "That's got it, Frannie. Thanks." She began scribbling the

calculations on her clipboard, and spoke absently to Bill. “Stick with the same location today, see what else you turn up.”

“I was kind of hoping I could work with you.”

“Maybe later.”

“Well, okay. Sure. Anyway, this is all so much cooler than I thought it was going to be. I mean, it takes forever, but then bam! you get something and it’s great. But whenever you need a hand, I could work with you over there.” He gestured toward the area marked off for the cemetery. “With the bones. I figure I can learn more in one day with you than a month with anybody else.”

She reminded herself she was here to teach as well as dig. Enlightenment was as essential as discovery. “We’ll see about it tomorrow.”

“Awesome.”

He jogged off to get his trowel.

“You know, you can get a rash having your butt kissed that much,” Jake commented.

“Shut up. He’s just eager. You’re going to want to have one of your beauty-pageant contestants start another triangulation. Sonya, probably. Dory could work with her.”

“I’ve already set them up.” He gestured to where the two women were working with measuring tapes and a plumb line. “Starting next week, we’re only going to have Sonya on weekends. She starts classes full-time.”

“What about Dory?”

“She’s arranging a sabbatical. She doesn’t want to leave the dig. Chuck and Frannie are staying on. Matt, too. For the time being anyway. You couldn’t drag Bill away with a team of mules. We’re going to lose a couple of the itinerants, the undergrads. Leo’s working on replacements.”

“If we’re going to be shorthanded, let’s keep those hands busy while we’ve got them.”

They separated, Jake to work on what they’d termed “the hut area,” and Callie back to the cemetery.

She could work there with the pulse of Digger’s rock music, the chatter of the planning team, the trill of birds in the trees at her back. She could work in her own bubble of

silence where those sounds simply pressed against the edges of her concentration.

She had the moist ground under her fingers, and the music of it sliding from her trowel into her spoil bucket. She had the sun on her back and the occasional brush of breeze to cool it.

She used trowel and brush and probe, painstakingly excavating the distant past, and her mind carefully turned over the known elements of her own.

William Blakely, Suzanne Cullen's obstetrician, retired twelve years after delivering her of a healthy baby girl. Seven pounds, one ounce. He died of prostate cancer fourteen years later, survived by his wife, who had been both his office manager and his nurse, and their three children.

Blakely's receptionist during the period in question had also retired, but had moved out of the area.

She intended to visit the widow, find more on the receptionist as soon as possible.

She'd track down the delivery-room nurse who'd assisted Suzanne through both of her labors. And the roommate she'd had during her hospital stay.

The pediatrician Suzanne had used continued to practice. She'd be going to see him as well.

It was a kind of triangulation, she thought. Each one of those names was a kind of point on the feature of her past. She would mark them, measure them, plot them. And somehow, she'd form the grid that began to give her the picture of what lay beneath it all.

Meticulously, she brushed the soil from the jawbone of a skull. "Who were you?" she wondered aloud.

She started to reach for her camera, glanced over when it wasn't there.

"I've got it." Dory crouched down, framed in the skull. "I've been elected to pick up lunch." She rose, moved to another position to take another series of pictures from a different angle. "My name is Dory, and I'll be your server today. What'll you have?"

"I could go for one of those meatball subs, extra sauce

and cheese. Bag of chips—see if they’ve got sour cream and onion.”

“How do you eat like that and stay slim? I even look at a bag of potato chips, I gain five pounds.” Dory lowered the camera. “I hate women like you. I’m having yogurt—for a change.”

She put the camera down to take the notebook out of her back pocket and scribble down Callie’s order.

“You need money?”

“No, the kitty’s still flush. Speaking of which, we’re trying to get a poker game together for tonight. Interested?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got to work.”

“Everybody needs some downtime. You haven’t taken a night off since I started on the dig. And when you’re not on-site, you’re traveling. In and out of Atlanta yesterday, a day in the lab last week—”

“How’d you know I went to Atlanta?”

Dory flinched at the snap in Callie’s voice. “Rosie mentioned it. She said you and Jake had to fly to Atlanta on business. Sorry. I didn’t mean to step in anything.”

“You didn’t step in anything. Look, I’ll ante up if I get the chance, but I’ve got some legwork on an alternate project that’s taking time.”

“Sure. We can always come up with an extra chair.” Dory got to her feet, brushed off her knees, then nodded toward the skull. “I bet he didn’t have many meatball subs for lunch.”

“Not likely.”

“Something to be said for progress,” Dory said, then walked to her car.

Callie waited until she was gone, then boosted out of the hole. She gestured to Rosie, wandered over to the cooler.

“What’s up?” Rosie asked her.

“Did you mention to anyone that I was in Atlanta yesterday?”

Rosie pulled a jug of Gatorade with her name on it out of the cooler. “Probably.” She took a long drink. “Yeah, your not-so-secret admirer was pretty bummed when you

weren't here. I told him you had some business south and would be back in a day or two. I might've told someone else. Was it a secret mission or something?"

"No." She rolled her shoulder. "Just jumpy, I guess." She frowned over to where Bill worked. "Has he asked you anything else about me?"

"Yeah, he asks. What you like to do in your free time. If you've got a boyfriend."

"A boyfriend? Give me a break."

"He shoots sulky and territorial glares at Jake when he's absolutely sure Jake's not looking. And gooey ones at you."

"He's twelve."

"Twenty-four and counting. Come on, Callie." Rosie gave her a friendly elbow in the ribs. "It's sweet. Be nice to him."

"I'm nice to him."

But it made her think about perceptions, about team dynamics and gossip. So she decided to go after the next pieces of her puzzle without Jake.

Lorna Blakely had steel-gray hair, wore bifocals and housed four cats. She kept the screen door locked and peered suspiciously through it while the cats complained and circled around her.

"I don't know any Dunbrooks."

"No, ma'am. You don't know me." The Hagerstown neighborhood seemed quiet, settled and peaceful. Callie wondered why the woman would be so paranoid and why she'd believe a locked screen would stop anyone from breaking in. "I'd like to speak with you about one of your husband's patients. Suzanne Cullen."

"My husband's dead."

"Yes, ma'am. He was Suzanne Cullen's doctor. He delivered both her babies. Do you remember her?"

"Of course I remember her. I'm not senile. She lives down the south of the county and got famous for her baking. She was a nice young woman, had pretty babies. One got kidnapped. Terrible thing."

"Yes, ma'am. That's what I'd like to talk to you about."

"You the police? That must've been thirty years ago. Talked to the police back then."

"No, I'm not the police." How much, Callie wondered, could she trust her instincts, her judgment? They both told her that this tiny, suspicious woman with her bevy of cats wasn't the type to black-market the babies her husband had spent his life bringing into the world. "Mrs. Blakely, I'm the baby who was kidnapped. I'm Suzanne Cullen's daughter."

"Why the devil didn't you say so in the first place?" Lorna flipped off the lock, pushed open the screen. "How's your mama? Didn't hear they'd found you. Don't listen to the news much. Haven't since Wil'm passed."

"I just recently found out about the connection. If I could ask you some questions it might help me figure out what really happened."

"Don't this beat all." Lorna shook her head and scattered a couple of silver hairpins. "Just like something from that *America's Most Wanted* or some such thing. Guess you better sit down."

She led the way into a small living room coordinated to within an inch of its life with matching maple tables, two identical china lamps, a sofa and chair out of the same pink and blue floral print.

Lorna took the chair, propped her feet on a matching ottoman. When Callie sat on the sofa, cats leaped into her lap. "Don't mind them. They don't get much company. Suzanne's little girl, after all this time. Isn't that something? You got the look of her, now that I think about it. Good breeder," she added. "Breezed through both of those pregnancies. Strong, healthy girl, just about broke your heart to see how she went sickly after she lost that baby."

"You worked with your husband."

"Sure I did. Worked with him for twenty-two years."

"Would you remember, when he was treating Suzanne through that pregnancy, if there was anyone who asked questions about her, seemed overly interested in her?"

"The police asked questions back when it happened. Wasn't a thing we could tell them. Wil'm, he was heartsick over it. That man loved his babies."

“What about the other people who worked in your husband’s office back then?”

“Had a receptionist, another nurse. Hallie, she was with us ten years. No eleven. Eleven years.”

“Hallie was the other nurse. What about Karen Younger, the receptionist?”

“Moved here from the city. D.C. Worked for us six years or so, then her husband he got transferred down to Texas somewhere. Got a Christmas card from her every year. Always said she missed Dr. Wil’m. She was a good girl. Billy delivered her second baby, a boy. Worked for us another two years before they moved away.”

“Do you know where in Texas?”

“Course I do. Didn’t I say I wasn’t senile? Houston. Got two grandchildren now.”

“I wonder if I could have her address, and Hallie’s? To contact them in case they remember anything.”

“Don’t know what they’d remember now they didn’t remember then. Some stranger snatched you up. That’s what happened. That’s how people can be.”

“There were people at the hospital, too. People who knew your husband, who knew Suzanne had a baby. Orderlies, nurses, other doctors. One of the delivery-room nurses was with Suzanne for both deliveries. Would you remember her name?”

Lorna puffed out her cheeks. “Might’ve been Mary Stern, or Nancy Ellis. Can’t say for sure, but Wil’m asked for one of them most often.”

“Are they still in the area?”

“As far as I know. Lose track of people when you’re a widow. You want to talk to every blessed one who worked up the hospital back then, you check with Betsy Poffenberger. She worked there more than forty years. Nothing she doesn’t know about anybody or anything goes on there. Always had her nose in somebody’s business.”

“Where would I find her?”

Betsy lived twenty minutes away, in a development Callie learned had been built by Ronald Dolan.

“Lorna Blakely sent you?” Betsy was a robust woman with hair as black as pitch that had been lacquered into a poofed ball. She sat on her front porch with a pair of binoculars close at hand. “Old biddy. Never did care for me. Thought I had a thing for her Wil’m. I wasn’t married back then, and in Lorna’s mind any unmarried woman was on the prowl.”

“She thought you might be able to tell me who was in the delivery room with Suzanne Cullen when her daughter was born. Maybe who her roommate was during her stay. The names of the nurses and staff working the maternity wing. That sort of thing.”

“Long time ago.” She eyed Callie. “I’ve seen you on TV.”

“I’m with the archaeology project at Antietam Creek.”

“That’s it. That’s it. You don’t expect me to tell you anything without you telling me why.”

“You know Suzanne Cullen’s daughter was taken. It has to do with that.”

“You an archaeologist or a detective?”

“Sometimes they’re the same thing. I’d really appreciate any help you can give me, Mrs. Poffenberger.”

“Felt sorry as could be for Ms. Cullen when that happened. Everybody did. Things like that don’t happen around here.”

“This time it did. Do you remember anything, anyone?”

“We talked about nothing else for weeks. Alice Lingstrom was head nurse on the maternity floor. She’s a particular friend of mine. She and Kate Regan and me, we talked about it plenty, over breaks and at lunch. Kate worked in Administration. We went to school together. Can’t say I recall what was what right off, but I could find out. I still got ways,” she said with a wink. “Guess I could do that. Jay Cullen, he taught my sister’s boy in school. Mike, he’s no brain trust, if you know what I mean, but my sister said Mr. Cullen worked special with him to help him out. So I guess I could see what’s what.”

“Thank you.” Callie took out a piece of paper, wrote down her cell phone. “You can reach me at this number. I’d appreciate any information at all.”

Betsy pursed her lips at the number, then peered up at Callie’s face when she rose. “You kin to the Cullens?”

“Apparently.”

The poker game was under way when Callie got back. She could hear the rattle of chips from the kitchen. She turned toward the steps with the hope of getting up them and into her room unnoticed.

But Jake appeared to have radar where she was concerned. She was halfway up when he took her arm, turned her around and marched back down.

“Hey. Hands off.”

“We’re going for a walk.” He kept his grip on her arm and propelled her through the door. “So nobody can interfere when I slap you around.”

“You keep dragging me and you’re going to be flat on your back checking out the evening sky.”

“Why did you sneak off?”

“I didn’t sneak off; I drove off. In my freshly painted vehicle.”

“Where did you go?”

“I don’t report to you.”

“Where did you go, and why did you have your phone turned off so I couldn’t call and yell at you?”

When they reached the creek, she pulled her arm free. “I had some legwork I wanted to do, and I wanted to do it alone. I’m not having the team talking about us because we’re always together. You know how gossip can breed on a dig.”

“Fuck gossip. Did it occur to you that I’d worry? Did it ever cross your mind that I’d worry when I didn’t know where you’d gone and couldn’t contact you?”

“No. It occurred to me you’d be mad.”

“I am mad.”

“I don’t mind that, but I didn’t mean to worry you.” And she saw, very clearly, that she had. “I’m sorry.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“You apologized without being pounded into submission first.” He lifted his hands palms up, looked toward the sky. “It’s a day of miracles.”

“And now I’m going to tell you what to do with the apology.”

“Uh-uh.” He took her face in his hands, pressed his lips to hers. “Let me enjoy it.”

When she didn’t kick him, shove him, he drew her closer. He deepened the kiss, let his fingers slide back into her hair.

His lips were warm, and gentle. His hands more persuasive than possessive. This, she thought as she let herself float into the kiss, wasn’t the way he demonstrated temper. Not in her experience. The fact was, she couldn’t remember him ever kissing her in quite this way.

With patience, and with care. As if, she thought, she mattered a very great deal.

“What’s going on with you?” she murmured against his mouth.

“That’s my question.” He eased back, let out a long breath. “We’d better talk or I’m going to forget why I’m mad at you. Where did you go?”

She nearly refused to tell him, then realized that was simply a knee-jerk reaction. You demand, she thought, I refuse. And we end up nowhere.

“Why don’t we sit down?” She lowered to the bank of the creek, and told him.

Seventeen

Callie sat cross-legged on the ground, filling out a find sheet. Her notes and records were secured in a clipboard and fluttered in the light breeze.

There were voices everywhere. The weekend team expanded with amateur diggers and curious students. Leo was talking about organizing a knap-in the following month to draw in more help and more interest before the end of the season.

She imagined fall in this part of the world would be a perfect time for camping out and holding outdoor instruction. Some who signed up were bound to be more trouble than they were worth, but she didn't mind the idea as long as it got the project attention and more hands.

She heard the occasional car pull up at the fence line, and those voices carried as well. One of the students would give the standard lecture and answer the questions of the tourists or townspeople who stopped by.

When a shadow fell over her, she continued to write. "You can take those pails over to the spoil pile. But don't forget to bring them back."

"I'd be glad to, if I knew what a spoil pile was and where to find it."

Callie turned her head, shading her eyes with the flat of her hand. It was a jolt to see Suzanne in sunglasses and ball cap. It was almost like looking at an older version of herself. "Sorry. I thought you were one of the grunts."

"I heard you on the radio this morning."

"Yeah, Jake, Leo and I take shifts with the media."

"You made it all sound so fascinating. I thought it was time I came by and had a look for myself. I hope it's all right."

"Sure." Callie set the clipboard down, got to her feet. "So . . ." She hooked her thumbs in her pockets to keep her hands still. "What do you think?"

"Actually"—Suzanne looked around—"it's tidier than I imagined somehow. And more crowded."

"We're able to pull in a lot of volunteers on the weekends."

"Yes, so I see," she said, smiling over at where little Tyler scooped a trowel through a small pile of soil. "Starting them young."

"That's Lana Campbell's little boy. He's a Saturday regular. We give him spoil we've already sieved. One of us seeds his pile with a couple of minor finds. He gets a charge out of it. The spoil's dirt we take out of the plots, then it's sieved so any small artifact isn't missed."

"And every piece tells you something about who lived here, and how. If I understood your radio interview."

"That's right. You have to find the past in order to understand the past, and understand it in order to reconstruct it." She paused as her words echoed back to her. "I'm trying to do that, Suzanne."

"Yes, I know you are." Suzanne touched a hand to Callie's arm. "You're uncomfortable with me, and that's partly my fault for going to pieces the way I did in Lana's office that day. Jay gave me a hell of a lecture over it."

"Well, you were understandably—"

"No, you wouldn't understand." And there was quiet

sorrow in the words. “Jay isn’t a man who normally gives anyone hell. He’s so patient, so quiet. Just some of the reasons I fell in love with him when I was about six years old. But he laid it on the line for me the other day. It was very unexpected. And, I suppose, exactly what I needed.”

“I guess this isn’t easy for him either.”

“No, it’s not. That’s something I found it very convenient to forget over the years. I need to tell you before this goes any further that I’m not going to put that kind of pressure on you again.”

She let out a little breath, a half laugh. “I’m going to *try* not to put that kind of pressure on you again. I want to get to know you, Callie. I want that chance. I want you to get to know me. I know you’re trying to...reconstruct. Betsy Poffenberger called me this morning. She heard you on the radio, too.”

“Popular show.”

“Apparently. She told me you’d been to see her. She said she wanted to make sure it was all right with me to give you information, but what she wanted was to pump me for it. I didn’t tell her anything, but people are starting to put things together.”

“I know. Are you all right with that?”

“I don’t know yet.” She pressed a hand to her stomach. “I’m jittery all the time. The idea of answering questions when everything’s still evolving is hard. Harder than I could have imagined. But I can handle it. I’m stronger than I’ve given you reason to think.”

“I’ve read some of your letters. I think you’re one of the strongest women I’ve ever known.”

“Oh. Well.” Eyes stinging, Suzanne looked away. “That’s a lovely thing to hear from a grown daughter. I’d really like you to tell me more about your work here. I’d really like to understand more about it, and you. I really want us to be comfortable with each other. That would be enough for right now. Just to be comfortable with each other.”

“I’m working this section.” Needing to make the effort, Callie took Suzanne’s arm, turned her. “We’re establishing

that this area was a Neolithic settlement. And this section their cemetery. You can see here we've uncovered a low stone wall, which we believe the tribe built to enclose their graveyard. As we excavate bones—bones are my specialty, by the way."

"Bones are your specialty?"

"Yeah. I almost went into forensic archaeology, but it's too much time in the lab. I like to dig. Here, this is pretty sweet. I found this the other day."

She crouched down for her clipboard, flipped back sheets and pulled out a photo of a skull. "It's already at the lab, so I can't show you the real deal."

"This will do." Gingerly, Suzanne took the photo. "There's a hole in it. Is that a wound?"

"Trepanning. An operation," Callie explained when Suzanne looked blank. "They'd scrape or cut away bone, using a stone knife or drill. The purpose, we speculate, might have been to relieve cranial pressure caused by fractures or tumors."

"You're kidding."

"No. Had to seriously hurt. The point is, they tried, didn't they? However crude the healing, they attempted to heal their sick and injured. A tribe gathers together for defense and survival, and evolves into a settlement. Housing, rituals—you can talk to Graystone if you're interested in that kind of thing. Hunting, gathering, organized tasks, leadership, healing, mating. Farming," she added, gesturing toward the area not yet disturbed. "Grains, domesticated animals. From settlement to village, and village to town. From town to city. Why? Why here, why them?"

"You find out the who and the how first."

"Yeah." Pleased, Callie glanced back at Suzanne and continued. "To do that, you have to plot the site. That's considering you have permission to dig, financial support and a team. You've got to do your surveys. Once you start digging, you're destroying the site. Every step and stage has to be recorded, in detail. Measurements, readings, photography, sketches, reports."

Jake watched Callie give Suzanne a tour of the site. He

could gauge Callie's emotional state by her body language. She'd closed in immediately upon seeing Suzanne, then had gone on the defensive, from there to uneasy, and now to relaxed.

In her element now, he thought, as he noted her using her hands to gesture, to draw pictures.

"It's nice to see them together," Lana said as she stepped beside him. "To see them able to be together like that. It can't be easy for either of them, trying to find some common ground without trespassing. Particularly challenging for Callie, I'd think, as she's sectioned off in so many areas."

"Meaning?"

"Oh, I think you get the meaning. This project is her professional focus right now, and one that challenges and excites her. At the same time, she's dealing with the trauma of uncovering answers to her past, trying to forge a relationship with Suzanne they can both live with. And in, around and through all that is you. Personally, professionally, every which way. And, if you don't mind my saying so—"

"Whether I mind or not, you strike me as a woman who says what she has to say."

"You're right about that. And you strike me as a difficult man. I've always liked difficult men because they're rarely boring. Added to that, I like Callie, very much. So I enjoy seeing her more at ease with Suzanne, and I enjoy watching the two of you trying to figure each other out."

"We've been at that for a long time." He turned as Ty raced over, clutching a bone in his grimy fist.

"Look! Look what I got. I found a bone."

Jake chuckled at the low and essentially female sound of disgust Lana tried to muffle. He swung Ty up, shifting so Ty could wag the bone in his mother's face.

"It's neat, huh, Mom?"

"Mmm. Very neat."

"Is it from a people? A dead people?"

"Ty, I don't know where you've developed this ghoulish interest in dead people."

"Dead people are neat," Jake said soberly. "Let's have a

look.” But he was still watching Callie. “Why don’t we ask the expert?”

“And wooing a woman with bones isn’t ghoulish?” Lana said under her breath.

“Not when she’s Callie. Hey! Got a find over here, Dr. Dunbrook.”

“It’s a bone!” Ty called out, waving it like a flag as Callie walked over with Suzanne.

“It certainly is.” Callie stepped close, examined it thoughtfully.

“From a dead person?” Ty asked.

“A deer,” she said, and watched his face fall in disappointment. “It’s a very important find,” she told him. “Someone hunted this deer so the tribe could eat. So they could make clothing and tools and weapons. Do you see those woods, Ty-Rex?” She brushed a hand over his hair as she turned to point. “Maybe that deer walked in those woods. Maybe a young boy, not much older than you, went out with his father and his brother, his uncle, on a day just like today, to hunt. He was excited, but he knew he had a job to do. An important job. His family, his tribe was depending on him. When he brought down this deer, maybe it was the very first time he did his job. And you have this to remember him.”

“Can I take it to show-and-tell?”

“I’ll show you how to clean it and label it.”

He reached out, and Callie reached for him. For a moment she and Jake held the child together. Something fluttered in her belly as their eyes met. “Ah, maybe you could explain the site to Suzanne from the anthropological level,” she said. “Ty and I have—ha ha—a bone to pick.”

“Sure.”

“It’s a strange world, isn’t it?” Suzanne said when Callie carted Tyler off.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re my son-in-law. More or less. And since I don’t know the circumstances of your relationship with Callie, I don’t know if I should be mad at you or disappointed in you or sorry for you.”

"I probably deserve a little of all three."

"You were waiting for her outside Lana's office the day we all met there. And you went with her to Atlanta. Would that mean you're looking out for her?"

"That's right."

"Good."

He thought a moment, then dug his wallet out of his pocket. Glancing over to be sure Callie was occupied with Ty, he flipped it open, took out a snapshot.

"I can't give it to you," he said. "It's the only one I've got. But I thought you might like to see it. Wedding photo. Sort of. We drove out to Vegas and got it done in one of those get-hitched-quick places. In fact, we looked for the tackiest one we could find. We had some guy take this for us outside, right after."

The snapshot showed some creases and hard wear, but the colors were still lurid and bright. Callie had chosen siren red for her wedding gown, and "gown" was an exaggeration. The dress was short, skimpy and strapless. She had a full-blown red rose behind her ear, and both arms wrapped around Jake's waist.

He wore a dark suit and a tie with a green-and-blue parrot on a red background. His arms were around her.

The wall behind them was a candy pink, and the red, heart-shaped door bore a sign that read MARRIAGE-GO-ROUND.

They were both grinning like idiots, and looked ridiculously happy.

"She picked out the tie," Jake commented. "First and last time for that one, let me tell you. See, the place had this merry-go-round thing you stood on, with horses dressed up like brides and grooms. You stood on it while it went around and this guy in a clown suit... Anyway."

"You look terribly in love," Suzanne managed. "Stupid with it."

"Yeah, stupid was the theme."

"You're still in love with her."

"Look at her. How the hell do you get that out of your system? So..." He closed the wallet, stuck it back in his

pocket. "Since you're my mother-in-law, more or less, how about making me some of those macadamia nut brownies?"

She smiled at him. "I might just do that."

"If we could keep that between you and me, because if any of the pigs in the house find out, I'll be lucky to get crumbs." His attention was diverted by a noise. "Seems to be visitors' day around here."

Suzanne looked over as a car pulled up. "It's Doug. I didn't think he'd be back so soon." She started toward the fence, then pulled up short when she saw Lana dash over, watched her son nip Lana at the waist and lift her off her feet and kiss her with the fence between them.

"Oh." Suzanne pressed a fist to her heart as it lurched. "Well. I didn't see that one coming."

"Problem?" Jake asked her.

"No. No," she decided. "Just a surprise." She saw Ty race over, still waving the deer bone. When Doug swung over the fence, crouched down to look at it, Suzanne pressed that fist a little harder against her heart. "A very big surprise."

Doug studied the bone, listened to Ty chatter, then shook his head. "This is very cool. I don't know if you're going to want what I've got in here when you've got something like this."

"What is it?" Ty asked excitedly as he looked at the little bag in Doug's hand. "Is it for me?"

"Yeah. But if you don't want it, I'll hang on to it." Doug reached in, pulled a palm-sized tyrannosaurus out of the bag.

"It's a dinosaur. It's a T-rex! Thanks!" Ty fell on Doug's neck in gratitude and the love a four-year-old boy has in abundance. "It's the best! Can I go bury it and dig it up again?"

"You bet." He straightened as Ty sprinted off to the spoil pile. "That seems to be a hit." He looked back to see Lana grinning at him. "Want a present?"

"I do."

He reached in the bag again, watched her mouth fall open as he pulled out her gift.

“Is that . . .”

“Yes, it is. An official electric-blue, guitar-shaped Elvis flyswatter. After considerable search and debate, this was the silliest thing I could find. I hope it does the job.”

“It’s perfect.” Laughing, she threw her arms around his neck as Ty had done.

“I missed you. I don’t know if I like that or not. I’m not used to missing anyone, but I missed you.”

She drew back. “Are you used to being missed?”

“Not really.”

“You were,” she said and took his hand.

Callie had just called for the team to gather up their loose when the last visitor arrived. Diggers and students began the routine of gathering tools for cleaning and storage.

Bill McDowell, his arms full of trowels and pails, jogged over. “Want me to take this one, Callie?” He nodded toward the baby blue sedan. “I don’t mind.”

“That’s okay.” Callie watched Betsy Poffenberger lever herself out of the driver’s seat of the blue Camry. “I know her.”

“Okay, well, a bunch of us are going to camp out here tonight. Grill up some dogs, have some beer. Just hang out. You gonna?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I’ll get your loose for you.”

“Thanks.” She spoke absently, and was already walking away. “Mrs. Poffenberger.”

“Isn’t this just something. Look at all those holes in the ground. All those trenches. You dig those yourself?”

“Some of them. I was hoping to hear from you.”

“Thought I’d take a drive out, have a look-see for myself. Heard you on the radio this morning. Sounded real scientific.”

“Thank you. Were you able to find out anything for me?”

Betsy studied Callie’s face. “You didn’t mention you were Suzanne Cullen’s girl.”

“Does that make a difference?”

“Sure it does. It’s just like a mystery story. I recollect when it all happened. Suzanne and Jay Cullen’s picture was in the paper. Yours, too. Just a baby then, of course. There were flyers, too, all over Hagerstown. Now here you are. Isn’t that something?”

“I’d appreciate anything you can tell me. If anything you can tell me helps, there’ll probably be more newspaper stories down the road. I imagine reporters will want to talk to you.”

“You think? Wouldn’t that be something. Well, I talked to Alice and Kate, and Alice, she remembered that it was Mary Stern who was the delivery-room nurse when Suzanne Cullen’s babies were born. Remembered for sure because she said she spoke to Mary about you after you got snatched away. Alice, she’ll gossip about the phase of the moon if you give her half a chance. Got a couple other names for you, people she remembered. Night-shift nurse, and so on. Don’t know as all of them’re still in the area.”

She took out a sheet of paper. “I looked the names up in the phone book myself. Got a curious nature. Mary Stern is living down in Florida now, got divorced and remarried. Had herself a baby when she was damn near forty. Sandy Parker here, she died in a car wreck about five years ago. Terrible thing, read about it in the paper. She was on the night shift.”

Callie tried to tug the sheet away, but Betsy clung tight, adjusted her glasses and continued to read. “Now, this one, this Barbara Halloway, I didn’t remember her till Alice reminded me. She wasn’t on staff more than a year, and on night shift, too. I didn’t know many of the night-shifters well, but I remembered her after Alice jogged my memory.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Poffenberger. I’m sure this will help.”

“Snooty young thing,” she continued. “Fresh out of nursing school. Redheaded girl, had her sights set on bagging a doctor, from what I heard. Got one, too. Not around here, up north somewhere. She moved away not long after the whole thing happened. That’s why I didn’t remember her right off. Had a cool way about her. That’s one I’d take a second look at if I were you. Had a cool way.”

“Thank you. I will. And I’ll be sure to let you know what I find out.”

“Got some orderlies on there, too. That Jack Brewster, he was a slick one. Always sniffing around the nurses, be they married or not.”

“Dr. Dunbrook?” Jake sauntered up. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but you’re needed at grid thirty-five.”

“Oh. Of course. You’ll have to excuse me, Mrs. Poffenberger. But again, I appreciate your time and trouble.”

“Don’t you worry about that. You just give me a call if you need anything else. Like a mystery story.”

Callie tucked the paper in her back pocket, stepped back from the fence as Betsy climbed in her car. “There is no grid thirty-five,” she announced.

“You were sending off panic signals, so I decided to ride to the rescue.”

“That wasn’t panic, it was my ears ringing. She doesn’t shut up.” Callie blew out a breath. “And she did me an enormous favor. I’ve got names. At least a dozen names.”

“How do you want to handle it?”

“I think I’ll start with a search on the net. See how many are still alive, still in the area. Go from there.”

“Want some help?”

“You’re awfully accommodating these days.”

He stepped forward, leaned down, caught her bottom lip in his teeth. “I’m going to bill you later.”

“I could use the help. And I might even be willing to give you a down payment on that bill.”

“Babe.” His lips hovered a breath from hers, then retreated. “Don’t worry. I trust you.”

When he walked away, Callie shook her head. “Just another mystery story,” she concurred.

Bill McDowell got a little drunk. It didn’t take more than a single beer to manage it, but he had two, just to be sure he’d stay that way awhile.

He’d seen the way Jake had moved in on Callie. And worse, he’d seen the way she’d moved in right back.

She wasn't going to come back to the site that night to hang out, to talk. To let him look at her.

He wasn't stupid. He knew what was going on, right now, right this minute while he was sitting out here drinking that second beer and listening to that local jerk Matt play some lame version of "Free Bird" on the guitar.

Lynyrd Skynyrd, for Christ's sake. Talk about your artifacts.

Right now, while he was drinking beer under the stars, listening to "Free Bird" and watching the fireflies go nuts in the dark, that goddamn Jake Graystone was putting it to Callie.

She was too good for him. Anybody could see that. She was so smart and pretty. And when she laughed those three dimples just about drove him crazy.

If she'd just give him a chance, he'd show her how a guy was supposed to treat a woman. He sucked his beer and imagined whipping the shit out of Jacob Graystone.

Yeah, that was going to happen.

Disgusted, he got to his feet, stood swaying and struggling to focus.

"Easy there, Poncho." Amused, Digger took his arm to steady him. "How many those brews you got in you?"

"Nough."

"Looks like. Where you off to?"

"Gotta piss. You mind?"

"Don't mind a bit," Digger said cheerfully. "Want to use the john in the trailer?"

"I wanna walk." Unwilling to be befriended by any associate of his nemesis, Bill jerked free. "Too damn crowded around here."

"I heard that. Well, don't go falling in the pond and drowning yourself." Deciding a bladder break was a fine idea, Digger wandered toward his trailer.

Bill staggered away from the tents, away from the music and company. Maybe he'd just get in the car and drive out to the house. What the hell did he want to stay out here for when Callie was there?

He didn't *know* she was in bed with Jake. Not ab-

solutely. Maybe she'd wanted to come out to the site, he thought as he circled into the trees. Maybe she'd wanted to come, and Jake had strong-armed her.

He wouldn't put it past the son of a bitch.

He could go on out there, stand up to the bastard and get Callie away from him. She'd be grateful, he mused as he relieved himself.

Oh Bill, thank God! I'm so glad you came. He's crazy. I've been so afraid.

Yeah, that's how it could be. He'd just drive on out there and take care of everything.

He imagined Callie clinging to him, imagined her lifting her face, those dimples trembling as she smiled at him.

And imagining that first hot, grateful kiss, he didn't hear the sound behind him.

The blow had him sprawling facedown. He moaned once as he was rolled toward the pond, but was already sliding under the pain when his head slipped under the water.

Okay, here's the basic grid." Jake used drawing paper while Callie manned the computer.

After some debate, they'd agreed to work in his office. For the first two hours, they worked against the noise from the action movie one of the team had rented. Now the house had gone quiet around them, except for the sound of Leo's gentle snoring from the living room sofa.

She looked over from the screen, studied what he'd done. She had to admit, the man was good.

He had her as the central point, with her parents on one side, the Cullens on the other. Out of each set, relevant names were connected.

Henry Simpson, Marcus Carlyle, Richard Carlyle, the Boston pediatrician, the names of their known staff were listed in sections on her parents' side.

The names from the lists Suzanne and Betsy Poffenberger had provided were arranged on the other side.

"You're the single known connection," he began. "But

there must be others. That's what we need to find. Over here's your dateline. The stillbirth, your date of birth, the first appointment your parents had with Carlyle and so on."

"We fill in known data on each one of these names," Callie added.

"And we find the connections. Did you eat the last cookie?"

"I did not eat the last cookie. You ate the last cookie. And you drank the last of the coffee. So you go make more coffee, and I'll type in the known data."

"You make better coffee."

"I also type faster."

"I don't make as many typos."

"I'm sitting in the chair."

"All right, have it your way. But don't give me a rash of grief when it tastes like swamp water."

She smirked as he stalked out. He hated making the coffee. Just one of those odd personal things. He'd wash dishes, cook—as long as it was some form of breakfast. He'd even do laundry without much complaint. But he always bitched about making coffee.

Therefore, whenever she finagled him into it, she felt a nice glow of accomplishment.

They were falling back into old patterns, she thought. With a few new and interesting variations. They weren't fighting as much, or certainly not in the same way. For some reason one or both of them seemed to ease back before it got ugly.

They certainly weren't jumping between the sheets at every opportunity. That . . . restraint, she supposed, added a sort of appealing tension to the whole thing.

They still wanted each other—that part of the pattern would never change. Even after the divorce, when she'd been thousands of miles away from him in every possible way, she'd wanted him.

Just to roll over in the night and have her body bump against his. And the way he'd sometimes hooked his arm around her waist to keep her there.

She'd ached for that, for him.

She hoped he'd ached for her. She hoped he'd cursed her name the way she'd cursed his. And suffered.

If he'd loved her as much as she'd loved him, he'd never have walked away. He would never have been able to walk away no matter how hard she'd pushed.

If he'd ever told her what she'd needed to hear, she wouldn't have had to push.

When she felt the old resentment and anger begin to brew she shut it down. That was over, she reminded herself. That was done.

Some things were better off left buried.

She ordered her mind to clear so she could concentrate on the data she was bringing up. Then she yawned as she noted the article on Henry Simpson.

"What the hell good is a stupid fluff piece on some charity golf tournament?"

She started to bypass it, then made herself stop. Just like sieving the spoil, she reminded herself. It might be grunt work, but it was a necessary step.

"How long does it take to make a damn pot of coffee?" she wondered and propped her chin on her elbow as she read the article.

She nearly missed it. Her eyes had moved on before her brain registered the information. Her finger jerked on the mouse, then slowly scrolled back.

"We're out of milk," Jake announced as he came back in with the coffeepot. "So no matter how bad it is, you drink it black."

He lowered the pot as she turned her head and he saw her face.

"What did you find?"

"A connection. Barbara Simpson, née Halloway."

"Halloway. Barbara Halloway. The maternity-ward nurse."

"It's not a coincidence. Funny she didn't mention working at the hospital where Suzanne Cullen's baby was born. Funny she didn't mention living in the area when that baby was stolen."

Jake set the pot down. "We'll want to verify it."

"Oh, we will. Poffenberger was rambling on about her. 'Cool,' she said. 'Snooty redhead just out of nursing school.' That bitch was part of it, Jake. Simpson connects to Carlyle, Halloway connects to Simpson, and so to Carlyle. Simpson and Carlyle to my parents. Halloway to Suzanne."

"We'll verify," he repeated. "Find out where she went to school. Dig the next level."

"We sat in their house. We sat in their house and they dripped shock and sympathy, and she served us goddamn lemonade."

"We'll make them pay." He laid his hands on her shoulders, gently. "I promise you."

"I need to go to Virginia, face them with this."

"As soon as we get the rest of the data on her, we'll go. We'll go together."

She lifted a hand, closed it over his. "He held my mother's hand. He used my father's grief. I'm going to hurt them."

"Damn right. Let me take over there for a while."

"No, I can do it. I need to do it," she said, gripping his hand when she saw the shutter come down over his face. "I need to do it for my parents, for the Cullens. For myself. But I don't know if I can if you step back."

"I'm not going anywhere."

This time she took his face in her hands. "There are a lot of ways of stepping back from someone. I could never make you understand that. You close up, and I can't find you."

"If I don't close up, you slice me in two."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never hurt you."

"You broke my heart. For Christ's sake, you broke my goddamn heart."

Her hands fell limply to her lap. "I did not. No, I didn't."

"Don't tell me." More furious with himself than with her, he spun away, paced to the door. "It's my heart. I ought to know."

“You . . . you left me.”

“Bullshit.” He whirled back. “That’s bullshit, Callie. You’ve got a damn convenient memory. I’ll tell you exactly what happened—fuck!” He balled his hands into fists as the phone on his desk shrilled.

He snatched it up. “Graystone.” He’d lifted a hand to rake his fingers through his hair. They froze. And Callie got shakily to her feet as she saw his expression. “Name of God. How? All right. All right. Keep everybody calm. We’re on our way.”

“What happened?” she demanded. “Who’s hurt?”

“Bill McDowell. He’s not hurt, Callie. He’s dead.”

Eighteen



Callie sat on the ground at the edge of the fallow field just beyond the dig. The sky was fierce with stars, each one of them sharply clear, as if they'd been carved with a laser on black glass. And the half-moon was a white globe cleaved with a honed ax.

The air held the faintest chill when the breeze fluttered. Fall, it seemed, was already moving into the mountains.

She could hear the whine of insects in the grass, and the occasional throaty bark from the dog across the road as the nighttime activity disturbed his routine.

Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, as she thought of the dog's owners, had come out to see what the ruckus was about. Though they'd gone back inside now, the old farmhouse blazed with lights.

She'd rushed out of the house with Jake minutes after the phone call, with Rosie and Leo right behind them. They'd beaten the police to the scene by ten minutes. But they'd still been too late for Bill McDowell.

Now she could only watch and wait.

Sonya sat beside her, weeping pitifully against her own knees.

Other members of the team sat or stood. The initial chatter born of shock and panic had passed into a kind of dullness that precluded words.

She could see the lights spearing through the trees where the police worked, and occasionally a voice would catch the air just right and carry over to the field. Every once in a while someone nearby would whisper.

What's going to happen?

Not how could this happen, though that had been the first question. They'd moved beyond that already, into the what now?

She knew they looked to her for the answer. With Jake in the trailer with Digger, and Leo over by the woods with some of the police, she was the only one in authority.

But it was just one more answer she didn't have.

"I don't think I can take it. I don't think I can stand it." Sonya turned her head, her cheek resting on her updrawn knees. "I don't see how he can just be dead. Just like that. We were sitting here talking a few hours ago about stuff I don't even remember. I didn't even see him go over to the pond."

"I did." Bob shifted his feet. "I didn't think anything of it. He and Digger had a couple of words about something, then Bill went off toward the woods. Figured he had to, you know, take a leak. I didn't think he was that drunk or anything. I just didn't pay any attention."

"Nobody did," Dory put in. "God, I was half asleep and thinking about crawling into the tent. And I... I heard Digger say something like, 'Don't fall into the pond and drown.' I laughed." Her breath caught on a sob. "I just laughed."

"We were always laughing at him. Goddamn, he was such a schmo."

Dory swiped at her cheeks. "It's not your fault," she said to Bob. "We wouldn't have found him so soon if you hadn't wondered where he was, remembered he'd gone that way. He'd still be in the water if you..."

"I want to go home." Sonya began to weep again. "I just want to go home. I don't want to do this anymore."

"You go back to the house." Callie put an arm around

her shoulders. "As soon as the sheriff says it's okay, you go back to the house for the night. See what you want to do in the morning."

She glanced toward the trailer, then over at Dory. She pointed to the ground beside Sonya, then rose as Dory sat, put both arms around Sonya.

Let them cry together, Callie thought. She just didn't have any tears.

In the trailer Jake set another cup of coffee in front of Digger. "Drink it."

"I don't want any damn coffee. God, Jake, that boy's dead."

"You can't help him. You can't help yourself if you don't sober up and start thinking."

"What's there to think about? I let him walk off, half shitfaced so he could fall in the fucking pond and fucking drown. I was in charge here. I should've gone with him."

"You're not a baby-sitter, and you're not responsible for what happened to McDowell."

"Aw, Christ, Jake, Christ." He lifted his burnt-raisin face. "Most of them are just kids. They're just kids."

"I know it." Jake pressed his forehead to the cabinet, fought to steady himself, then eased back and got out another cup.

How many times had he needled that kid? Deliberately baited him over Callie. Just for the hell of it.

"But he was old enough to be here, old enough to drink. You're not here to run herd on them, Dig. You're here to make sure nobody disturbs the site."

"Pretty fucking disturbed when a kid's floating face-down in the water. Where are my smokes?"

Jake picked up what was left of a crumpled pack on the counter, tossed them over. "Drink the goddamn coffee, suck down a cigarette, then tell me exactly what happened. You want to cry over it, cry later."

"I see Mr. Sensitivity's hard at work." Callie shot Jake a disgusted glare as she came in.

“He’s just trying to straighten me up,” Digger replied. He yanked out his bandanna, blew his nose heroically.

“Yeah, and if he pushes your face in shit, you’d say it was to improve your complexion.” She stepped around the little pedestal table and did something she’d never done in her life, or expected to do.

She put her arms around Digger’s bony shoulders and stroked his long, tangled hair.

“I came in here to use the john, then to pull out the bed. Was going to put on some music in case I could talk Sonya into screwing around. I knew he was half drunk. Barely finished a second beer and he was half drunk. I watch out for them, I swear to God. Just to make sure they don’t get stupid. Seemed to me like everybody was settling down.”

He sighed a little, rubbed his cheek against Callie for comfort. “Matt was playing the guitar. Can’t play worth shit, but it’s always nice to have somebody playing something. Those two from West Virginia? Frannie and Chuck? They were making out. Bob was writing something. Had a damn flashlight wired around his hat like a freaking miner. Dory, she was half asleep already, and Sonya was singing. ‘Free Bird.’ She kept messing up the words, but I liked hearing her anyway.”

He closed his eyes. “It was a nice night. Clear, just cool enough. Lots of lightning bugs, and the cicadas were still carrying on. I saw that boy get up, swaying like he was on a ship in a storm. He was a little pissy with the drink. Usually he’s got that goofy grin on his face. Except with you,” he added with a half smile at Jake. “Didn’t like you one bit, figuring you were beating his time with Callie.”

Jake said nothing, just drank coffee and focused on Callie’s face.

“I said how if he needed to whiz, he could use the trailer, but he gave me a little push, told me he wanted to walk. Figured he wanted to tell me to fuck off, but even drunk he wasn’t up for that. So I said . . . Jesus, I told him not to fall into the pond and drown himself. But he did. That’s just what he did.”

Because they were watching each other, Callie saw the

emotion run over Jake's face. The shock, the horror, then the pity.

"How long before someone went to look for him?" Jake asked.

"I don't know, exactly. I was in here for a while. Figured if I was going to get lucky, I'd better straighten the place up a little. Picked out some music, put it on the CD player there. Got out those candles. College girls like a little romance, right, Cal?"

"Yeah." She hugged him tighter. "We lap it right up."

"I cleaned up some. I guess I was in here about fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty. I could still hear the guitar. Then I went out, started putting the moves on Sonya. Bob's the one who asked after Bill. Somebody—can't remember—said how they thought he'd gone on to bed, and somebody else said he'd gone to take a leak. Bob said how he had to take one himself, so he'd see if Bill had passed out in the woods. Couple minutes later, he was shouting, running back. We all went down there. All of us.

"It was like Dolan all over again. It was like Dolan."

It was more than an hour later before Callie could manage a moment alone with Leo. "How much do you know?"

"They're not saying much. They won't issue cause of death until the autopsy. Once they finish taking statements, I think we should break camp here."

"I've already asked Rosie to see that anyone who's staying on goes back to the house for the night. We need someone to stay here, and Digger's in no shape for it."

"I'll stay."

"No, we should take shifts. Jake and I will stay till morning. You and Rosie are better at keeping the team calm. I don't like the way Hewitt's looking at Digger."

"Neither do I, but the fact is he was here at two deaths."

"There were a lot of people here for this one, and Digger was in the trailer. And as far as we know, Bill fell and drowned. It was an accident. Nobody had any cause to harm that kid."

"I hope you're right." He took off his glasses, polished the lenses methodically on the tail of his shirt. "Rosie and I'll gather up the team. We'll be back in the morning."

"To work?"

"Those who want to dig, will dig. We're going to get media, Blondie. Can you handle it?"

"Yes. Go get some sleep, Leo. We'll all do what we have to do."

She went into the trailer as soon as she was able, tossed out the lousy coffee Jake had brewed, made a fresh pot. The scent of the fragrance Digger had used to clean mixed with the cinnamon scent of the candles he'd lit. Both hung in the air, little whiffs of simplicity and anticipation.

She could hear voices trailing off as people broke camp. And cars leaving. And she imagined most of the team who headed for the house would be up late into the night, going over and over what had happened.

She wanted quiet. Would have preferred to have had both quiet and solitude. But Leo would never have agreed to her staying on-site alone. Jake, she had to admit, was the only person whose company she could stand through this kind of night.

She poured the first cup of coffee, then hearing his footsteps approaching, poured a second.

"I tossed yours out," she said. "It was bilge. This is fresh." She turned, held out a cup.

"I'm not bunking outside just because you're pissed off at me."

"I don't expect you to bunk outside, and I'm not pissed off at you. Particularly. I can't pick up where we left off before the phone rang. I just can't talk about that now."

"Fine with me."

She knew that tone, couldn't count the times she'd bashed herself bloody against the cold wall of it. She wasn't up for a battle, but she was never up for retreat.

"I didn't like the way you were handling Digger. I know you *were* handling him, but I didn't like your approach. And you'll note, I got more out of him with a little

comfort and sympathy than you would have with your macho bullshit.”

His head ached. His heart ached. “Why is it women automatically link macho with bullshit? Like they were a single word.”

“Because we’re astute.”

“You want me to say you’re right.” Weary, he dropped down on the thin cushions of the sofa. “You’re right. I didn’t have what you had to offer him. We’ll both agree comforting isn’t one of my finest skills.”

He looked exhausted, Callie noted. She’d seen him blitzed with fatigue from the work, but she wasn’t used to seeing him simply worn out from stress, from worry.

She had to rein in an impulse to put her arms around him, as she had with Digger. “You didn’t know about the comment he made before Bill walked off. I did.”

“Christ. He’ll never be able to put that completely aside. For the rest of his life he’s going to have that careless remark stuck somewhere in his head along with the picture of that kid floating.”

“You don’t think Bill fell into the water.”

Jake lifted his gaze from his cup, and his eyes were as careful and cool as his voice. “Everybody said he was drunk.”

“Why didn’t they hear the splash? He weighed what, a hundred and sixty? That much weight falls, it makes a splash. Clear, quiet night, you’d hear it. I could catch pieces of the conversations going on with the cops in the woods. Why didn’t he call out when he fell? Digger said he’d had two beers. So he’s a cheap drunk, fine, but a guy that size isn’t likely to pass out cold, cold enough so he doesn’t revive when he falls in water. Water’s cold, too. Slap you sober enough, quick enough to piss you off if you fell in.”

His expression didn’t change, face or voice. “Maybe he had more than beer. You know drugs slip into a dig now and then.”

“Digger would’ve known. He’d have said. That kind of

thing doesn't get by Digger. He'd confiscate any drugs and stash any joints so he could fire one up himself when he was in the mood."

She walked to the sofa, sat on the other end. She knew what they were doing—playing both sides. She found it interesting they weren't doing it at the top of their lungs. "Two men end up dead in the same little body of water outside the same town, on the same dig within weeks of each other. Anybody thinks that's just a coincidence is nuts. Hewitt doesn't strike me as nuts. I know for sure you're not."

"No, I don't think it's a coincidence."

"And you're not subscribing to the popular local theory that the site's cursed."

He smiled a little. "I kinda like that, but no. Someone killed Dolan for a reason. Someone killed McDowell for a reason. How are they connected?"

Callie picked up her coffee, tucked up her legs. "The dig."

"That's the obvious link. That'd be the connection most easily reached. Go a segment over and there's you."

He saw by her face she'd already gotten there, and he nodded. "Fan out from you and you've got the dig, the development, the percentage of locals who are a little miffed at having their paychecks cut. So you could theorize that someone was miffed enough to kill two people in order to scare the team off the dig, or put the authorities in the position of shutting us down."

"But that's not your theory." She reached over, relit one of Digger's candles.

"It's a theory, but it's not the one I'm favoring."

"You're favoring the one that fans out from me to the Cullens, Carlyle, all those names on the list, and a black-market ring that specializes in infants. But the connection to Dolan and Bill is very weak."

"Remember this?" He opened his hands, turned them palms out, palms back, then flipped his wrist. He held a quarter between his fingers. Another flick and it was gone.

"You could pick up some extra pay playing at kids' parties," she commented.

“Misdirection. Trick your eye into looking over here . . .” He passed his right hand in front of her face. “And you miss what’s happening here.” And tugged her ear with his left, giving the illusion that the quarter had popped out of it.

“You think someone has murdered two people to misdirect me?”

“Hasn’t it worked, to a point? Aren’t you so distracted now that you’re not thinking about what you learned only hours ago about Barbara Halloway? Everybody on the team liked that kid. Even I liked him, couldn’t help myself. And I had some sympathy for the way he mooned after you. If somebody killed him, it was because he was handy. Because he was separated from the group just long enough.”

Casually, she nudged back one of Digger’s faded curtains, looked out the grimy window. “And they’re watching. Whoever they are. The way they were watching us at the house that night. Cold. They’d have to be cold. And if I don’t let myself be misdirected, if I keep pushing, is someone else going to die?”

“Blaming yourself is just another way of being misdirected.”

“I brushed him off, Jake.” With a sharp tug, she pulled the curtain over the smeared glass again. “When we were clearing up, he came over, said we’re going to hang out later, camp for the night. I wasn’t even listening to him. Yeah, sure, maybe, whatever. Swatted him off like a gnat.”

She shook her head before he could speak. “And everything you’re saying is what I’m thinking. What I feel in my gut. And if that’s right, it means he’s dead because someone wants to stop me. He’s dead, and I couldn’t bother to give him a minute of my time today.”

“Come on, come here.” He pulled her closer. “Stretch out,” he ordered, and nudged her down until her head rested in his lap. “You should try to get some rest.”

She was silent for a moment, listening to the night sounds, absorbing the quiet sensation of having his hand stroke over her hair.

Had he touched her that way before? Had she ever paid attention?

“Jake?”

“Yeah.”

“I had plans for tonight.”

“Did you?”

She shifted so she could look up at him. From this angle she could see the way the scar on his chin edged just a fraction under his jawline. She'd like to trace her finger there, or her lips. To acknowledge that tiny imperfection.

“I'd planned to let you talk me into bed. Or to talk you into bed. Whichever seemed more fun at the time.”

He ran a fingertip along the curve of her cheek. Yes, she thought. Yes, he had touched her that way before. Why hadn't she paid more attention to those small gestures? Why hadn't she realized how much they meant to her?

Did she need words so much that she'd ignored the quieter, simpler signs of affection?

“Too bad that didn't work out,” he answered.

“It still could.”

His fingertip took a little jump, as if he'd touched something hot, unexpectedly, then it lifted away from her. “Not a good idea, for either of us. Why don't you catch some sleep? We've got a lot to deal with tomorrow.”

“I don't want to think about tomorrow. I don't want to think about today or next week or yesterday. I just want now.”

“We had plenty of nows, didn't we? Sex is a very common, very human response to death.” He played with her hair, hoping he could talk her to sleep. “It's proof of life.”

“We are alive. I don't want to be alone.” She wasn't speaking just of tonight, but of all the nights without him. “I thought I did, but I don't want to be alone.”

“You're not alone.” He took her hand, brought it to his lips. “Close your eyes.”

Instead she rose, sliding up, body to body, until her arms were chained around his neck. “Be with me.” She covered his mouth with hers, poured herself in. “Please, be with me.”

She was trembling, he realized. Part fear, part need, part exhaustion. He gathered her closer, pressed his face to the curve of her neck. "Tell me you need me. Just once."

"I do need you. Touch me. You're the only one who ever really could."

"This isn't the way I wanted it to be." He skimmed his lips along her jaw as he lowered her to the narrow couch. "For either of us. But maybe it's just the way it's meant. Don't think." He kissed her temples, her cheeks. "Just feel."

"I can't stop shaking."

"It's all right." He unbuttoned her shirt, bending over to brush kisses on her throat, her shoulders. But when she reached for him, he eased back, pressed her hands down again.

"No. Wait. Close your eyes. Just close your eyes. I'll touch you."

She let her lashes lower. Even that was a relief. The soft dark soothed the headache she hadn't been aware was thudding. The air was cool against her skin when he slipped the shirt away. His fingers were warm as they trailed over her. Warm, with that rough scrape of callus. Her belly quivered as they stroked down and flipped the button on her ancient trousers.

His lips pressed lightly, just above her waist, and made her moan.

"Lift your hips," he told her, and drew the worn cotton down her legs.

He tugged off her boots, her socks. Then began to rub her feet.

Now she groaned.

"There was a time when I could barter a foot rub for any sort of exotic sexual favor."

She opened one eye, saw him grinning at her. "What did you have in mind?"

"I'll let you know." He pressed the heel of his hand to her arch, watched her lashes flutter. "Still works, doesn't it?"

"Oh yeah. I still figure the first true orgasm started with the feet."

"I like your feet. They're small, almost delicate." He ran his teeth along the side, grinned again when her body jerked. "And very sensitive. Then there's your legs."

He let his mouth roam over her ankle, up her calf. "Just can't say enough about your legs."

Then suddenly, he pressed his face to her belly. "Christ, Callie, you smell the same. I'd wake up smelling you when you were a thousand miles away. Wake up wanting you," he murmured and captured her mouth with his.

Every day, every night, he thought as that scent surrounded him. Haunting him and taunting him until he'd wished with every fiber of his being he could hate her for it.

Now she was here, her arms tight around him, her mouth eager under his. And it made him weak.

Love for her blew through him and left him helpless.

His hand came up to cup her face. His lips softened, gentled on hers.

The change in tone had her eyes opening again. "Jake."

"Ssh." He laid a kiss of utter tenderness in the hollow of her throat. "Don't think," he repeated. "Just feel."

When his mouth came back to hers in a kiss of lingering sweetness, she went pliant under him.

A surrender, he realized. Both of them surrendering in a way they never had before. Her heart was thudding thickly under his lips, and her breath was slow and ragged. And still the tenderness for her drifted over desire like a mist.

The air was so heavy, she thought. So heavy, so warm. So soft. It was gliding over her, and she over it to a world where there was only pleasure.

He'd taken her there.

She sighed his name as his lips, his tongue, his hands slid over her, as they soothed and aroused, calmed and awakened. When his lips found hers again, when they lingered as if there were nothing more vital in the world than that single kiss, her heart simply melted.

The feel of him under her hands, that long, lean torso when he stripped his shirt away. The narrow hips and hard muscles. His body excited her, and knowing it was hers, hers for the taking brought her unbearable pleasure.

She shuddered with it, nipped her teeth into his shoulder when the pressure built. “Jake.”

“Not fast this time.” He stroked down her, over her, tormenting them both. “Fast is too easy.”

Time, nothing but time. The scent of her, the quiver of her body, the heat that was beginning to pump out of her skin. He wanted all of that, and so much more.

Having her now erased every lonely hour without her.

He pressed his lips to her throat, her shoulder, her mouth, let the need for her rage through him. As he nudged her over the first peak, her strangled cry beat in his blood.

Now they watched each other as he slid inside her, watched as they began to move together. He saw her eyes blur, both pleasure and tears as he gripped her hands with his.

“Stay with me.” He crushed his mouth to hers. “Stay with me.”

He stripped her heart bare. She wondered he didn’t feel it quivering in his hand. She wondered he couldn’t see it on her face as the tears welled in her eyes.

So she closed them, kept her hands in his, stayed with him. Stayed with him. And was with him still when they shattered.

She slept, deeply for an hour, then fitfully as dreams began to chase her. In the woods, in the dark, in the cold water. It closed over her head, and hands tugged her in opposite directions.

She couldn’t pull free of them, couldn’t kick her way free to the surface. Couldn’t breathe.

As she struggled, the water shifted, changed, weighed down and became a grave.

She woke with a start, strangling for breath. The trailer was dark, chilly. There was a thin cover tangled around her legs, and she was alone.

Panicked, she leaped up, ramming a hip against the table, stumbling for the door. Her throat was closed, forcing her to gasp and gulp for air as she had in the dream.

She clutched at her chest as if she could tear out the pressure that weighed there.

She fought with the door, her breath wheezing as her fingers slid damply off the latch. A scream was ripping through her chest, into her throat. She all but fell out of the door when she finally shoved it open.

And collapsed to her knees in the dim chill of dawn.

At the sound of rushing footsteps, she tried to push herself up. But the muscles in her arms had gone to lead.

"Hey, what happened?" Jake dropped to the ground beside her, lifted her head.

"Can't breathe," she managed. "Can't breathe."

"Yes, you can." Her pupils were dilated, her face dead white and clammy. He put a hand on the back of her head and shoved it between her knees. "Slow, easy, deep. You breathe."

"Can't."

"Yes, you can. One breath. Inhale. One breath. Now another one. Let it out." He felt the tightness in his belly begin to ease when she started to draw in air. "Keep going."

"I'm okay."

He simply held her head down. "More. In and out. I want you to lift your head up, slowly. Nausea?"

"No. I'm okay. I just . . . woke up, and I was disoriented for a minute."

"Like hell. You had yourself a full-blown panic attack."

She was far from steady, but just steady enough to feel the prick of embarrassment. "I don't have panic attacks."

"You do now. Unless you come flying out of trailers naked for fun."

"I—" She glanced down, saw she'd run out without a stitch on. "Jesus Christ."

"It's okay. I like seeing you naked. You've got an amazing body, even when it's clammy with panic sweat. Up you go. You need to lie down a minute."

"I don't. And don't baby me."

"You're too smart to beat yourself up for having anxiety. And too bullheaded not to. Tough spot for you, Dunbrook. Sit." He pushed her onto the sofa, tossed the blanket

over her. "Shut up one minute before you make me take back the smart part. You've had nothing but stress, tension, shocks and work for over a month. You're human. Give yourself a break."

He pulled out a bottle of water, opened it, handed it to her.

"I had a nightmare." She bit her lip because it wanted to tremble. "And I woke up, and I was alone and I couldn't breathe."

"I'm sorry." He sat beside her. "I went out to look around, just checking on things. I didn't want to wake you up."

"It's not your fault." She took a long drink of water. "I don't scare easy."

"Don't I know it."

"But I'm scared now. You tell anybody that, I'll have to kill you. But I'm scared now, and I don't like it."

"It's okay." He put an arm around her, pressed his lips to her temple.

"When I don't like something, I get rid of it."

His lips curved against her skin. "Don't I know it," he repeated.

"So I'm not going to be scared." She took one long breath, relieved when it didn't catch in her lungs or her throat. "I just won't be scared. I'm going to find out what I need to know. I'm going to Virginia, and the Simpsons are going to tell me what I need to know. I want you to go with me."

He lifted her hand, kissed it. "You'd better get dressed first."

Nineteen



With the last strips of a pound of bacon snapping in the black iron skillet, Jake beat two dozen eggs in a bowl. He'd browbeaten Callie into making the coffee before she'd gone up to shower, so that was something. But if anybody wanted toast, somebody else was going to have to deal with it.

He didn't mind cooking. Not when it was breakfast in bulk and didn't require any fancy touches. In any case, they all had to eat, and no one else had worked up the interest or energy to put food together.

A team—or a tribe—whatever their rituals and customs, required fuel to carry them out. A member's death forced a new intimacy among the survivors. Food was a symbol, and the preparation, presentation and consumption of it a ceremony common to many cultures during mourning for a good reason.

Like sex, food was life. Along with sorrow, the guilt and the relief of still claiming life while one of your own was lost had to be acknowledged.

That enforced intimacy was temporary, he reminded

himself, thinking of Callie. Unless you worked, very hard, to maintain it.

When Doug stepped into the kitchen, he saw the man he thought of as Callie's ex-husband leaning a hip against the stove, a dishrag dangling out of the waistband of faded jeans, while he whipped what looked like a garden fork in a mixing bowl.

It was an odd enough picture, but odder yet when he considered he'd been admitted to the house by some guy in his underwear with gray-streaked hair down to his butt, who had gestured vaguely toward the kitchen before crawling back onto a ripped-up sofa.

Doug had stepped over two lumps on the floor, which he assumed by the snoring were people.

If this was the kind of place Callie chose to live in, he was going to have to go a long way before he understood her.

"Sorry to interrupt."

Jake kept beating the eggs. "If you're looking for Callie, she's in the shower."

"Oh. Guess I figured you'd all be up and around by now."

"Late start today. Coffee's fresh."

"Thanks." There were several mugs and cups lined up on the counter. Doug chose one at random and reached for the pot.

"Milk's on the counter if you want it. That's fresh, too. Just picked it up on the way back from the dig this morning."

"You were working all night?"

"No." Jake stopped beating the eggs, turned to flip the bacon. "I thought you'd come by to see how she was doing. But I don't guess you've heard."

"What do you mean how she's doing? What happened?"

Instant concern, Jake noted. Blood could run thick. "One of our team drowned last night. In Simon's Hole. We don't know how. Cops're looking into it. Callie and I took the night shift. Top off that blue mug, will you?"

"You're awfully cool about it."

Jake glanced up from the skillet. "We've got a team to keep together. People make up that team, and Callie and I

are responsible for those people. She's taking this hard. I'm not going to do her any good if I do."

He looked up as the ceiling creaked. She was in the bedroom now, Jake thought. So he had another minute or two. "Somebody killed that boy," he said quietly.

"You just said he drowned."

"I think somebody helped him. I think two people are dead because Callie's digging up the past—one that doesn't have anything to do with the site."

Doug stepped closer to the stove, lowered his voice as Jake had. "Ron Dolan and this guy were killed because Callie's looking for whoever took her out of that stroller in 1974? That's a reach."

"Not as much as you think. She'll be down in a minute—doesn't take her any longer to pull on a shirt and pants—so I'll cut to the point. I don't want her alone, not for so much as an hour. When I can't stick with her, you will."

"You think someone's going to try to hurt her?"

"I think the closer she gets, the more they'll do to stop her. I'm not going to let anyone hurt her, and neither are you because you were raised in a culture where a brother—especially an older brother—is schooled to look out for his sister. The fact that circumstances robbed you of that task during the formative years will make you, as an adult male, only more determined to step into the role at this point."

"So I'm going to help you look out for her because my culture demands it?"

"That, and because the blood connection's already kicked in with you." A little baffled by it, Jake concluded as he studied Doug's face. A little embarrassed by it, but it's kicked in. "Because she's a female, and it's your nature and upbringing to stand up for a female. And because you like her."

Doug supposed that covered all the bases. "What's your excuse?"

Jake shoved the skillet off the heat. "My excuse is coming down the stairs right now, and will shortly start nagging me to put cheese in these eggs."

He tugged the dishcloth out of his jeans and used it as a pot holder on the handle of the skillet while he poured off still sizzling grease into a empty can of pork and beans.

"I'm leaving it to Leo to wake up the slugs we've got spread all over the house," she said as she came in. "Doug," she added after a moment's surprise. "Um. How's it going?"

"Jake just told me about what happened. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, a little fogged up yet." Still looking at him, she held out a hand. Jake put a mug of coffee into it. "I heard you were out of town."

"I got back yesterday. I came by the site, but you were busy."

"Oh. Well. You put cheese in those eggs?" she asked Jake, and was already opening the refrigerator to dig some out.

"Not everybody likes cheese in their eggs."

"Everybody should like cheese in their eggs." She passed him the cheese, skirted around him to open a loaf of bread. "Put some in my share, and if it gets in someone else's that's too bad."

Doug watched Jake hold out a hand for the knife she'd taken out of a drawer, watched her pop bread into the toaster, then take the plate he handed her.

It was like a little dance, he decided, with each knowing the steps and rhythm the other would take even before they were taken.

"I just dropped by to give you something I picked up in Memphis."

There was another moment of surprise, obvious on her face, before she worked up a smile. "Barbecue?"

"No." Doug handed her a small brown bag. "Just a little souvenir from Graceland."

"You went to Graceland. I always wanted to go to Graceland. I have no idea why. Wow, look at this, Graystone, it's an official Elvis beer cozy."

"You can never have too many beer cozies."

Jake studied the red cozy dutifully. "You better keep that out of Digger's reach. He likes a good beer cozy."

“Well, he can’t have this one.” She took a step toward Doug, hesitated. What the hell was she supposed to do? Should she kiss him, punch him in the arm? “Thanks.” She settled for patting his shoulder.

“You’re welcome.” And they, Doug thought, just didn’t know the steps and rhythm of their dance. “I’d better get going.”

“Have you had breakfast?” She opened a drawer, took out a spatula even as Jake poured the eggs into the skillet behind her.

“No.”

“Why don’t you stay? There’s plenty, right, Jake?”

“Sure.”

“I wouldn’t mind, and lucky for me, I like cheese in my eggs.”

“Grab a plate,” she told him. Jake shifted to the right as she bent down, opened the oven door and took out the platter of bacon he’d already fried.

“Leo told me to come straight back,” Lana announced as she walked in. “Doug, I saw your car outside. I guess you heard what happened.”

“Grab two plates,” Callie told him, refilling the toaster. “Do we need a lawyer?”

“Leo has some concerns. I’m here to alleviate them. The legal concerns anyway. As to the rest.” She lifted her hands. “It’s awful. I don’t know what to say. I spoke with Bill just yesterday afternoon. He let Ty talk his ear off about that damn deer bone.”

“Where’s Ty?” Doug handed her a paper plate from the stack on the counter.

“What? Oh, with Roger. I don’t really think I could eat. I just want to speak with Leo.”

“When I cook, everybody eats.” Jake got an enormous jar of grape jelly out of the fridge, passed it back to Callie. “You’d better get a seat before the horde piles in and takes them all. How many we got, Dunbrook?”

“Rosie and Digger are at the site. So counting our guests here, we’ll be eleven for breakfast this morning.”

They came in and out, in various states of dress and undress. Some scooped up food, then wandered off with their plates. Others found a space at the long scarred table Rosie had picked up at the flea market.

But Jake was right. When he cooked, everyone ate.

Callie concentrated on the meal, deliberately putting food on her fork, and the fork in her mouth. She didn't bother to tune in as Lana went over the legal ground with Leo.

"People might make us stop," Sonya commented. She shredded a piece of toast, scattering crumbs over the eggs she'd barely touched. "I mean, the police, or the town council or something like that. They might want the dig shut down."

"The Preservation Society has bought the land," Lana told her. "We'll settle on it in a matter of weeks. As a member, and having spoken with another key member only this morning, I can promise you that none of us blames your team for what happened. The work you're doing there isn't responsible for what happened to Bill McDowell."

"He died when we were all just sitting there. We were all just sitting there."

"Would you have just sat there if you'd known he was in trouble?" Jake asked her.

"No, no, of course not."

"Would you have done whatever you could to help if you'd known he needed help?"

Sonya nodded.

"But you didn't know, so you couldn't help. The dig was important to him, don't you think?"

"Oh yeah." She sniffed, pushed her fork through her eggs. "He was always talking about it, getting all revved up every time there was a new find. If he wasn't talking about the work, he was talking about Callie." She stopped, winced, shot Callie a glance. "Sorry."

“It’s okay.”

“In many cultures, many societies,” Jake continued, “you show respect for the dead by honoring their work. We’ll dig.”

“I don’t mean to stir up trouble,” Dory began. “I just wondered what would happen if Bill’s family sues. The landowner, and the team leaders, something like that. People do that sort of thing over a broken toe, so it seems they might do it over Bill. How would that kind of legal trouble affect the grant? Could it be pulled?”

“People suck.” After the statement, Matt shrugged, then reached for more bacon. “I just mean Dory’s got a point. In a litigious, materialistic, self-absorbed society, it’s a natural progression to go from emotion to calculation. Who’s going to pay for this, and how much can I get?”

“Let me worry about that,” Lana told him. “My advice at the moment is to continue as if you mean to go on. Cooperate with the police, and with the media, but before giving statements to either, you should consult with me or other counsel.”

“We’re also going to employ a strict buddy system.” Leo pushed his plate aside, reached for his coffee. “Nobody wanders into the woods at any time alone. Those team members who remain throughout the week will share night-shift duties on-site. No less than two members per shift. We’re not losing anyone else.”

“I’ll work out a schedule,” Callie agreed.

“Good. I need to be back in Baltimore tonight, but I’ll be back here midweek. I think it’s best if we take today off. Anyone who’s remaining should be ready to work tomorrow.”

“I’ve got some personal business in Virginia today.” Callie glanced at Jake. “Dory and the West Virginia turtle-doves can relieve Rosie and Digger this afternoon. We’ll put Bob and Matt and Digger on the night shift. I’ll have a daily schedule worked out by tomorrow.”

“I’ll take KP here, before I leave.” Sonya got to her feet. “I know what you’re saying’s right,” she said to Jake. “In my head. But I can’t get past it. I don’t know if I’ll be

back. I'm sorry to let everyone down, but I don't know if I can do it."

"Take a few days," Callie suggested. "I need to get some things together. And I need complete reports, and all film from yesterday from everyone by end of day."

She went into Jake's office to print out the article on Simpson, to make a file folder for the lists, the chart.

"What's in Virginia?" Doug asked from the doorway.

"Who. Someone I need to talk to."

"Is this about . . . Does it have to do with Jessica?"

"Yeah." She stuffed the file in a shoulder bag. "I'll let you know what I find out."

"I'll go with you."

"Jake's tagging along. I've got it handled."

"I'm going with you," he said again, then shifted aside as Lana nudged through.

"What's this about?"

"I've got some information I need to check out."

"Are you going?" Lana asked Doug.

"Yeah, I'm going."

She frowned at her watch. "Let me call Roger, see if he can handle Ty until we get back."

"What is this 'we'?" Callie demanded.

"I think it's what you refer to as a team. I'm the legal portion of that team. Let me just make that call, then you can fill me in on the drive."

"I might end up doing something illegal," Callie muttered as Lana dug out her cell phone.

Lana tucked her hair behind her ear. "Then you definitely need me along."

She couldn't even manage to take the wheel, and had to settle for sitting shotgun in Jake's SUV instead of her own. To give herself time to sulk in silence, she handed the file back to Doug so he and Lana could read it over in the backseat.

But silence was short as both of them began to pepper her with questions.

“Look, what I know is in there. What I’m going to find out is in Virginia.”

“She’s always grumpy when she hasn’t had a good night’s sleep,” Jake commented. “Right, babe?”

“Just shut up and drive.”

“See?”

“How long was Simpson your mother’s doctor?” Lana unearthed a legal pad from her bag and began taking notes.

“I don’t know. At least since 1966.”

“And he wasn’t married to Barbara Halloway at that time?”

“No, I think that was closer to 1980. He’s got a good twenty years on her.”

“And according to your information, she worked at Washington County Hospital from July or August of ’seventy-four until the spring of the following year, and was on the maternity floor when Suzanne Cullen was admitted. In the spring of the following year, she relocated. You don’t know where.”

“I’m going to find out where, and you can bet your ass that at some time between spring of ’seventy-five and ’eighty, she spent time in Boston.” She shifted to look into the backseat. “She was still working in Hagerstown when Jessica Cullen was kidnapped. You don’t forget something like that. But when we talked to them back in July, it was all news to her. News to both of them, and that doesn’t play.”

“It’s circumstantial.” Lana continued to write. “But I agree.”

“Circumstantial, my ass. You look at the time line, the focal points, and it’s a simple matter to put together a picture of events. Halloway was one of Carlyle’s organization. One of his key medical contacts. An OB nurse. She gets word that he’s in the market for an infant, preferably female, most likely the order comes in with a basic physical description of the clients, maybe some of their heritage. Suzanne Cullen delivers a baby girl who fits the bill.”

“But they didn’t take the baby for over three months,” Doug pointed out.

“Even a desperate couple might get suspicious if they request a child for adoption purposes and have it served up to order immediately. Wait a couple months, make sure the kid stays healthy, doesn’t come up with medical problems, take the time to learn and study the family routine, wait for the best opportunity. And pile up additional fees during the waiting period.”

“She’d have been the one to take her,” Doug said quietly. “She’d have been the one in the area, the one with the opportunity to keep tabs on my parents, on us. She’d have had time to learn the mall, how to get out of it fast.”

“Works for me,” Callie agreed. “My parents said a nurse brought me to Carlyle’s office.”

“Other factors,” Lana mused. “Jessica was probably not the only candidate. It’s more likely at least two or three others were under consideration. If we accept that Barbara Halloway was a point person, there would have been other baby girls born that fit the basic requirements during that period. And it’s also likely she wasn’t the only plant. There would have been others at different facilities around the country. Jessica was the only infant taken from the area, but Carlyle, from our suppositions, exchanged a number of infants over the course of several years.”

“Every level you go down in a dig you find more data, make more connections, expand the picture,” Jake said. “Halloway’s our current find.”

“We dig her up, seal her up and label her,” Callie put in.

“Obviously, she needs to be questioned.” Lana drew several circles around Barbara Halloway’s name on her pad. “Even though your information is still largely speculative and circumstantial, I think you have enough pieces to take to the police. Isn’t it more likely she’d talk in an official interview with the authorities than to you?”

Callie merely slid her gaze toward Jake, smirked as he slid his toward her.

Noting the exchange, Lana shook her head. “Well, really, what are you going to do? Tie her to a chair and beat it out of her?”

Callie stretched out her legs. Jake drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Doug looked pointedly out the side window.

And Lana finally blew out a long breath. "I don't have enough on me to post bond for multiple charges of assault. Callie." She boosted forward in the seat. "Let me talk to them. I'm a lawyer. I'm a brilliant talker. I can make it seem as if we know a great deal more than we do. I know how to put the pressure on."

"You want a shot at her? Be sure to ask her who they sent up to Maryland, and if they even knew Bill McDowell's name when they killed him."

"Killed him? But I thought he... Oh God." Lana dug frantically in her purse for her phone to check on her son.

"He's all right," Doug stated as she dialed. "Grandpa won't let anything happen to him."

"Of course not. I just want to—Roger? No, nothing wrong." She reached across the seat, relaxing again when Doug's fingers linked with hers.

"I didn't mean to spook you," Callie said when Lana hung up.

"Yes, you did, but I appreciate it. It's easy to think about this as something that happened years ago and forget the immediacy. You need to go to the police."

"After we talk to the Simpsons, I'll give Sheriff Hewitt everything I have. For all the good it does." Noting the joined hands, Callie swiveled farther around. "So, you guys sleeping together yet?"

"Where the hell do you get off asking that?" Doug demanded.

"I'm just trying the sister hat on for size. I didn't have the chance to evolve into it, go through the pest stage and all that. So I'm just jumping in. How's the sex anyway? Good?"

Lana ran her tongue around her teeth. "As a matter of fact—"

"Cut it out."

"Guys get weirded out when women talk about sex," Callie commented.

"I don't." Jake reached over to pat her hip.

"You're an aberration. But Graystone here's really good in bed."

"I don't want to hear about it," Doug said.

"I'm talking to Lana. You know how some guys are mainly good at one thing? Like maybe they're a good kisser, but they've got hands like a fish or the endurance of a ninety-year-old asthmatic?"

"I do. Yes, I certainly do." Lana capped her pen, put it back in her bag.

"Well, Graystone, he's got all the moves. Great lips. And, you know, he does these little magic tricks, sleight-of-hand stuff. He's got really creative hands. It almost makes up for his numerous flaws and irritating qualities."

Lana leaned forward, lowered her voice. "Doug has reading glasses. Horn-rims."

"No kidding? Horn-rims kill me. You got them on you?" She reached back, pushed at Doug's knee and got nothing but a withering stare in return. "Starting to think it wasn't such a bad thing when somebody grabbed me out of that stroller, huh?"

"I'm wondering how I can talk them into kidnapping you again."

"I'd just find my way back now. You're awful quiet, Graystone."

"Just enjoying watching you needle somebody besides me for a change. Almost there, Doug."

"Just remember I'm in charge," Callie said when Jake got off at the exit. "You three are just backup."

"Now she's Kinsey Milhone," Doug grumbled.

She felt more like Sigourney Weaver's character from *Aliens*. She wanted to slash and burn. But she strapped her rage down as Jake pulled in the driveway. Temper wasn't going to blind her.

She climbed out of the car, walked to the front door, pressed the bell.

She heard nothing but the late-summer twitter of birds and the low drone of a lawn mower from somewhere up the street.

“Let me check the garage.” Jake walked off while Callie pressed the doorbell again.

“They could be out, Sunday lunch, tennis game,” Lana suggested.

“No. They know what’s going on. They know I’ve been talking to people who might remember Barbara. They’re not sipping mimosas and playing doubles at the club.”

“Garage is empty,” Jake reported.

“So we’ll break in.”

“Hold it, hold it.” Doug put a restraining hand on Callie’s shoulder. “Even if we toss out the downside of daytime breaking and entering, a place like this is going to have an alarm system. You break a window, bust down a door, the cops are going to be here before you can find anything. If there’s anything to find in the first place.”

“Don’t be logical. I’m pissed.”

She slapped a fist on the door. “They couldn’t have known I was coming. Not this fast.”

“One step at a time. Doug’s got a point about the neighborhood.” Jake scanned the houses across the street. “Upscale, secure. But a village is a village, and there’s always a gossipmonger. Somebody who makes it his or her business to know what everyone else is up to. We fan out, knock on some doors and politely ask after our friends the Simpsons.”

“Okay.” Callie reined herself in. “We’ll go in couples. Couples are less intimidating. Jake and I’ll take the south side, Doug and Lana, you take the north. What time is it?”

She studied her watch as she ran ideas around in her head. “Okay, timing’s a little off, but it’ll do. We were supposed to drop by for drinks with Barb and Hank. Now we’re worried we’ve got the wrong day or that something’s wrong.”

“It’ll do in a pinch.” Jake took her hand, linked fingers when she tugged. “We’re a couple, remember. A nice, harmless, unintimidating couple concerned about our friends Barb and Hank.”

“Anybody believes you’re harmless, they’re deaf, dumb and blind.”

Lana and Doug started off in the opposite direction. "They don't act divorced to me," he said.

"Really? What's your definition of 'acting divorced'?"

"Not like that. I watched them putting breakfast together. It was like choreography. And you saw how they were in the car. They can let each other know what they're thinking without saying a word, when they want to."

"Like when Callie distracted us from worrying by tormenting you?"

"He knew exactly what she was doing. I don't know what the deal is between them, but I'm glad he's around. He'll look out for her."

He pressed the bell on the first house.

By the time Jake rang the bell on their third stop, they had their story and routine down smooth as velvet frosting. The woman answered so quickly, he knew she'd watched their progress from house to house.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am, but my wife and I were wondering about the Simpsons."

"I'm sure we just have the wrong day, honey." But Callie glanced back with a distracted air of concern at the Simpson house.

"I just want to be sure everything's okay. We were supposed to drop by for drinks," he said to the woman. "But they don't answer the bell."

"All four of you having drinks with the Simpsons?"

"Yes," Jake confirmed without missing a beat, and smiled. So she'd been watching the house. "My brother-in-law and his fiancée walked up that way to see if anyone could help us."

"My brother and I are old family friends of Hank and Barb's." Callie picked up the angle on Jake's story as if it were God's truth. "That is, my parents and Dr. Simpson go way back. He delivered my brother and me. Our father's a doctor, too. Anyway, my brother just got engaged. That's actually why we were coming by for drinks. Just a little celebration."

"I don't see how you're going to celebrate when they're out of town."

Callie's hand tightened on Jake's. "Out of town? But . . . for heaven's sake. We *have* to have the wrong day," she said to Jake. "But they didn't mention a trip when I talked to them a couple weeks ago."

"Spur of the moment," the woman provided. "What did you say your name was?"

"I'm terribly sorry." Callie offered a hand. "We're the Bradys, Mike and Carol. We don't mean to trouble you, Mrs. . . ."

"Fissel. No trouble. Didn't I see the two of you over at the Simpsons a while back?"

"Yes, earlier this summer. We've just moved back east. It's nice to catch up with old friends, isn't it? You said spur of the moment. It wasn't an emergency, was it? Oh, Mike, I hope nothing's happened to—" What the hell was the daughter's name? "Angela."

"They said it wasn't." Mrs. Fissel stepped out on the front patio. "I happened to see them loading up the cars when I came out to get the morning paper. We look out for our neighbors here, so I walked over and asked if anything was wrong. Dr. Simpson said they'd decided to drive up to their place in the Hamptons, spend a few weeks. Seemed strange to me, them taking both cars. He said Barbara wanted to have her own. Took enough luggage for a year, if you ask me. But that Barbara, she likes her clothes. Not like her to forget you were coming. She doesn't miss a trick."

"I guess we mixed something up. They didn't say when they'd be back?"

"Like I said, a few weeks. He's retired, you know, and she doesn't work, so they come and go as they please. They were out here around ten this morning, loading up—and Barbara, you never see her up and around on a Sunday morning before noon. Must've been in a hurry to get on the road."

"It's a long drive to the Hamptons," Callie noted. "Thanks. We'll have to catch up with them later."

"Mike and Carol Brady," Jake said under his breath as

they started back across the street. “We’re the Brady Bunch?”

“First thing that came into my head. She was too old to have watched it the first time around, and didn’t strike me as the type to tune in to *Nick at Night*. Goddamnit, Jake.”

“I know.” He lifted their joined hands, kissed her knuckles.

“Do you think they went to the Hamptons?”

“However much of a hurry they were in, I don’t think Simpson would be stupid enough to tell the town crier where they were going.”

“Me either. And I don’t think they’re coming back.”

“They had to go somewhere, and wherever that is, they’ll leave some sort of trail. We’ll find them.”

She only nodded, stared at the empty house in frustration.

“Come on, Carol, let’s go get Alice and the kids and go home.”

“Okay. Okay,” she grumbled and walked with him. If she was going to get through this, and she was, she needed to hold on to control, maintain her perspective. “So, do you think Carol Brady was hot?”

“Oh man, are you kidding? She *smoked!*”

PART III



The Finds

When you have eliminated the impossible,
whatever remains, *however improbable*,
must be the truth.

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Twenty

You did the right thing.” Back in Maryland, Lana stood out by her car with Callie, jiggled her keys in her hand. She was reluctant to leave, though she’d imposed on Roger far too long that day.

Knowing the Simpsons had evaded them was frustrating. She had to admit, she’d been revved up for a show-down, for the prospect of hammering the Simpsons with questions, twisting them up with facts and speculation.

And the long drive back only to relay the scattered pieces of the puzzle to the county sheriff, leaving everything very much as it had been at the start of the day, was another disappointment.

There should’ve been something more to be done. Something else.

“Hewitt didn’t seem particularly dazzled by our deductive reasoning.”

“Maybe not, but he won’t ignore it. Plus, now everything’s on record. And he’ll—”

“Look into it,” Callie finished, and managed a laugh. “Can’t blame the guy for being skeptical. A thirty-year-old

crime solved by a couple of diggers, a girl lawyer and a bookseller.”

“Excuse me, two respected scientists, a brilliant attorney and an astute antiquarian book dealer.”

“Sounds better your way.” Restless, Callie picked up a stone, tossed it toward the creek, where it landed with a sharp plop. “Look, I really appreciate all you’ve done over and above the call of billable hours and stuff.”

“It’s not my usual kind of work, and I have to admit, it’s been exciting.”

“Yeah.” She pitched another stone. “Getting burned out must’ve been a hell of a thrill.”

“No one was hurt, I’m insured, and the fact that it pissed me off is to your advantage. I’m in for the duration. And the fact that this matters a great deal to Doug adds additional incentive.”

“Hmm. Hey, look, there’s a black snake.”

“What? Where?” In instant terror, Lana hopped onto the hood of her car.

“Relax.” Callie picked up another stone, took aim. “Right over . . . there,” she said, and tossed the stone toward the creek again where it landed several inches to the right of the snake. Undoubtedly annoyed, it slithered along the bank and into the trees. “They’re harmless.”

“They’re snakes.”

“I like the way they move. Anyway. Doug. He’s an interesting guy. He brought me an Elvis beer cozy from Memphis.”

“Did he?” The sigh escaped before Lana realized it was there. “Now, why should that just touch my heart?”

“Because you’ve got the hots for him.”

“True. Very true.”

“Listen, that business in the car about your sex life was really just a . . .” She paused, whipped around, and even as Lana prepared to duck and cover, swatted a fat, buzzing bee away, the way a batter might swat a good fastball.

The somehow fat sound of the contact had Lana shuddering. “Jesus. Are you stung?”

“No. Those kind usually just like making a bunch of noise and annoying people. Like teenagers, I guess.”

“Were you, by any chance, a tomboy as a child?”

“I don’t get that name. I mean, Tom’s probably already a boy, so why is *tomboy* the word used to describe a girl with likes, skills and habits more traditionally ascribed to boys? It ought to be something like *maryboy*. Don’t you think?”

Lana shook her head. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“Makes more sense. Anyway, what was I saying before?”

“Ah . . . about my sex life.”

“Oh yeah. That bit in the car was really just a ruse.”

Deciding whatever nature might wing their way, Callie would handle, Lana eased off the hood to lean against the door of her car. “I know.”

“Not that I don’t like hearing about other people’s sex lives.”

“Living or dead.”

“Exactly. Every life has its defining moments.”

Callie glanced back toward the house as someone inside turned on music. As the Backstreet Boys pumped through the windows, she figured on Frannie.

“My first one happened when I was sleeping in a stroller in December of ’seventy-four,” she continued. “Defining moments create the grid for the pattern, but it’s the day-to-day that makes the pattern. What you eat, what you do for a living, who you sleep with, make a family with, how you cook or dress. The big finds, like discovering an ancient sarcophagus—that makes the splash in a career. But it’s the ordinary things that pull me in. Like a toy made out of a turtle’s carapace.”

“Or an Elvis beer cozy.”

“You are pretty smart,” Callie declared. “I think we’d have gotten along if we’d grown up together, Doug and I. I think we’d have liked each other. So it makes it easier to like him, and it’s less awkward to be around him, or Roger, than it is for me to be around Suzanne and Jay.”

“And easier to look for the people responsible, to look

for the reasons how and why it happened than to deal with the results. That's not a criticism," Lana added. "I think you're handling a complex and difficult situation with admirable common sense."

"It doesn't stop everyone involved from being hurt to some degree. And if we're right, two people who aren't even part of it are dead because I have the admirable common sense to demand the answers."

"You could stop."

"Could you?"

"No. But I think I might be able to give myself a break, to sit back for a while, try to take a look at the pattern I'm in right now, and how I got there. Maybe if you do that, you'll be able to accept it all when you do find the answers."

It wasn't a bad idea, Callie decided, to step back from one puzzle and use herself as the datum point for another. What was her pattern and how had she gotten there? What would her layers expose about her life, her personal culture and her role in society?

She sat down at her computer and began a personal time line from the date of her birth.

Born September 11, 1974

Kidnapped December 12, 1974

Placed with Elliot and Vivian Dunbrook December 16, 1974

That part was easy. Jogging her memory, she added the dates she'd started school, the summer she'd broken her arm, the Christmas she'd begged for and received her first microscope. Her first cello lesson, her first recital, her first dig. The death of her paternal grandfather. Her first sexual experience. The date of her graduation from college. The year she'd moved into her own apartment.

Professional highlights, the receipt of her master's degree, significant physical injuries and illnesses. Meeting Leo, Rosie, her very brief affair with an Egyptologist.

What had she been thinking?

The day she'd met Jake. How could she forget?

Tues, April 6, 1998

The date of their first sexual consummation.

Thurs, April 8, 1998

Jumped right into that one, she mused. They hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other, and had burned up the mattress in some cramped little room in Yorkshire near the Mesolithic site they were studying.

They'd moved in together, more or less, in June of that year. She couldn't pinpoint when or how they'd evolved into a team. If one of them was heading to Cairo or Tennessee, both of them had gone to Cairo or Tennessee.

They'd fought like lunatics, made love like maniacs. All over the world.

She recorded the date of their marriage.

The date he'd walked out.

The date she'd received the divorce papers.

Not so much time between, in the big scheme, she thought, then shook her head. The point was *her* life, not *their* life.

Shrugging, she keyed in her doctorate. She entered the day she'd gone to see Leo in Baltimore, her first day on the project, which included meeting Lana Campbell.

The day Jake had arrived.

The date Suzanne Cullen had come to her hotel room.

Her trip to Philadelphia, her return. Hiring Lana, dinner with Jake, the vandalism on her Rover, Dolan's murder. Conversation with Doug.

Sex with Jake.

Blood tests.

The first visit to the Simpsons.

Frowning, she went back, consulted her logbook and entered the date each team member had joined the project.

The shot fired at Jake, the trip to Atlanta, the fire. Interviews with Dr. Blakely's widow and Betsy Poffenberger, resulting data discovered.

Bill McDowell's death.

Making love with Jake.

Then the trip back to Virginia, which brought her to the present.

Once you had the events, you had a pattern, she thought. Then you extrapolated from it to see how each event, each layer connected to another.

She worked for a time shifting the data around into different headings: Education, Medical, Professional, Personal, Antietam Creek Project, Jessica.

Sitting back, she saw one element of the pattern. From the day she'd met him, Jake had a connection to every major point in her life. Even the damn doctorate, she admitted, which she'd gone after with a vengeance to keep herself from brooding over him.

She couldn't even have an identity crisis without him being involved.

Worse, she wasn't sure she'd want it any other way.

Absently, she reached for a cookie and found the bag beside her keyboard empty.

"I've got a stash in my room."

She jolted, jerked around to see Jake leaning against the doorway.

"But it'll cost you," he added.

"Damn it, stop sneaking around, spying on me."

"I can't help it if I move with the grace and silence of a panther, can I? And your door was open. Standing in an open doorway isn't spying. What are you working on?"

"None of your business." And to keep it that way, she saved the file and closed it.

"You're irritable because you're out of cookies."

"Close the door." She gritted her teeth when he did so, after he'd stepped inside. "I meant with you on the other side."

"You should've been more specific. Why aren't you taking a nap?"

"Because I'm not three years old."

"You're beat, Dunbrook."

"I have work I want to do."

"If you'd been dealing with the schedule or the site

records, you wouldn't have been in such a hurry to close the file before I got a look at it."

"I have personal business that doesn't involve you." She thought of the time line she'd just generated, and his complete involvement in it. "Or I should have."

"You're feeling pretty beat up, aren't you, baby?"

Her stomach slid toward her knees at the slow, soft sound of his voice. "Don't be nice to me. It drives me crazy. I don't know what to do when you're nice to me."

"I know." He leaned down to touch his lips to hers. "I can't figure out why I never thought of it before."

She turned away, opened the file again. "It's just a time line, trying to establish a pattern. Go ahead." She got up so he could have the desk chair. "The highlights and lowlights of my life."

She plopped down on her sleeping bag while he read.

"You slept with Aiken? The sleazy Egyptologist? What were you thinking?"

"Just never mind, or I'll start commenting on all the women you've slept with."

"You don't know all the women I've slept with. You forgot some events in this."

"No, I didn't."

"You forgot the conference we went to in Paris, May of 2000. And the day we skipped out on it and sat at a sidewalk cafe, drank wine. You were wearing a blue dress. It started to rain, just a little. We walked back to the hotel in the rain, went up to the room and made love. With the windows open, so we could hear the drizzle."

She hadn't forgotten it. She remembered it so well, so clearly, that hearing him recount it made her hurt. "It isn't relevant data."

"It was one of the most relevant days of my life. I didn't know it then. That's the tricky thing about life. Too often you don't know what's important until the moment passes. You still have that dress?"

She shifted on her side, pillowed her cheek on her hand as she studied him. He hadn't had a haircut since they'd

started the dig. She'd always liked it when his hair got just a little too long. "Somewhere."

"I'd like to see you in it again."

"You never noticed or cared what I was wearing before."

"I never mentioned it. An oversight."

"What're you doing?" she demanded when he began to type.

"Adding May of 2000, Paris, to your time line. I'm going to shoot this file to my laptop. I'll download it later, play with it."

"Fine, great. Do what you want."

"You must be feeling awful. I don't recall you ever telling me to do what I wanted before."

Why did she want to cry? Why the hell did she want to cry? "You always did anyway."

He sent the file to his e-mail, then got up and walked to her. "You always thought so." He sat down beside her, trailed his fingers over her shoulder. "I didn't want to leave that day in Colorado."

Ah yes, she thought bitterly. That was why she wanted to cry. "Then why did you?"

"You made it clear it was what you wanted. You said every minute you'd spent with me was a mistake. That the marriage was a bad joke and if I didn't resign from the project and go, you would."

"We were fighting."

"You said you wanted a divorce."

"Yeah, and you jumped on that quick, fast and in a hurry. You and that six-foot brunette were out of there like a shot, and I got a divorce petition in the mail two weeks later."

"I didn't leave with her."

"So it was just a coincidence that she left at the same time."

"You never trusted me, Cal. You never believed in me, in us, for that matter."

"I asked if you'd slept with her."

"You didn't ask, you accused."

"You refused to deny it."

"I refused to deny it," he agreed, "because it was insulting. It still is. If you believed that I'd break a vow to you, that I'd break faith with you over another woman, then the marriage *was* a bad joke. It had nothing to do with her. Christ, I don't even remember her name."

"Veronica. Veronica Weeks."

"Trust you," he muttered. "It had nothing to do with her," he repeated. "And everything to do with us."

"I wanted you to fight for me." She pushed up to a sitting position. She had her own wounds. "Just once I wanted you to fight for me instead of with me. I wanted that, Jake, so I'd know. So I'd know what you never once told me."

"What? What didn't I tell you?"

"That you loved me."

She didn't know whether to laugh or weep at the shock on his face. It was rare, she thought, to see him so unguarded, so baffled, so stunned.

"That's bullshit, Callie. Of course I told you."

"Not once. You never once said the words. 'Mmm, babe, I love your body' doesn't count, Graystone. 'Oh that, yeah, me too.' I'd get that sometimes when I said it to you. But you never said it to me. Obviously you couldn't. Because one thing you're not is a liar."

"Why the hell did I ask you to marry me if I didn't love you?"

"You never asked me to marry you. You said, 'Hey, Dunbrook, let's take off to Vegas and get married.'"

"It's the same thing."

"You're not that dense." Weary of it, she raked her hands through her hair. "It doesn't matter."

He took her arm at the wrist, lowered her hand. "Why didn't you say all this before? Why didn't you just ask me straight out if I loved you?"

"Because I'm a girl, you big stupid jerk." She punched his arm, pushed to her feet. "Digging in the dirt, playing with bones, sleeping in a bag doesn't mean I'm not a girl."

The fact that she was saying things he'd figured out for himself in the past months only made it worse. "I know you're a girl. For Christ's sake."

“Then figure it out. For somebody who’s spent his adult life studying and lecturing and analyzing cultures, the human condition and societal mores, you’re an idiot.”

“Stop calling me names and give me a goddamn minute to work this out.”

“Take all the time you want.” She spun away, headed for the door.

“Don’t.” He didn’t move, didn’t rise and didn’t raise his voice. Surprise, because everything in their history indicated he would do all three, stopped her. “Don’t walk out. Let’s at least finish this part without turning away from each other. You didn’t ask,” he continued quietly, “because in our culture, verbalization of emotions is as important as demonstrations of emotions. Free communication between mates is essential to the development and evolution of the relationship. If you’d had to ask, the answer had no meaning.”

“Bingo, professor.”

“Because I didn’t tell you, you thought I slept with other women.”

“You came with a track record. Jake the Rake.”

“Damn it, Callie.” There was little he hated more than having that particular term tossed in his face. And she knew it. “We’d both been around.”

“What was to stop you from going around again?” she countered. “You like women.”

“I like women,” he agreed, and stood. “I loved you.”

Her lips trembled. “That’s a hell of a thing to say to me now.”

“Can’t win, can I? Here’s something else, and maybe I should have told you a long time ago. I was never unfaithful to you. Being accused of it . . . It hurt, Callie. So I got mad, because I’d rather be mad than hurt.”

“You didn’t sleep with her?”

“Not her, not anyone else. There was no one but you, not from the first minute I saw you.”

She had to turn away. She’d convinced herself he’d been unfaithful. It was the only way she could bear being without him. The only thing that had stopped her from running after him.

"I thought you had. I was sure you had." She had to sit again, so merely slid down the door. "*She* made sure I believed it."

"She didn't like you. She was jealous of you. If she made a play for me . . . Okay, she did make one, it was only because I was yours."

"She left her bra in our room."

"Her what? Christ."

"Half under the bed," Callie continued. "Like she'd missed it when she got dressed again. I could smell her in the room when I walked in. Her perfume. And I thought, our bed. He brought that bitch to our bed. It tore me to pieces."

"I didn't. I can only tell you I didn't. Not in our bed, not anywhere. Not her, Callie, not anyone, since the first time I touched you."

"Okay."

"Okay?" he repeated. "That's it?"

She felt a tear spill over and swiped it away. "I don't know what else to say."

"Why didn't you tell me about this when it happened?"

"Because I was afraid. I was afraid if I showed you the proof, what seemed like undeniable proof, you'd admit it. If you'd said, yeah, you slipped but it wouldn't happen again, I'd've let it go. So I got mad," she said with a sigh. "Because I'd rather be mad than hurt or afraid. I got mad because if I was mad I could stand up under it, I could stand up to it. I don't know what to do anymore. I don't know how to do it."

He sat down in front of her so their knees bumped. "We've been making some progress on being friends this time."

"I guess we have."

"We could keep doing that. And I can work on remembering you're a girl while you work on trusting me."

"I believe you, about Veronica. That's a start."

He took her hand. "Thanks."

"I still want to yell at you when I need to."

"That's fine. I still want to have sex with you."

She sniffled, knuckled away another tear. "Right now?"

"I'd never say no, but maybe it could wait. You know,

we never got around to taking that trip west and seeing my family after we got married.”

“I don’t think this is a good time to zip out to Arizona.”

“No.” But he could take her there, with words. Maybe he could show her a part of himself he’d never thought to share before.

“My father...he’s a good man. Quiet, dependable, hardworking. My mother’s strong and tolerant. They make a good team, a reliable unit.”

He looked down at her hand, began to play with her fingers. “I don’t remember ever hearing either one of them say they loved the other. Not out loud, anyway. I don’t remember either of them ever saying it to me. I knew they did, but we didn’t talk about it. If I were to phone my parents and tell them I loved them, they’d both be embarrassed. We’d all be embarrassed.”

She’d never considered the three most basic words in the human language could embarrass him, or anyone. “You’ve never said it to anyone?”

“I’ve never thought about it but, no, I guess I haven’t—if you’re sure the I-love-your-body thing doesn’t count.”

“It doesn’t.” She felt a warm, unexpected wave of tenderness for him, and brushed his hair away from his face. “We never told each other much about our families. Though you’re getting a crash course on mine these days.”

“I like your family. Both of them.”

She rested her head back against the door. “We always talked about our feelings in my house. What we were feeling, why we were feeling it. I doubt a day went by when I didn’t hear my parents say I love you—to me or to each other. Carlyle did a better job than he could possibly know in connecting the Cullens and the Dunbrooks.”

“What do you mean?”

“Big emotions, verbalized. I’ll show you.”

She got up, took the shoe box out of her duffle. “I’ve read them all now. I’ll just pick one at random.”

She did so now, then brought the letter back, sat on the floor.

“Go ahead,” she told him. “Read it. It’ll make my point. Any one of them would.”

He opened the envelope, unfolded the letter.

Dear Jessica,

Happy birthday, sweet sixteen. How excited you must be today. Sixteen is such an important birthday, especially for a girl. Young woman now, I know. My little girl is a young woman.

You’re beautiful, I know that, too.

I look at young women your age, and I think, oh, how lovely and bright and fresh they are. How thrilling it is for them to be on the brink of so much. And how frustrating and difficult.

So many emotions, so many needs and doubts. So much that’s brand-new. I think about what I’d like to say to you. The talks we might have about your life and where you want it to go. The boys you like, and the dates you’ve gone on.

I know we’d quarrel. Mothers and daughters are bound to quarrel. I’d give anything just to be able to fight with you, have you storm up to your room and slam the door. Shut me out and turn your music up to annoy me.

I would give anything for that.

I think how we’d go shopping, and spend too much money, and have a ladies’ lunch somewhere.

I wonder if you’d be proud of me. I hope so. Imagine Suzanne Cullen, businesswoman. It still amazes me, but I hope you’d be proud that I have a business of my own, a successful one.

I wonder if you’ve seen my picture in a magazine while you’re waiting for a dentist appointment or to have your hair done. I think about you opening a bag of my cookies, and what sort you like the best.

I try not to grieve, but it’s hard, it’s so hard knowing you might do these things and you’d never know who I am. You’d never know how much I love you.

Every day and every night, Jessie. You're in my thoughts, my prayers, my dreams. I miss you.

I love you.

Mom

“This is hard for you. I can’t imagine how hard.” Jake lowered the letter and looked at her. “I’ve been caught up in patterns and data, facts and connections. And I tend to forget how all this makes you feel.”

“What year was that?”

“You were sixteen.”

“Sixteen years. She didn’t know, not for certain, what I looked like. She didn’t know what I’d become, what I’d done, where I was. But she loved me. Not just the baby she’d lost, but whoever I was. It didn’t matter. She loved me anyway, enough to write that. Enough to give it to me, to give all those letters to me so I’d know I was loved.”

“Knowing you can’t love her back.”

“Knowing I can’t love her back,” Callie agreed. “Not this way. Because I have a mother who I did all the things with that Suzanne wrote of wanting to do with me. I had a mother who told me she loved me, who showed me. A mother I went shopping with, and argued with, and thought was too strict or too stupid, and all the things teenage girls think their mothers are.”

She shook her head. “What I’m trying to say is my mother could have written that. Vivian Dunbrook could have written that kind of letter to me. Those emotions, those needs, that kindness, it’s in both of them.

“I already have some of the answers. I know where I come from. I know I was blessed with both the heredity and the environment that allowed me to be what I am. I know I owe two sets of parents, even if I can only love one set without reservations. And I know I can get through this. Through the emotional turmoil, the anxiety, the digging through facts to find more facts. Because the time line isn’t finished until I can give the woman who wrote that letter the rest of the answers.”

Twenty-one

Lana knew there were women who worked successfully out of the home. They ran businesses, created empires and managed to raise happy, healthy, well-adjusted children who went on to graduate magna cum laude from Harvard or became world-renowned concert pianists. Possibly both.

These women accomplished all this while cooking gourmet meals, furnishing their home with Italian antiques, giving clever, intelligent interviews with *Money* magazine and *People*, and maintaining a brilliant marriage with an active, enviable sex life and never tipping the scales at an ounce over their ideal weight.

They gave smart, intimate dinner parties and served on the boards of several charitable organizations and were unanimously voted in as president of the PTA.

She knew those women were out there. If she'd had a gun, she'd have hunted every last one of them down and shot them like rabid dogs for the good of womankind.

She was still wearing the boxers and T-shirt she'd slept in, was limping from the lightsaber wound on her heel she incurred when she stepped on the action figure of Anakin

Skywalker while chasing the dog—who'd decided her new slingback looked tastier than his rawhide bone—and had just finished arguing with the plumber for twenty minutes as he seemed to believe she could wait until later in the week to have her toilet fixed.

Ty had managed to smear peanut butter all over himself, the dog and the kitchen floor and drown several Star Wars villains in the toilet, hence the call to the plumber. And it wasn't yet nine o'clock.

She wanted a quiet cup of coffee, her pretty new shoes and an organized office outside the home.

It was partly her own fault, of course. She'd been the one to decide there was no point in shuffling Ty off to a baby-sitter while she was working at home. She'd been the one to be generous and understanding when her assistant had requested a week off to go visit her daughter in Columbus.

She'd been the one to decide she could do it all.

Now her little boy was upstairs sulking because she'd shouted at him. Her dog was afraid of her for the same reason. The plumber was mad at her—and everyone knew what *that* meant—and she'd managed to do nothing positive except turn on her computer.

She was a failure as a mother, as a professional woman, as a dog owner. Her foot hurt and she had no one to blame but herself.

When her phone rang, she considered, seriously, just covering her head with her arms. If anyone thought she was capable of solving their problems, they were going to be bitterly disillusioned.

But she took a deep breath, picked up the receiver.

“Good morning. Lana Campbell.”

Doug knocked, then decided it was doubtful anyone could hear him over the noise rolling out of Lana's house. Cautious, he opened the door, poked his head in.

The dog was barking like a maniac, the phone was ring-

ing, something blasted on the living room TV and Tyler was wailing.

He could hear Lana's frustrated and close-to-strident voice trying to cut through the din.

"Tyler Mark Campbell, I want you to stop this minute."

"I wanna go to Brock's house. I don't like you anymore. I wanna live with Brock."

"You can't go to Brock's house because I don't have time to take you. And I don't like you very much right now either, but you're stuck with me. Now go up to your room and don't come out again until you can behave like a civilized human being. And turn off that television!"

Doug nearly stepped back outside again. From the sound of it, nobody was going to notice if he hightailed it back to his car and drove off in a cloud of cowardly dust.

None of his business, he reminded himself. Life had enough complications and conflict without voluntarily asking for more.

"You're mean to me." Tyler sobbed it, his voice rising and inciting the dog to join in with a long, high howl. "If I had a daddy he wouldn't be mean to me. I want my daddy instead of you."

"Oh, Ty. I want your daddy, too."

He supposed that was it—the child's pitiful sob, the absolute misery in Lana's voice, that pushed him in the door instead of out again.

Still, he opted for denial first with a big, easy smile and a cheerful tone of voice. "Hey, what's all this?"

She turned. He'd never seen her look less than perfectly groomed, he realized. Even after they made love she somehow managed to look perfect.

Now her hair was standing in tufts, her eyes were damp and a little wild. Her feet were bare, and there was a coffee stain splattered over the front of the WORLD'S BEST MOM T-shirt she wore.

Embarrassed color flooded her cheeks even as she lifted her hands in a helpless gesture.

He'd been attracted to the stylish, organized attorney.

Seduced by the warm, confident woman. Intrigued by the widowed single mother who seemed to effortlessly juggle all the balls in the air.

And to his utter astonishment, he fell in love with the messy, frustrated, unhappy woman with toys scattered at her feet.

“Sorry.” She forced what she hoped resembled a smile on her face. “We’re in bedlam at the moment. I don’t think this is a good time to—”

“She yelled at us.” Seeking sympathy, Ty flung himself at Doug, wrapped his arms around Doug’s legs. “She said we were bad.”

Doug hauled Ty up. “Asked for it, didn’t you?”

Ty’s lip quivered. He shook his head, then buried his face against Doug’s shoulder. “She spanked my butt.”

“Tyler.” Lana supposed that had the floor opened up to swallow her, she’d just have been battered to death by the toys that fell in with her.

“How come?” Doug gave the butt in question a light pat.

“Doug.” Lana resisted just pulling out her own hair.

“I don’t know. She’s mean. Can I go home with you?”

“No, you may not go anywhere, young man, but to your room.” Livid, Lana reached out to tug Tyler away, but the boy clung to Doug like a wiry monkey to a branch.

“Why don’t you go answer the phone?” Doug suggested, jerking his head toward the shrilling phone. “Give this a minute.”

“I don’t want you to . . .” Be here. See this. See *me*. “Fine.” She snapped it out, stalked away to answer the phone.

He switched off the television and, still carrying Ty, opened the door, whistled for the dog. “Had a rough morning, haven’t you, slugger?”

“Mommy spanked my butt. She hit it with her hand. *Three times.*”

“My mom used to spank me sometimes. It didn’t really hurt my butt. It hurt my feelings. I guess you wanted to hurt hers back when you said you didn’t like her anymore.”

“I *don’t* like her when she’s mean.”

“She get mean a lot?”

“Nuh-uh. But she is today.” He lifted his head, aimed a look that managed to be woeful, hopeful and innocent all at once. “Can I come live with you today?”

Jeez, Doug thought, just look at him. A guy would have to be a hell of a lot tougher than Douglas Edward Cullen not to fall for him. “If you did, your mom would be awfully lonely.”

“She doesn’t like me anymore because the bad guys stuffed up the toilet and it flushed over, and we got the peanut butter and the shoe.” Tears plopped out. “But we didn’t mean it.”

“Busy day.” Impossible to hold back, Doug admitted, and kissed the hot, wet cheeks. “If you didn’t mean it, you must be sorry. Maybe you should tell her you’re sorry.”

“She won’t care, ’cause she said we were a couple of heathens.” Ty’s eyes were wide now, and earnest. “What’s that?”

“Oh boy.” How did a man resist a package like this? He’d gone all his life walking down his own path, alone and satisfied to be alone. Now there was this woman, this boy, this idiot dog. And they all had hooks in his heart.

“It’s somebody who doesn’t behave. Doesn’t sound like you and Elmer were behaving. Your mom was trying to work.”

“Brock’s mom doesn’t work.”

His own voice echoed back to him. His own childhood thoughts as he’d complained or sulked because his mother had been too busy to give him her undivided attention.

Too busy for me, are you? Well, I’m going to be too busy for you.

And how stupid was that?

Hell of a note, he thought, when a four-year-old’s tantrum causes an epiphany in a man past thirty.

“Brock’s mom isn’t your mom. Nobody’s more special than your own mom. Nobody in the world.” He held Ty close, stroking his hair while Elmer pranced over with a stick, obviously ready for a game.

“When you do something wrong, you have to make up

for it." He set Ty down, obliged Elmer by tossing the stick. "I bet that's what your dad would say."

"I don't have a dad. He went away to heaven and he can't ever come back."

"That's hard." Doug crouched down. "That's about the hardest thing there is. But you've got a really great mom. It said so on her shirt."

"She's mad at me. Grandma helped me buy the shirt for Mommy's birthday, and Elmer jumped and made her spill coffee all over it. And when he did, she said a bad word. She said the *S* word." Remembering it had his lips curving again. "She said it *two* times. Really loud."

"Wow. She must've been pretty mad. But we can fix that. Want to fix it?"

Ty sniffed, wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. "Okay."

Lana finished the call and was on the point of laying her head down on her desk for a minute, for one blissful minute, when she heard the door open.

She rose, tried to smooth down her hair, to draw some layer of composure around her.

Then Tyler came in, clutching a ragged bouquet of black-eyed Susans. "I'm sorry I did the bad stuff and said the mean things. Don't be mad anymore."

"Oh, Ty." Weepy, she dropped to her knees to drag him close. "I'm not mad anymore. I'm sorry I spanked you. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I love you so much. I love you more than anything in the world."

"I picked you flowers because you like them."

"I do. I like them a lot." She drew back. "I'm going to put them on my desk so I'll see them when I'm working. Later on, I'll call and see if it's okay for you to go over to Brock's."

"I don't want to go to Brock's. I want to stay and help you. I'm going to pick up my toys, like I'm supposed to."

"Are you?"

"Uh-huh. And I'm not going to kill the bad guys in the toilet anymore."

"Okay." She pressed her lips to his brow. "We're okay."

Go ahead and pick up your things, then I'll put the *Star Wars* video on for you."

"Okay! Come on, Elmer!" He raced off with the dog scrambling after him.

Lana pushed at her hair again, though it was hopeless, then got to her feet. Though her phone began to ring again, she ignored it and walked into the kitchen, where Doug was sipping a mug of coffee.

"I guess this was an educational experience. I'm sorry you walked in on all that."

"You mean that I walked in on all that normal?"

"This isn't our usual routine around here."

"Doesn't make it less normal." He thought of his mother again, with some shame. "One person has to hold all the lines, occasionally some of the lines get snagged."

"You can say that again." She reached into a cupboard for a small green vase. "My own fault, too. Why send Ty to the sitter's when he could be here with me? I'm his mother, aren't I? So what if I'm trying to run an office out of here, and my assistant's on vacation? Then when things get a little complicated, I take it out on a little boy and his brainless dog."

"I'd say the little boy and his brainless dog played a big part." He lifted a mangled shoe off the counter. "Which one of them chewed on this?"

She sighed as she filled the vase with water. "I haven't even worn them yet. Damn dog nosed it right out of the shoe box while I was trying to deal with the flood in the bathroom."

"You should've called a plumber." He bit back a laugh when she bared her teeth at him. "Oh, you did. I'll take a look at it for you."

"It's not your job to fix my toilet."

"Then you don't have to pay me."

"Doug, I appreciate it, I really do. I appreciate your taking Ty out of the line of fire until I calmed down, and helping him pick the flowers, and offering to stand in as emergency plumber, but—"

"You don't want anyone to help."

“No, it’s not that. It’s certainly not that. I didn’t get involved with you so you could handle plumbing and other household crises. I don’t want you to think I expect that sort of thing just because we’re dating.”

“How about if you start expecting that sort of thing because I’m in love with you?”

The vase slid out of her fingers and hit the counter with a clunk. “What? What?”

“Happened about fifteen minutes ago, when I walked in and saw you.”

“Saw me.” Stupefied, she looked down at herself. “Saw *this*?”

“You’re not perfect. You’re damn close, but you’re not absolutely perfect. That’s a big relief to me. It’s intimidating to think about being with someone for the long haul—which is something I’ve never tried with anyone before, by the way—if she’s absolutely perfect. But she spills coffee all over herself and doesn’t get around to brushing her hair, yells at her kid when he deserves it, that’s worth thinking about.”

“I don’t know what to say.” What to think. What to do. “I’m not . . .”

“Ready,” he finished. “So, why don’t you just tell me where the plunger is, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“It’s, ah . . .” She waved a hand overhead. “Already up there. I was . . . I couldn’t . . . Doug.”

“That’s nice. It’s nice that you fumbled.” He caught her chin, kissed her. “It’s nice that you’re a little scared. Should give me time to figure out how to handle this.”

She managed a helpless gesture while bats bumped around in her stomach. “Let me know when you figure it out.”

“You’ll be the first.”

When he walked out, she braced a hand on the counter. Once again, she looked down at herself.

He’d fallen in love with her because of coffee stains and messy hair. Oh God, she realized as her heart fluttered, she was in trouble.

This time when the phone rang, she picked it up ab-

sently. "Hello. Yes." She winced. "This is the law office of Lana Campbell. How may I help you?"

Minutes later, she was streaking upstairs where Doug, Ty and the dog all huddled around the toilet. "Out. Everybody out. I have to shower. Doug, forget everything I just said about not asking or expecting, because I'm about to take terrible advantage of you."

He glanced at Ty, then at her. "In front of witnesses?"

"Ha ha. Please, I beg you, take Ty downstairs, scoop up everything that doesn't look like it belongs in the home or office of a brilliant attorney. Stuff it in a closet. I'll worry about it later. Put the dog out back. Ty, you're going to Brock's after all."

"But I don't wanna—"

"Come on, pal." Doug started the scooping with Ty. "We'll have a man-to-man talk about the futility of arguing with a woman when she has a certain look in her eye."

"I'll be down in twenty minutes." Lana slammed the door behind them and stripped.

She was jumping back out of the shower when Doug gave a cursory knock and walked in. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"For God's sake, I'm naked. Ty—"

"Is downstairs picking up his toys. And since I intend to be a fixture around here, he'll get used to knowing I see you naked. What's lit the fire, Lana?"

"Richard Carlyle." She grabbed a towel, wrapping it around her body as she raced out and into the bedroom. "He just called from the airport. From Dulles. He wants a meeting. Damn it, I didn't get the navy Escada back from the cleaners."

"He's coming here."

"Yes, he'll be here at noon. I have to pull myself together so I look like a cool, articulate professional instead of a raving lunatic. I have to contact Callie, go through the files again." She wiggled into a bra and panties. "I need to make certain I have all salient information in my head and at my fingertips."

She pulled out a gray pin-striped suit, put it back again.

“No, looks like I’m trying too hard. Working temporarily out of the home, something just a little more relaxed, but still... Ah!”

She grabbed a slate-blue jacket. “This works. I have to call Jo—Brock’s mother—and see if he can go over there for a couple hours. Then I’m going to impose on you to drive him over.”

She tossed the outfit onto the bed, snatched up the portable phone and was already dialing as she dashed back to the bathroom to dry her hair.

“I’ll drive him over, but I’m coming back. I’m going to be part of this meeting.”

“That’s not up to me. That’s up to Callie.”

“No, it’s up to me,” he corrected, and stepped out again.

She was cool and composed again when she showed Callie and Jake into the living room. “I think it’s best to have the meeting here. The office I use upstairs is small, and this might work toward keeping him relaxed and friendly.”

“Let’s serve tea and cookies.”

“Callie.” Lana laid a hand on her arm. “I know you’re not happy with him, and you feel he’s been blocking you. But we need him on our side, or at least open to our side, if we’re to get his help in finding his father. Every other avenue we’ve tried has been a dead end.”

“A guy just doesn’t drop off the face of the earth.”

“I agree. And I’m sure we’ll find him, eventually, if we keep looking. But with Richard Carlyle’s help, we could find him sooner.”

“Why should he help me find his father, when my intention is to see the rat-bastard son of a bitch in jail for the rest of his life?”

“Probably not a good idea to bring that up.” Jake took a seat, stretched out his legs. “Or to call him a rat-bastard son of a bitch when talking to his son.” Jake jerked a shoulder at the glittering glare Callie aimed in his direction. “Just my take on it.”

“And mine. Sit down, Callie.” Lana gestured to a chair. “However hostile you might be feeling, it won’t do us any good to alienate Richard Carlyle. He and his father may be estranged, but they’re still father and son. The fact is, I have some concerns about the number of people here for this meeting. Carlyle asked to speak to me and my client. I don’t think he’s going to be happy to walk in and find himself this outnumbered.”

“That’ll be his problem.” Jake nodded at Doug.

Doug folded his arms, didn’t budge. “I’m not going anywhere. Carlyle feels a little uncomfortable, that’s too damn bad. My family’s felt uncomfortable for going on thirty years.”

“And if you take the sins-of-the-father attitude with him, he’s likely to blow us off.” But Lana knew when she was beating her head against rock. “I won’t ask you to go, but I’m going to insist you let me handle the meeting. He’s come here all the way from Atlanta. He’s come onto your turf,” she said to Callie. “Let’s give him some credit for it.”

“I’ll give him plenty of credit once he tells us where his rat-bastard, son-of-a-bitching father is. Just getting that out of my system.” She smiled fiercely at Jake.

At the sound of a car driving over gravel, Lana went to the window, nudged back the curtain. “I’d say this is our man. Doug, for God’s sake sit down and stop hulking.”

“Okay.” He went to the sofa, sat on the other side of Callie.

“Great.” She poked her elbows in his and Jake’s ribs. “Now I’ve got bookends. Let me breathe a little, would you? I think I’m a little past the point where I can be snatched again and put up for resale.”

“Stop bitching,” Doug said mildly. “This is what we call a show of solidarity.”

“Yeah, the hundred-and-twenty-pound infant, her long-lost brother and her ex-husband. Some show.”

Jake draped an arm behind her, over the back of her shoulders. “I’m enjoying it.”

Lana opened the door. Her voice was coolly polite. “Mr. Carlyle? I’m Lana Campbell.” She offered a hand.

“I’d like to thank you for coming all this way to speak with us. Please come in. I hope you’ll excuse the informality. There was a fire in my office recently, and I’m working temporarily out of my home. I believe you’ve met both Dr. Dunbrook and Dr. Graystone.”

He looked, Callie thought, considerably fatigued. More than a short flight warranted. He also kept a firm grip on the handle of his briefcase.

“This is Douglas Cullen,” Lana began.

“I didn’t agree to speak with any of the Cullen family.” Pointedly, Richard turned away from Doug, stared down at Lana. “I specifically requested a meeting with you and your client. If those terms weren’t agreeable, you could have saved me considerable time and trouble by saying so.”

“As representative of the Cullen family, Mr. Cullen’s presence is not only reasonable but sensible. My client would, naturally, relay any outcome of this meeting to the Cullens.”

Lana spoke smoothly, and without giving an inch. “Having Mr. Cullen present will avoid any chance of miscommunication. I’m sure you haven’t come all this way to object to the inclusion of one of the members of Dr. Dunbrook’s biological family. You called the meeting, Mr. Carlyle. As I’m aware you’re a very busy man, I’m sure you had good reason to make this trip.”

“A very inconvenient trip. I want to make it clear, I won’t be interrogated.”

“If you’d sit down, I’d be happy to get you coffee, or something cold.”

“I won’t be here that long.” But he took a seat facing the sofa. “Dr. Dunbrook and her associate gained access to my office by claiming a family connection.”

“You assumed the family connection,” Callie corrected. “We said I had a connection to your father. Since he made a great deal of money from selling me, that connection stands.”

“Accusations like that are slanderous. If your attorney hasn’t warned you, then she’s incompetent. I checked on the documents you left in my office. While it’s true that the

papers for the adoption by Elliot and Vivian Dunbrook of the infant girl were not properly filed—”

“They were fraudulent.”

“They were not properly filed. As your own attorney should know, this oversight might very well have been the fault of the court, a law clerk, an associate or assistant.”

“I hardly find that valid”—Lana took a seat as well—“as the petition for adoption and the final decree were both signed by all parties, bore what appears to be a forged court seal. And neither was filed in the appropriate docket.”

“And some overworked and underpaid clerk is probably responsible.”

“The exchange—fee for child—was made in your father’s office, Mr. Carlyle. In your father’s presence.”

“A number of infants were placed through my father’s practice. And as with any successful practice, many people worked on the cases he took. Whatever else my father was, he was a highly respected attorney. To accuse him of taking part in this sort of heinous baby bartering is ridiculous. I won’t see his reputation damaged, and by association my own. I will not see my mother nor my children harmed by gossip.”

“You’re not telling us anything you didn’t say in Atlanta.” Because he could feel her revving, Jake dipped his arm from the back of the couch, laid a restraining hand on Callie’s shoulder. “You don’t strike me as a man who’d waste time repeating himself.”

“If it bears repeating. I sympathize with your situation, Dr. Dunbrook, Mr. Cullen. I know from my own verification of the documents and articles you left with me that your situation is both very real and very tragic. Even if I believed, which I do not, that my father was in any way involved, I couldn’t help you.”

“If you’re so sure he wasn’t involved, why don’t you ask him?” Callie demanded. “Why don’t you show him the papers and ask him to explain?”

“I’m afraid that’s just not possible. He’s dead. My father died ten days ago. In his home on Grand Cayman. I’ve

just returned from there, from his funeral and from assisting his current wife with the disposition of his estate.”

Callie felt the bottom drop out from under her. “We’re supposed to just take your word that he died? So conveniently?”

“Hardly conveniently. He’d been ill for some time. But no, I don’t expect you to take my word for it.” He opened his briefcase, reached in for a file. “I have copies of his medical reports, his death certificate and his obituary.” Watching Callie, he passed them on to Lana. “You can easily have them substantiated.”

“You told us you didn’t know where he was. If you lied then, this could just be another way to cover it all up.”

“I didn’t lie. I hadn’t seen my father for years. He treated my mother shabbily. And, from all accounts, repeated the pattern with his second wife. His third? I can’t say. I was aware he was most likely in the Caymans or in Sardinia. He bought property in both places in one of his various mistresses’ names a number of years ago. But I didn’t feel I had any obligation to relay that assumption to you. My obligation is to protect my mother, my wife and children, my reputation and my practice. That’s exactly what I intend to do.”

Carlyle got to his feet. “It’s over, Dr. Dunbrook. Whatever he did or didn’t do, he’s dead. He can’t answer your questions, explain or defend himself. And I won’t see my family punished. I won’t let that happen. Let the dead stay dead. I’ll show myself out.”

Twenty-two



Jake heard the deep, sorrowful sound of the cello. He couldn't name the piece or the composer. He'd never had the ear for recognizing the classics. But he knew the mood, and therefore, Callie's.

She was sulking.

He couldn't blame her for it. As far as he was concerned, she'd had more than enough for one summer. He wished he could pack her up and off somewhere. Anywhere. They'd always been good at picking up stakes. Maybe a bit too good, he admitted, and shoved away from his computer.

They'd never dug roots for themselves as a couple. And he, at least, hadn't thought them important. Not then, he reflected as he got up to pace. Back then, it had been all about "the now." No matter how determinedly the two of them had dug into the past of others, their own relationship had been steeped in the moment.

They'd rarely spoken of their yesterdays and had given no thought to their future. He'd sure as hell had a lot of time to think about both over the past year. The single truth

he'd come to was that he wanted plenty of tomorrows with Callie.

One way to do that was to strip their yesterdays for each other and build a now instead of just riding on it.

A good plan, he thought. Until her past had reared up and sucker-punched her.

There was no moving on from this. No picking up stakes and playing nomads. They were both going to have to stick.

He walked around to the kitchen, where Dory was working at the table. "We found some great stuff today. The hand ax Matt dug up was amazing," she offered.

"Yeah, a good find." He opened the refrigerator, nearly reached for the beer, then passed it over for wine.

"I'm, ah, coordinating Bill's notes. I thought somebody should."

"You don't have to do that, Dory. I'll take care of it."

"No, I... I'd like to, if it's okay. I wasn't very nice to him. I mean I ragged on him a little—a lot," she corrected. "About the way he trotted around after Callie. I feel so... I just feel so bad about it."

"You didn't mean anything by it," he replied.

"We never mean most of the stupid stuff we do. Until it's too late. I made fun of him, Jake. Right to his face."

"Would you feel better if you'd made fun of him behind his back?" He opened the wine, poured her a glass. "I gave him some grief myself."

"I know. Thanks." She picked up the wine but didn't drink. "I couldn't blame you since you were both putting moves on Callie. In your own ways," she added. She looked up at the ceiling. The music was soft and distant, almost like the night sounds whispering through the open window. "That's pretty, but so damn sad."

"Cello never sounds very cheerful, if you ask me."

"I guess not. She's really talented. Still, it's kind of weird. An archaeologist who hauls a cello around to digs so she can play Beethoven."

"Yeah, she just couldn't play the harmonica like everybody else. Don't work too late."

He carried the rest of the wine and two glasses upstairs.

He knew what it meant when Callie had her door closed, but he ignored the signal and opened it without knocking.

She sat in the single chair, facing the window as she drew the bow over strings. Her profile was to him, that long line of cheek exposed with her hair bundled back.

Her hands, he thought, always looked so delicate, so female, when she played. And whatever he'd said to Dory, he'd missed hearing her play.

He walked to the desk, poured wine.

"Go away." She didn't turn her head, just continued to stare out into the night and draw those thick, rich notes out of the air. "This isn't a public concert."

"Take a break." He crossed to her, held out good white wine in a cheap dime-store glass. "Beethoven can wait."

"How did you know it was Beethoven?"

"You're not the only one with an appreciation and knowledge of music."

"Since Willie Nelson is the epitome of an artist in your world—"

"Watch it, babe. Don't insult the greats or I won't share my adult beverage."

"How come you brought me wine?"

"Because I'm a selfless, considerate man."

"Who's hoping to get me loose so he'll get lucky?"

"Naturally, but I'm still considerate."

She took the glass, sipped. "I see you went all out. It's excellent wine." She set the glass on the floor, then angling her head, studied him as she slid out the first bars of "Turkey in the Straw." "More your speed, huh?"

"Would you like to discuss the cultural and societal stages of folk music and its reflection in arts and tribal customs?"

"Not tonight, professor." She reached down, lifted the glass for another sip. "Thanks for the wine. Go away now and let me brood."

"You've exceeded your brooding limitations for the evening."

"I'm on overtime." She set the glass down again. "Go away, Jake."

In response he sat down on the floor, leaned back against the wall and drank.

Irritation flickered over her face, then smoothed out. She set the bow again, then played the two-toned warning notes from *Jaws*.

“It’s not going to bother me.”

Her lips curved, and she continued to play. He’d crack. He always did.

He made it for nearly thirty seconds before his skin began to crawl. Leaning forward, he slapped a hand on her bow arm. “Cut it out.” But even as he fought off a shudder, he had to laugh. “You’re such a bitch.”

“Damn right. Why won’t you go away?”

“Last time I did that, I stayed mad, sad and lonely for the best part of a year. I didn’t like it.”

She wanted to hunch her shoulders. “This isn’t about you.”

“No, it’s about you. And you matter.”

Weakened, she rested her forehead against the neck of the cello. “God, when did I get to the point where having you say something like that makes me stupid?”

He ran his hand gently up and down her calf. “Why was I ever at the point where I couldn’t say it to you? But this time I’m not going away. I know what you’re thinking, what’s been stuck in your craw all day. The fucker had to go and die on you.”

“Maybe Carlyle Junior’s lying. Maybe the death certificate’s bogus.”

Jake kept his gaze steady on hers. “Maybe.”

“And I know what you’re thinking. What would be the point? He knows we’ll have it checked. The bastard’s dead, and I’ll never look him in the eye and tell him who I am. Make him tell me what I want to know. He’ll never pay the price for what he did. There’s nothing I can do about it. Not a damn thing I can do.”

“So, it stops here?”

“That’s the logical conclusion. Carlyle’s dead. Simpson and his bitch of a wife are gone. Maybe if I had nothing but time and money I could keep an investigator or a team of

them working indefinitely to track them down. But I don't have that luxury."

"Whether or not you can look the bastard in the eye, you know who you are. Whatever price he'd pay wouldn't change what he did to the Cullens, to your parents, to you. What you do now, for them and for yourself, is what counts."

Everything he was saying had already played through her head a dozen times. "What am I going to do, Jake? I can't be Jessica for Suzanne and Jay. I can't ease the guilt my parents feel for their part in all this. The one thing I felt I could do was get down to the answers, put the person responsible on trial."

"What answers do you need?"

"The same I always need. All of them. How many others are there? Others like me, others like Barbara Halloway? Do I look for them? What do I do if I find them? Do I walk up to someone and turn their life into chaos, the way mine's been for the last couple months? Or do I walk away, leave it alone. Let the lies stand. Let the dead stay dead."

He leaned back against the wall again, picked up his wine. "Since when have we ever let the dead stay dead?"

"This could be the first."

"Why? Because you're pissed off and depressed? You'll get over it. Carlyle's dead. That doesn't mean he doesn't still have the answers. You're about the best I know at finding answers from the dead. With me being the best, of course."

"I'd laugh, but I'm busy being depressed."

"You know where he was living. Find out what he was doing there. Who he knew, kept in contact with. How he lived. Explore his stratigraphy and extrapolate your data from the layers."

"Do you think I haven't considered all that?" She rose to set her cello back in its case. "I turned it over in my head and looked at it from every angle after we went back to the dig this afternoon. And none of those angles gives me a reason. Nothing I can think of tells me what good it

would do, for anyone. If I keep at this now, without Carlyle as a focal point—or more, a target—it’s only prolonging the anxiety for my parents, and the unhappiness for the Cullens.”

“You left yourself out of the equation again.”

Never missed a trick, she thought. “So, I’d get some personal satisfaction from it. Personal and intellectual satisfaction from finishing the pattern. When I weigh that against everything else, it’s just not heavy enough.”

She bent over to pick up her wine. “Two people are dead, but I can’t be sure they’re connected to this now. I can’t even be certain Lana’s fire’s a part of it. By all accounts Carlyle was old and sick. He sure as hell didn’t bop up to rural Maryland and kill two people, shoot at you, knock me unconscious and burn down Lana’s office.”

“Must’ve made a hell of a lot of money selling babies over the years.” Jake studied the wine in his glass. “Enough to hire the kind of people who kill, knock women out and burn down buildings.”

“You’re just not going to let me off the hook here, are you?”

“No.”

“Why?” Torn between frustration and curiosity, she kicked him lightly in the ankle. “Why do you want me obsessing on this?”

“I don’t. You won’t stop obsessing until you finish it.”

She kicked him again, for the hell of it, then paced away. “When did you get to know me so well?”

“I always knew you pretty well. I just didn’t always give what I knew the right priority.”

“I can’t figure out what you’re looking for. You already know I’ll have sex with you.”

“Want a surprise?” He picked up the bottle, filled his glass nearly to the rim. And he drank half before he spoke again. “I want you to be happy. I want that more than I realized. Because . . .” He paused, drank deep again. “I love you more than I realized.”

She felt the shock of it, and the thrill, blast straight

through her heart and down to her toes. “You need to guzzle wine before you can say that?”

“Yeah. Give me a break, I’m new at this.”

She walked back, crouched down so they were level. “Do you mean it?”

“Yeah, a little wine helps the words slide out. Yes, I mean it.”

“Why?”

“I knew you wouldn’t let it be simple. How the hell do I know why? I do, that’s all. Since I do, I want you to be happy. You’re not going to be happy until you finish this out. So I’m going to hound you, and I’m going to help you. Then when it’s finished we can deal with you and me.”

“And that’s the way things are.”

“That’s the way they are.” He took her glass, filled it. “Now catch up,” he ordered and pushed the glass back into her hand. “So I can get you into that sleeping bag.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” She drank the wine down, set the glass aside. “I’ll get *you* in the sleeping bag.”

“Just got to have it all your way, don’t you?” He let her take his hand, tug him to his feet. “Be gentle with me.”

“Yeah, sure, right.” And yanked his shirt over his head.

Later, when she lay sprawled beside him, her breath still choppy, her skin slicked with sweat, she smiled into the dark. “Feeling pretty happy.”

He traced the curve of her hip, her waist, with his hand. “It’s a start.”

“I want to tell you something.”

“It can’t be that you were once a man, which is something I once feared and suspected given your very sensible attitude toward sex.”

“No, and that’s a really stupid and sexist remark.”

“Sexist, but not stupid. A number of attitudes no longer considered politically correct are actually realistic when considered within the—”

“Shut up, Graystone.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Roll over the other way. I don’t want you to look at me.”

“I’m not looking at you. I have my eyes closed.” But he grumbled and shifted onto his side when she poked and pinched.

“You said, a couple of times, that I didn’t need you. Before. That wasn’t completely accurate. No, don’t turn around.”

“You didn’t need me. You made sure I knew it.”

“I thought you’d run for the hills if you thought I did. You weren’t known for your long-term commitments. Neither was I.”

“It was different for us.”

“I knew it was different for me. And it scared me. If you turn over, I’m not saying another word.”

Cursing under his breath, he settled down again. “Fine.”

“I never expected to feel what I felt with you. I don’t think people, even people who have a romantic bent, expect to be consumed that way.

“I could read you perfectly, when it came to the work, or other people, general stuff.” She sighed. “But I could never read you when it came to us. Anyway, some of it has to do with what you’d call my family culture. I don’t know a couple more devoted to each other than my parents. As in tune. And still, I always saw that it was my mother who had the need.

“She gave up her music, moved away from her family, made herself into the perfect doctor’s wife because she needed my father’s approval. It was her choice, I know that. And she’s happy. But I always looked at her as a little less. I always promised myself I’d never put myself second for anyone. I’d never need someone so much that I couldn’t be a whole person without him. Then you exploded into my life, and I had to rush around and pick up the pieces just so I didn’t forget who I was supposed to be.”

“I never wanted you to give anything up.”

“No. But I was terrified I would anyway. That I wouldn’t be able to think without asking myself what you’d think first. My mother used to do that. ‘We’ll ask

your father.' 'Let's see what your father says.' Drove me crazy."

She laughed a little, shook her head. "Stupid, really, when you think of it. Taking that small part of their marital dynamic and making it personal. I didn't want to need you, because if I did, that made me weak and you strong. And I was already crazy because I loved you more than you loved me, and that gave you the edge."

"So it was a contest?"

"Partially. The more I felt at a disadvantage, emotionally, the more I pushed you. The more I pushed, the more you closed up on me, which made me push harder. I wanted you to prove you loved me."

"And I never did."

"No, you never did. And I wasn't going to tolerate somebody who couldn't cooperate enough to love me more than I loved him so I'd have the controls. I wanted to hurt you. I wanted to cut you deep. I wanted that because I didn't think I could."

"It must make you feel better to know you broke me into small, bloody pieces."

"It does. I'm a failure as a human being because it makes me feel so much better to know that."

"Glad I could help." He pulled her arm around him, then carried her hand to his lips.

"You can barely choke out that you love me. I'm afraid to love you. What the hell are we supposed to do?"

"Sounds like a match made in heaven to me."

She pressed her face to his back and laughed. "God, you're probably right."

Let the dead stay dead, Callie thought as she gently brushed soil from the finger bones of a woman who'd stayed dead for thousands of years. Would this woman, one Callie judged to have been at least sixty when she died, agree? Would she be angry, horrified, baffled at having her bones disturbed by a stranger who lived in another time, in another world?

Or would she understand, be pleased that these strangers cared enough to want to learn from her? Learn about her.

Would she be willing, Callie wondered as she paused to write another quick series of notes, to allow herself to be unearthed, removed, studied, tested, recorded, so that knowledge about who she was, *why* she was, could be expanded?

And still, so many questions could never be answered. They could speculate how long she'd lived, what had caused her death, her diet, her habits, her health.

But they would never know who her parents had been, her lovers and friends. Her children. They would never know what made her laugh or cry, what frightened her or angered her. They would never know, truly, what it was that made her a person.

Wasn't that what she was trying to find out about herself, somehow? What made Callie Dunbrook who she was beyond the facts she had at her disposal. Beyond what she knew.

What was she made of? Was it strong enough, tough enough, to pursue answers for the sake of knowledge? Because if she wasn't, her entire life had been misdirected. She had no business being here, uncovering the bones of this long-dead woman if she backed away from uncovering the bones of her own past.

"You and I are in the same boat." She sighed as she set her clipboard aside. "And the trouble is, I'm the one at the oars. My head's in it. Too much training for it not to be. But I don't know if my heart's in it anymore. I just don't know if my heart's in any of it."

She wanted to walk away. Wanted to pack up her loose and walk away from the digs, from the deaths, from the Cullens, from the layers of questions. She wanted to forget she'd ever heard the names Marcus Carlyle or Henry and Barbara Simpson.

She even thought she could live with it. Wouldn't her parents be less traumatized if she just stopped? Put this all aside. Buried it, forgot it.

And there were other archaeologists who could competently head the Antietam Project. Others who hadn't known Dolan or Bill and wouldn't be reminded of them every time they looked at the sun-spangled water of the pond.

If she walked away, she could start to pick up her life again—the part of it that had been on hold for a year. There was no point in denying that now, at least to herself. Part of her had just stopped when Jake had walked away.

If they had a second chance, shouldn't they take it? Away from here. Away where they could finally start learning each other—those layers again. Layers they'd simply bored through the first time around without taking the time to study or analyze in their rush to simply have each other.

What the hell was her responsibility anyway—here, or to somewhere she'd been for barely two months of her life? Why should she risk herself, her happiness, maybe even the lives of others just to know all the facts about something that could never be changed?

Deliberately, she turned away from the remains she'd so carefully excavated. She boosted herself out of her section, wiped at the soil that clung to her pants.

“Take five.” Jake put a hand on her arm, tugged her away from the boundary of her section. He'd been watching her for several minutes, measuring the weariness and the despair that had played over her face.

“I'm done. I'm just done.”

“You need to take a minute. Get out of the sun. Better yet, take an hour in the trailer and get some sleep.”

“Don't tell me what I need. I don't care about her.” She gestured toward the remains behind her. “If I don't care, I don't belong here.”

“Callie, you're tired. Physically, emotionally. You're pissed off, and now you're beating yourself up because there's nobody else to kick.”

“I'm resigning from the project. I'm going back to Philadelphia. There's nothing here for me, and I've got nothing to give anyone here.”

“I'm here.”

“Don’t put that on the line again.” She hated hearing her own voice shake. “I’m not up to it.”

“I’m asking you to take a couple days. Take a break. Do paperwork, head to the lab, whatever works best for you. Then, after you’ve cleared your head a little, if you want off, we’ll talk to Leo, help him find replacements for us.”

“Us?”

“You go, I go.”

“Jesus, Jake. I don’t know if I’m up to that either.”

“I’m up to it. This time you’re going to lean on me if I have to kick your feet out from under you.”

“I want to go back home.” There were tears in her throat, tears behind her eyes. She had a moment’s panic she wouldn’t be able to stop them. “I want to feel normal.”

“Okay.” He drew her against him, then shook his head quickly as Rosie started toward them. “We’ll take a few days. Let me get in touch with Leo.”

“Tell him . . . Christ, I don’t know what to tell him.” She drew back, tried to steady herself. And saw Suzanne pull to the side of the road. “Oh God. That’s perfect. That’s just perfect.”

“Go on to the trailer. I’ll get rid of her.”

“No.” She swiped a hand over her cheeks to make sure they were dry. “If I’m taking off, the least I can do is tell her myself. But it wouldn’t hurt my feelings if you stuck around.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been stuck for some time.”

“Callie.” Suzanne actually seemed happy as she came through the gate. “Jake. I was just thinking how much fun all of this looks. That never occurred to me before, but it must be fun.”

Callie rubbed her grubby hands on her work pants. “It can be.”

“Especially on a day like this. Gorgeous day, so fresh and clear. I thought Jay would beat me here, but I see he’s running late.”

“I’m sorry. We were supposed to meet for something today?”

“No. We just wanted to . . . Well, I won’t wait for him. Happy birthday.” She held out a gift bag.

“Thanks, but it’s not my birthday until . . .” Realization came with a quick jolt that had her staring at the pretty little bag with its shiny blue stars. Jessica’s birthday.

“I realized you might not think of it.” Suzanne took Callie’s hand, slid the strap of the bag over her fingers. “But I’ve waited a long time to wish you happy birthday in person.”

She saw no sorrow or regret on Suzanne’s face. Only a joy that left her unable to turn away. “Well.” She stared down at the bag again. “I don’t know how to feel about this. It’s a little annoying to be another year older to begin with, the last one I’ve got before the big three-oh. And now I have to do it earlier than I expected.”

“Wait until you hit fifty. It’s a killer. I made you a cake.” She waved a hand back toward her car. “It might help it go down easier.”

“You made me a cake,” Callie murmured.

“I did. And I don’t mind telling you that not everyone gets a cake baked in Suzanne’s actual kitchen by Suzanne’s actual hands these days. There’s Jay now. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll have him get the cake out of the car for me. Be right back.”

Callie stood, the shiny bag dangling from her fingers. “How is she doing this? Jesus, Jake, she was bubbling. How is she making it a celebration?”

“You know why, Callie.”

“Because my life matters to her. It never stopped mattering.” She looked down at the gift bag, then back toward the bones of a long-dead woman. “She’s not going to let me walk away.”

“Babe.” He leaned down to kiss her. “You were never going to let yourself walk away. Let’s go have some cake.”

The team descended on the cake like locusts on wheat. Maybe, Callie thought as she heard the laughter, it was just what they'd all needed to push away the guilt and depression over Bill's death. Some careless greed, a half hour of simple human pleasure.

She sat in the shade at the edge of the woods and took the wrapped package Jay offered her. "Suzanne will tell you picking out gifts isn't my strong point."

"Car mats. For our fourth anniversary."

He winced. "And I've never lived it down."

Amused, Callie finished ripping off the wrapping. They seemed so easy together, like different people than they'd been the day she'd seen them in Lana's office.

"Well, this beats car mats." She ran her hand over the cover of a coffee-table book on Pompeii. "It's great. Thanks."

"If you don't like it, you can—"

"I do like it." It wasn't so hard to lean over, touch her lips to his cheek. Harder, much harder, was to watch him struggle to control his stunned gratitude for one small gesture.

"Good." He reached out, a little blindly, and closed his hand over Suzanne's. "Um. That's good, but I'm used to having my gifts returned."

Suzanne let out an exaggerated huff. "Didn't I keep that ugly music box with the ceramic cardinal you gave me for Valentine's Day? It plays 'Feelings,'" she told Callie.

"Wow, you really do suck at this. I lucked out." She picked up the gift bag, riffled through the matching tissue paper for the jewelry box.

"They were my grandmother's." Suzanne kept her fingers twined with Jay's as Callie drew out the single strand of pearls. "She gave them to my mother on her wedding day, and my mother gave them to me on mine. I hope you don't mind, but I wanted you to have them. Even though you never knew them, I thought it was a link you might appreciate."

"They're beautiful. I do appreciate it." Callie looked back toward the square in the ground where ancient bones

lay waiting. Jake was right, she thought. She'd never be able to walk away.

She put the pearls gently back in the box. "One day you'll tell me about them. And that's how I'll know them."

Twenty-three

Sane and enjoyable outdoor activities, as far as Lana was concerned, included shady summer picnics, sipping margaritas at the beach, a nice morning of gardening and perhaps a weekend of skiing—with the emphasis on the *après*.

She'd never envisioned herself camped out in a field, eating a charred hot dog as she updated a client. But nothing about her attorney-client relationship with Callie had been usual.

"Want a beer to go with that?" Comfortable, Callie flipped the lid on a cooler.

"She doesn't drink beer." Doug crooked a finger at the cooler. "But I do."

"Well, we're all out of pinot noir at the moment." Callie tossed Doug a can of Coors. "This is getting to be real cozy. Like we're double-dating."

"When we all go to the car to fool around, I call the backseat." Jake dipped a hand into an open bag of chips.

"I'll make sure to note the time when that activity begins." Shifting to try to find a soft spot on the ground,

Lana swatted at a mosquito. "It wouldn't be ethical to bill you for it. Meanwhile . . ."

She scooped her hair out of the way, then pulled a file out of her bag. "I've verified the death certificate, and spoke personally with Carlyle's physician. As he received permission from next of kin, he was willing to give me some of the details of Carlyle's medical condition. His cancer was diagnosed eight years ago, and treated. Recently, it recurred. The chemo cycle began last April, and in July Carlyle was hospitalized as his condition worsened. He was terminal, and was released to hospice care in early August."

She set the file down, looked at Callie. "I can extrapolate from this that Carlyle was in no shape to travel, and there's no evidence he left his home on Grand Cayman. He may have been able to communicate to some extent by phone, but even that would've been limited. He was a very sick man."

"And now he's a very dead one," Callie stated.

"It's possible we can put together enough evidence to take to court and persuade a judge to subpoena his records. There are probably records, Callie, and it may help you to see them. But it would take time, and I can't guarantee I can make it happen with what we have so far."

"Then we'll have to get more. We found the connection between Barbara Halloway and Suzanne, to Simpson, to my parents. And those connect to Carlyle. There'll be others."

"How important is it to you?" Doug lifted a hand, let it fall. "You know what happened. You may not be able to prove it, but you know. Carlyle's dead, so how important is it?"

Callie reached in the cooler again and took out a small package wrapped in aluminum foil. She opened it, offered it. "She baked me a birthday cake."

Doug stared at the pink rosebud on white frosting, then made himself reach out and break off a corner. "Okay."

"I can't love her the way you do. Or him," she said, thinking of Jay. "But they matter to me."

“People worked for Carlyle,” Jake put in. “In his offices, in his network. He had a wife during the time Callie was taken. Two wives since. And he very likely had other intimate relationships. No matter how careful a man is, he talks to someone. To find out who, and what, you need to get a clear picture of the man. Who was Marcus Carlyle? What drove him?”

“We have some of that from the investigator’s report.” Lana flipped through the file. “The name of his secretary in his Boston and Seattle offices. She’s no longer in that area. We believe she remarried and moved to North Carolina, but he hasn’t been able to locate her as yet. There was a law clerk, whom he has spoken with. There’s no indication he was involved. I have reports on a few other employees, and again, there’s no indication that any of them continued contact with him after he closed down in Boston.”

“What about associates? Other lawyers, other clients, neighbors?”

“He’s had interviews and conversations with some.” Lana lifted her hands. “But we’re talking about over a twenty-year gap. Some of these people are dead, or have moved, or simply haven’t been located yet. Realistically, if you want to spread out this way, it’s going to take a team of investigators, and a great deal of time and money.”

“I can go to Boston.” Doug broke off another corner of the cake. “And wherever.” He shrugged when Callie just looked at him. “Traveling’s what I do. And when you’re hunting up books, determining whether they are what they’re advertised to be, you talk to a lot of people, do a lot of research. So I’ll take a trip, ask some questions. Do me a favor?” he said to Jake.

“Name it.”

“Look after my woman and her kid while I’m gone?”

“Happy to.”

“Just a minute.” Flustered, Lana shut the file. “Jake has enough to do without worrying about me, and I’m not sure how I feel about being referred to as ‘your woman.’”

“You started it. She’s the one who asked me out.”

“To dinner. For God’s sake.”

“Then she just kept reeling me in.” Doug bit into a hot dog, talked around it. “Now she’s hooked me, she doesn’t know what to do about it.”

“Reeling you in.” Speechless, Lana picked up Callie’s beer and drank.

“Anyway, I’d feel better knowing you’re looking out for her and Ty while I’m gone. When I get back,” he added, “maybe you’ll have figured out what to do with me.”

“Oh, I’m getting some pretty good ideas right now.”

“Kind of cute, aren’t they?” Callie swooped a finger through icing, licked it off. “You lovebirds are really perking me up.”

“Then I’m really sorry I can’t stay until you’re rolling with laughter and cheer, but I need to get home to Ty. The updates are in the file. If you have any questions, call.”

“I’ll follow you home.” Doug rose, then offered a hand to help Lana to her feet.

As if surprised to find it in her hand, Lana handed the beer back to Callie. “How long will the two of you be here tonight?”

“Matt and Digger relieve us at two.”

Lana looked toward the mounds of dirt, the holes and trenches, the pond, the trees. “I can’t say I’d enjoy spending the best part of the night out here. Whatever the circumstances.”

“I can’t say I’d enjoy spending the best part of the day in Saks. Whatever the circumstances.” Callie lifted her beer. “We all have our little phobias.”

Doug waited while Lana settled Tyler in for the night. He spent the time studying the photographs she had scattered over her bookshelves. Particularly one of Lana leaning back against a fair-haired man with his arms snug around her waist.

Steven Campbell, he thought. They looked good together. Relaxed, easy, happy.

The kid had his father’s eyes, Doug decided, and slid

his hands into his pockets to stop himself from picking the photograph up. And the way he was grinning, the way he rested his chin on the top of Lana's head transmitted fun and affection, and intimacy.

"He was a terrific guy," Lana said quietly. She walked to the shelf, took down the picture. "His brother took this. We were visiting his family and had just announced that I was pregnant. It was one of the most perfect moments of my life."

She set the picture down gently.

"I was just thinking how good you look together. And that Ty's got a little of both of you. Your mouth, his eyes."

"Steve's charm, my temper. He made so many plans when Ty was born. Ball games and bicycles. Steve loved being a father, and was so much more immediately tuned to parenthood than I was. Sometimes, I think, because he was only going to be given such a short time to be one, he was somehow able to pack years into those short months with Ty."

"He loved you both. You can see it right here, in the way he's holding you both."

"Yes." She turned away, surprised and shaken that Doug could see and understand that from a snapshot.

"I'm not looking to take his place with you, Lana. Or with Ty. I know a lot about how impossible it is to step into a hole that's been left behind. When I was a kid I thought I could, even that I should. Instead, all I could do was watch my parents break apart, and that hole grow deeper and wider. I had a lot of anger because of that, anger I didn't even recognize. So I moved away from the source of the anger, geographically, emotionally. Stayed away for longer and longer periods."

"It must've been so hard for you."

"Harder now that she's back, because it makes me look at my whole life differently. I didn't stand by my parents, or anyone else for that matter."

"Doug, that's not true."

"It's absolutely true." It was important she knew that, he realized, understood that. And understood he was ready to

change. “I walked away from them because I couldn’t—wouldn’t live with a ghost. Because I figured I wasn’t important enough to keep them together—and I blamed them for it. I blamed them,” he admitted. “I walked away from every potential relationship since. I’ve never, as an adult, had a real home or tried to make one. I never wanted children because that meant responsibility and worry.”

He stepped to her now, took her hands. “I don’t want to take his place. But I want a chance to make a place with you, and with Ty.”

“Doug—”

“I’m going to ask you to give me that chance. I’m going to ask you to think about that while I’m gone.”

“I don’t know if I can let myself love someone like that again.” Her fingers gripped his, but they weren’t steady. “I don’t know if I have the courage.”

“I look at you, at this place, at that boy sleeping upstairs, and I don’t have any doubts about your courage.” He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. “Take some time and think about it. We’ll talk when I get back.”

“Stay here tonight.” She wrapped her arms around him and held on. “Stay tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m sure.”

Callie worked on her laptop until dark, then stretched out to stare up at the stars and plot out her next workday in her mind. She would complete the excavation of the woman’s skeleton, then supervise its transfer to the lab. She’d continue to work horizontally in that sector.

Leo was due in, so she would pass all film and reports on to him.

She and Jake needed to do another survey and update the plotting.

She’d have to take a look at the long-range weather forecast and prepare accordingly.

Right now it looked to continue warm and clear for the next few days. Perfect digging weather, with temps rarely

getting past the low eighties and the humidity returning to civilized levels.

She let herself drift, automatically tuning out the country music Jake had playing on low and concentrating on the night sounds. A quiet whoosh of a car on the road to the north of the field, the occasional plop of a frog or fish in the waters of the pond to the south.

The beagle from the farm just west was beginning to bay at the rising moon.

Lana didn't know what she was missing, Callie thought, enjoying the cool fingers of air tickling her cheeks. There was an utter peace here, in the night, in the open, that couldn't be found anywhere within walls.

She was stretched out on ground where others had slept. Year by century by era. And beneath her, the earth held more secrets than civilization would ever find.

But what they did find would always fascinate.

She could hear the faint scratch of Jake's pencil over paper. He'd sketch by the light of his Coleman lantern, she thought, sometimes late into the night. She often wondered why he hadn't pursued art rather than science. What had caused him to choose to study man instead of translating him onto canvas?

And why had she never asked?

She opened one eye, studying him in the lamplight.

He was relaxed, she thought. She could tell by the line of his jaw, his mouth. He'd taken off his hat, and that light breeze danced his hair back from his face as he sketched.

"Why didn't you make a living out of that? Out of, you know, art?"

"Not good enough."

She rolled over on her stomach. "Art wasn't good enough, or you weren't?"

"Both. Painting, if that's what you mean, didn't interest me enough to give it the time and study it required. Not to mention it wouldn't have been macho enough for me when I started college. Bad enough I never intended to work the family ranch, but then to work at becoming a painter? Jesus, my old man would've died of embarrassment."

“He wouldn’t have supported you?”

Jake glanced over, then flipped a page on his sketch pad and started another. “He wouldn’t have stopped me, or tried to. But he wouldn’t have understood it. I wouldn’t have either. Men in my family work the land, or with horses, with cattle. We don’t work in offices or the arts. I was the first in my family to earn a college degree.”

“I never knew that.”

He shrugged. “Just the way it is. I got interested in anthropology when I was a kid. To keep me out of trouble, my parents let me go to a couple of knap-ins in the summer. It was a big gift because they needed me on the ranch. And sending me to college because I wanted to go was a big sacrifice, even with the scholarships.”

“Are they proud of you?”

He was silent for a moment. “The last time I was home, I guess about five, six months ago, I just swung by. Didn’t let them know I was coming. My mother put an extra plate on the table. Well, two, one for Digger. My father came in, shook my hand. We ate, talked about the ranch, the family, what I’d been doing. I hadn’t seen them in nearly a year, but it was just like I’d been there the day before. No fatted calf, if you get me. But later on, I happened to glance at the shelf in the living room. There were two books on anthropology there, mixed in with my father’s *Louis L’Amours*. It meant a lot to me to see that, to know they’d been reading about what I do.”

She brushed a hand over his ankle. “That’s the nicest story you’ve ever told me about them.”

“Here.” He turned the pad over so she could see. “It’s rough, but it’s pretty close to what they look like.”

She saw a sketch of a woman with a long face, quiet eyes with lines dug at the corners, and a mouth just barely curved into a smile. Her hair was long, straight, streaked with gray. The man had strong cheekbones, a straight nose and a serious mouth. His eyes were deep-set and his face weathered as if from sun and time.

“You look like him.”

“Some.”

“If you sent this to them, they’d frame it and hang it on the wall.”

“Get out.”

She glanced up in time to catch the baffled embarrassment on his face, and in time to jerk the pad out of his reach. “Bet. A hundred bucks says if you send this to them, it’s framed and on the wall the next time you go home. You can mail it in the morning. Any water in the cooler?”

“Probably.” He scowled at her, then shifted to open it. He stayed turned away for so long, she kicked him in the ankle.

“Is there or not?”

“Yeah. Found some.” He turned back. “Somebody’s in the woods with a flashlight.” He spoke in the same casual tone as he handed her the water.

Her eyes stayed locked with his for a beat, then shifted over his shoulder. Even as her heart kicked in her chest, she unscrewed the cap on the bottle, lifted it for a drink as she watched the beam of light move through the silhouettes of trees.

“Could be kids, or your general species of assholes.”

“Could be. Why don’t you go in the trailer, call the sheriff?”

“Why?” Slowly, Callie capped the bottle again. “Because if I do, you’ll head out there without me. And if it turns out to be a couple of Bubbas in training hoping to spook the flatlanders, I’m the one who’ll look like the idiot. We’ll check it out first. Both of us.”

“The last time you went into the woods, you came out with a concussion.”

Like Jake, she continued to follow the progress of the beam of light. “And you dodged bullets. We keep sitting here like this, they could shoot us like ducks in a pond if that’s the goal.” She slid her hand into her pack, closed her fingers over the handle of a trowel. “We go to the trailer and make the call together, or we go into the woods and check it out together.”

He looked down at her hand. “I see which has your vote.”

“Dolan and Bill were both alone. If whoever’s out there is looking to repeat the performance, he’ll have to deal with two of us.”

“All right.” He reached down, pulled a knife out of his boot and had Callie’s eyes widening.

“Jesus Christ, Graystone, when did you start carrying?”

“Right after somebody shot at me. We stay together. Agreed?”

“Absolutely.”

He picked up a flashlight as they rose. “Got your cell phone on you?”

“Yeah, in my pocket.”

“Keep it handy. He’s moving east. Let’s give him something to think about.”

Jake switched on the light, aimed it at the oncoming beam. As that beam turned fast and wide to the west, both he and Callie rushed forward. They swung around the edge of the dig, toward the bank of the pond where the trees began their stand.

“He’s heading toward the road.” Instinctively Callie veered in the same direction. “We can cut him off.”

They plunged into the trees, following the bounce of the beam. She leaped over a fallen log, pumped her legs to match Jake’s longer stride.

Then cursed as he did as the beam they chased switched off.

He held up a hand to signal silence.

She closed her eyes, concentrated on sounds. And heard the fast slap of feet on ground. “He changed directions again.” She pointed.

“We’ll never catch him. He’s got too much of a lead.”

“So we just let him go?”

“We made our point.” Still, Jake shone his light back and forth. “Stupid for him to be out here with a light to begin with. A moron could figure one of us would spot it.”

Even as he said the words, the import of them struck both of them. “Oh shit,” was all Callie said as she spun on her heel and began to race back.

Seconds later, the first explosion split the air.

“The trailer.” Jake watched the tongue of flame shoot skyward. “Son of a bitch.”

Callie came out of the trees at a dead run, thinking only of reaching the fire extinguisher in her car. Her body hit the ground with an impact that jarred bones as Jake fell on top of her.

Even as she tried to lift her head, Jake shoved it down again, shielded it with his arms. “Propane!” he shouted.

And the world exploded.

Heat swooped over her, a burning hand that seared her skin and stole her breath. Through the ringing of her ears she heard something scream by and crash into the ground. Tiny points of flame showered down like rain.

Debris followed, spraying the air like shrapnel, thudding to the ground in twisted, flaming balls.

Her mind, gone numb, snapped back to alert when she felt Jake’s body jerk.

“Get off, get off, get off!” She bucked, rolled, shoved, and still he kept her trapped under him.

“Stay down. Just stay down.” His voice was raw and terrified her more than the explosion or the burning rain.

When he finally rolled away, she shoved up to her knees. Smoldering wreckage lay scattered around them, and what was left of the trailer burned madly. She leaped toward Jake as he tore off his smoking shirt.

“You’re bleeding. Let me see how bad. Are you burned? Jesus, are you burned?”

“Not much.” Though he wasn’t entirely sure of that. But the searing pain in his arm was from a gash, not from burns. “Better call nine-one-one.”

“You call.” She wrenched the phone out of her back pocket. Put it in his hand. “Where’s the flashlight? Where’s the fucking flashlight?”

But by the red light of the fire, she could see the wound in his arm would need medical attention. She crawled around him to study his back, running her trembling fingers over it.

Scratches, she told herself. Just some scratches and

some minor burns. "I'll get the first-aid kit out of the Rover."

She scrambled up, tore off in a run. Calm, she ordered herself as she yanked the door open. She had to be calm, stop the bleeding, give the wound a field dressing, get him to the ER.

She couldn't afford to go into shock, so she wouldn't.

But she remembered how he'd shielded her head with his arms. Her body with his body.

"Stupid, macho bastard." She swallowed a sob, grabbed a bottle of water and ran back.

He was sitting where she'd left him, the phone in his hand as he stared at the trailer.

"Did you call?"

"Yeah." He said nothing more as she dumped water on the gash.

"You're going to need stitches," she said briskly. "But we'll get a field dressing on this. You've got some burns, but they look first-degree. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No." He'd told her to go in the trailer, he remembered. He'd told her to go inside while he investigated the light in the woods.

"You didn't listen to me. So damn irritating."

"What?" Concerned, she wound the bandage and studied his eyes for signs of shock. "Are you cold? Jake, are you cold?"

"I'm not cold. Maybe a little shocky. You didn't go in the trailer like I told you to. If you had—"

"I didn't." She fought back a shudder. She could hear sirens now. "But you're going to the hospital like I'm telling you to." She tied off the bandage, sat back on her heels. "I didn't even think of the propane tanks on the trailer. Good thing you did."

"Yeah." He put his good arm around her, and they helped each other to their feet. "Looks like it's our lucky night." He let out a huge sigh. "Digger's going to be pissed."

He wouldn't go in the ambulance, wouldn't go anywhere until he knew the damage and how much could be salvaged. Any records and specimens that had been stored in the trailer until they could be transported were gone. Callie's laptop was a mangled mass of plastic and fried chips.

The computer left in the trailer for team use was toast. Hours of painstaking work destroyed in a heartbeat.

Debris was scattered over acres of field, over the carefully plotted areas. He saw a charred piece of aluminum speared into a spoil mound like a lance.

Firefighters, cops, emergency workers trampled over the site. It would take days, perhaps weeks to repair the damage, to calculate the loss. To start again.

He stood beside Callie listening to her relate, as he had already done, the events that led up to the explosion.

"Whoever was in the woods was a diversion." The anger was beginning to sharpen her voice now, replacing the shaky shock. "He drew us away so someone else could fire the trailer."

Hewitt studied the smoldering heap, measured the distance to the woods. "But you didn't see anybody?"

"No, we didn't see anybody. We were a hundred feet away, in the trees. We'd just started back when we heard the first explosion."

"The propane tanks."

"The first one. It sounded like a damn cannon, and then the hero here tackled me. Then the second one blew."

"You didn't see or hear a vehicle?"

"I heard my ears ringing," she snapped. "Somebody blew that first tank, and it wasn't some Neolithic ghost with a grudge."

"I'm not arguing that point, Dr. Dunbrook. Somebody blew up that trailer, and they had to get here, get away from here. Most likely they did that in a vehicle."

She let out a breath. "You're right. Sorry. No, I didn't hear anything after the explosion. Earlier, I heard cars go by, now and then, or caught the sound of one in the distance. But whoever was in the woods was heading back

toward the road. Probably had his ride parked close by.”

“I’m thinking so,” Hewitt agreed. “I don’t believe in curses, Dr. Dunbrook, but I believe in trouble. And that you’ve got.”

“It’s connected, to everything I told you about Carlyle, the Cullens. It’s just a way to scare me off this site, away from Woodsboro, away from the answers.”

His gaze stayed calm on her face. It was still smeared with soot and smoke. “Could be,” was all he said.

“Sheriff.” One of the deputies trotted up. “You better come see this.”

They followed Hewitt toward the pond, to the section where Callie had worked for more than eight hours that day. The remains she’d excavated were coated with soot and dirt now, but intact.

Lying with them in the ruler-straight square was a department-store mannequin dressed in olive drab chinos and shirt. The blond hair of the wig was stuffed messily under a cloth hat.

Around its neck hung a hand-lettered sign that read R.I.P.

Callie balled her hands into fists at her sides. “Those are my clothes. That’s my goddamn hat. The son of a bitch has been in the house. The son of a bitch has been through my things.”

Twenty-four

It wouldn't have been difficult to get into the house, Jake thought, yet again. He'd been through and around the house with the police the night before. And he'd been through and around it twice himself since dawn.

There were four doors, and any one of them could have been left unlocked inadvertently. There were twenty-eight windows, including those in his office, any one of which could have provided access.

The fact that the police had found no signs of forced entry meant nothing. Someone had been inside, selected Callie's clothes.

Someone had left them a very clear message.

She'd been on the verge of quitting. Studying the house, he stuck his hands in his pockets, rocked gently on his heels. He'd pushed her back from it. He was sure she'd have stepped back herself. He knew her too well to believe otherwise. But it didn't negate his part in the decision.

He had no doubt that whoever had blown up the tanks would have done so even if Callie had been in the trailer. In fact, whoever had done it might be a little disappointed she hadn't been.

Carlyle was dead. The Simpsons? He considered them. Both were fit, fit enough, he imagined, for one of them to have taken a quick sprint through the woods while the other dumped the effigy in the trench, then set a small charge on the tank.

How long had he and Callie been in the woods? Four minutes? Five? Plenty of time.

But his gut told him Barb and Hank were as far away from Callie and Woodsboro as they could manage.

They'd known just when to run, he remembered. And he had a feeling he knew how.

He walked toward the driveway as Doug pulled up.

"Where is she?" Doug demanded.

"Asleep. She finally went out about an hour ago. Appreciate you getting here so fast."

"She's not hurt?"

"No. Couple of bruises from when she hit the dirt, that's all."

After one long breath, Doug looked at Jake's bandaged arm. "How bad's that?"

"Some shrapnel grazed me. They sewed me up. Worst of the damage is to the site. We're waiting for them to clear us to start cleaning it up. But we lost everything that was in the trailer, and anything Callie had on her laptop that wasn't already backed up here. Then there was what they left for us."

He told Doug about the effigy of Callie, left in the ancient grave.

"Can you get her away from here?"

"Oh yeah, absolutely. If I sedate her, then chain her in a room somewhere. Got any manacles I can borrow?"

"Mine are in the shop for repair."

"Ain't that always the way?"

They stood in silence for a moment. "She's dug in here now," Jake said at length. "And I manned one of the shovels. She won't budge until she finds what she's after. If you're still going to Boston, you're going to want to watch your back."

"I'm going. But when I'm gone, I'm not here to look out for my family, or for Lana and Ty. I can ask my father

and my grandfather to move in with my mother for a few days. It'll be weird, but they'll do it. But Lana's alone out there."

"How would she feel about a houseguest? Digger could bunk there."

"Digger?"

A smile, tight and humorless, spread. "Yeah, I know, he looks like a twelve-year-old girl could whip his ass. Don't let that fool you. I've known him fifteen years. If I needed somebody to look out for my family, that's who I'd ask. Your main problem will be your lady might fall in love with him. I don't know why, but a lot of them do."

"That's reassuring. It has to still be going on, doesn't it?" Doug looked away from the house. "That's what none of us have said so far. But if someone's desperate enough to kill, it has to, somehow, still be going on. If we don't find the answers, it's never going to stop."

"I keep thinking we've missed something. Some detail. So we go back and sieve the spoil."

"While you do that, I'll go down another level in Boston." He opened the car door again. "Tell Callie . . . tell my sister," he corrected, "I'll find something."

She was still sleeping when he went up to her bedroom. Curled up tight on top of the sleeping bag, a travel pillow jammed under her head.

She looked too pale to suit him, and she'd started to drop weight.

He was going to take her away from there, he decided. Anywhere for a day or so, the first chance they had. They'd hole up somewhere and do nothing but eat, sleep and make love until she was steady again.

And when she was steady again, they were going to have a life together. Not just fireworks, but a life.

In lieu of a blanket, he draped a towel over her. Giving in to his own exhaustion, Jake lay down beside her, drew her back against him. Then he dropped off the edge of fatigue into sleep.

He woke on a blast of pain when he rolled over on his bad arm. Cursing, hissing his breath between his teeth, he tried to shift into comfort. And saw Callie was gone.

Panic was an instant ice ball that formed in his belly. Pain forgotten, he sprang up and bolted from the room. The silence of the house added another tier to the panic and had him shouting her name before he was halfway down the stairs.

When she rushed out of his office, he didn't know whether to laugh at the annoyance on her face or fall to his knees and kiss her feet.

"What are you yelling about?"

"Where the hell were you? Where the hell is everybody?"

"You need a pill." She stomped into the kitchen to dig out the pain medication. "I was in your office. My computer was fried, remember? I'm working on yours. Take the pill."

"I don't want a pill."

"Don't be a big, stupid baby." She ran a glass of water. "Take the antibiotic, too, like the nice doctor told you to do when he gave you the lollipop."

"Somebody's going to get a pop." He fisted a hand, tapped it against her chin. "Where's the team?"

"Spread out. On-site, waiting to let us know when the cops clear it. At the college, using some of the equipment, in Baltimore at the lab. No point in everybody lazing around today just because you decide it's nappy time."

"Nobody's here but you and me?"

"That's right, which doesn't mean it's time for sexcapes either. Take your meds like a good boy."

"How long has everybody been gone?"

"About an hour."

"Then let's get started." He ignored the pills she held out and headed out of the room.

"With what?"

"We're going to look through their things."

Callie's fingers curled around the pills. "We are not."

"Then I'm going to, but that'll take twice as long." He

hefted the backpack in a corner of the living room, dumped it on the table and unzipped it.

“We’ve got no right to do this, Jake.”

“Nobody had a right to blow up Digger’s trailer in our faces. Let’s make sure whoever did isn’t right in our faces, too.”

“That’s not enough to—”

“Question.” He stopped what he was doing long enough to look at her. “Who knew we were heading to Virginia the other day?”

She lifted her shoulders. “You and me, Lana and Doug.”

“And everybody who was in the kitchen when we were talking about schedules. Everybody who heard you say you had some personal business in Virginia.”

She sat down, hard. “Jesus.”

“Busybody across the street said they were loading up about ten. We were getting up from the table right around nine. It only took a phone call, telling them you were coming and to get the hell out.”

“Okay, okay, the timing works but . . . What the hell do you think you’re going to find?”

“I won’t know till I look.” He started a systematic pile, setting aside notebooks, pens, pencils, a handheld video game before he looked up at Callie again. “Are you going to help, or just watch?”

“Damn it.” She knelt down with him. “Take the pills.”

He grumbled about it, but he swallowed them.

Shaking her head, she picked up one of West Virginia Chuck’s notebooks, flipped through. Then she frowned, and did the same with the second.

“These are empty. Jake, there’s nothing in them. No notes, no sketches, no nothing.” She turned them around, flipped them again. “Blank pages.”

“Did he have any on him when he left?”

“I don’t know. He could have.”

No longer reluctant, she searched through the clothes, into pockets. When all the contents of the backpack were on the table, Callie got up and retrieved a notebook of her own and listed them.

Once the items were catalogued and replaced, they started the same procedure on Frannie's.

They found another notebook wrapped in a T-shirt and buried in the bottom of the pack.

"It's a diary." Callie sat cross-legged now and began to read. "Starts on the first day they joined the dig. Blah, blah, blah, just general excitement over the project. Huh, she thinks you're really hot."

"Yeah?"

"If things don't work out with her and Chuck, she could really go for you."

She scanned words, flipped pages. "Rosie's nice. Patient. Doesn't worry about her trying to put the moves on Chuck. But she wasn't so sure about Dory. Snooty and superior. Sonya's friendly, but kind of boring."

She paused, scowled. "I am not scary and bossy."

"Yeah, you are. What else does she say about me?"

"Jeez, she and Chuck had a quickie in Dig's trailer when we were on lunch break. She thinks Matt's dreamy, for an older guy, but probably gay because he never flirts with any of the women. Bob's got a dumpy ass and sweats too much. Bill..."

She had to pause, gather herself. "She thinks Bill's smart, but too much of a geek. A lot of daily minutiae. We had Eg-gos for breakfast. It rained. What she found that day, if she didn't find anything. Descriptions of sexual encounters."

"Maybe you should read those aloud."

"Observations," she continued, ignoring him. "Annoyances—like how come she can't talk to some of the reporters who've wanted interviews. Bitchiness. She's taken a dislike to Dory because Dory talks down to her. And... then there's a rundown of what happened to Bill. Nothing new. Nothing new," she repeated and closed it.

"It's just a college girl's journal. Harmless."

Still, she jumped when the phone rang.

"We're cleared," she said to Jake when she hung up. "We need to get out to the site."

"Okay." He began repacking Frannie's gear. "But we're going to go through the others first chance we get."

It only took Doug a day and a half to track down what he considered a reasonable lead. His advantage over the professional investigator, he concluded, was that he was no longer looking for Marcus Carlyle. All he wanted was any connection to the man, however peripheral, that might lead to another, and another, like a circle narrowing.

He found that old, thin link in Maureen O'Brian, who had worked at the country club where both Carlyle and his first wife had been members.

"Goodness, I haven't seen Mrs. Carlyle for twenty-five years," Maureen replied as she stepped outside the salon and dug into the pocket of her smock for a pack of Virginia Slims. "How in the world did you think to find me?"

"I asked questions. Mrs. Carnegie at the salon at the country club gave me your name."

"Old dragon." Maureen drew on the cigarette, blew out smoke. "Fired me, you know, because I missed so much work when I was pregnant with my third. That would be, oh, about sixteen years ago. Dried-up old bitch, if you'll forgive me saying so."

Since Carnegie had described Maureen as a flighty, irresponsible gossip, Doug didn't mind a bit. "She told me you'd been Mrs. Carlyle's regular manicurist."

"I was. I did her nails every week, Monday afternoons, for three years. She liked me, and tipped well. She was a fine woman."

"Did you know her husband?"

"Of him, certainly. And I saw him once when I went to their house to do her nails before a big gala they were going to. Very handsome man, and one who knew it. He wasn't good enough for her, if you ask me."

"Why do you say that?"

Her mouth went prim. "A man who can't be faithful to his wedding vows is never good enough for the woman he made them to."

"Did she know he cheated on her?"

"A woman always knows—whether she admits it or not."

And there was plenty of talk around the salon, and the club. His side piece, she'd come in now and then herself."

"You knew her?"

"One of them anyway. Word was there were more. This one was married herself, and was a doctor of all things. Dr. Roseanne Yardley. Lived up in Nob Hill in a big, fancy house. My friend Colleen did her hair." She smirked. "The doctor was not a natural blonde."

Natural or not, she was still blonde when Doug found her finishing her rounds at Boston General. He supposed she was what people called a handsome woman. Tall, stately, that sweep of blond hair perfectly coiffed around a strong, square face, Roseanne had a clipped, Bostonian voice that made it clear she took no time for nonsense.

"Yes, I knew Marcus and Lorraine Carlyle. We belonged to the same club, moved in the same social circle. I really don't have time to discuss old acquaintances."

"My information is that you and Marcus were more than acquaintances."

Her eyes were a cool blue that went frigid in a finger snap. "What possible business is that of yours?"

"If you could give me a few minutes in private, Dr. Yardley, I'll explain how it's my business."

She didn't speak, but after a hard look at her watch, clipped down the hall. She strode into a small office, moved directly to the desk and sat behind it. "What do you want?"

"I have evidence that Marcus Carlyle headed an organization that profited from fraudulent adoptions by kidnapping infants and selling them to childless couples."

She didn't even blink. "That's perfectly ridiculous."

"And that he used and employed members of the medical profession in his organization."

"Mr. Cullen, if you think you can accuse me of participating in some fictitious black-market ring, frighten me enough to be extorted or blackmailed, you couldn't be more mistaken."

Doug imagined her simply flattening him, or any irritating underling, with a single blow. "I don't want money. And I don't know whether you were involved or not. But I do know you had an affair with Marcus Carlyle, that you're a doctor, that you might have information that will help me."

"I'm quite certain I have no information whatsoever. Now, I'm very busy."

Doug didn't budge, even when she pushed to her feet. "My sister was stolen when she was three months old and days later sold to a couple out of Carlyle's Boston office. I have proof of that. I have evidence linking another Boston doctor to that event. That evidence and information have been passed to the police. They'll work their way around to you eventually, Dr. Yardley. But my family is looking for answers now."

Very slowly, she sat again. "What doctor?"

"Henry Simpson. He and his current wife left their home in Virginia abruptly, very abruptly, after this investigation began. His current wife was one of the OB nurses on duty the night my sister was born, in Maryland."

"I don't believe any of this," she retorted.

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't. But I want to know about your relationship with Carlyle. If you don't talk to me here, I'm going to have no problem making what information I have so far public."

"That's a threat."

"That's a threat," Doug agreed easily.

"I won't have my reputation impinged."

"If you had no part in illegal activities, you don't have anything to worry about. I need to know who Marcus Carlyle was, who he associated with. You had an affair with him."

Roseanne picked up a silver pen, tapped it gently on the edge of the desk. "My husband is aware of my relationship with Marcus. Blackmail won't work."

"I'm not interested in blackmail," he repeated.

"I made a mistake thirty years ago. I won't pay for it now."

Doug reached in his briefcase, took out a copy of Callie's original birth certificate, a photograph of her taken days before she was stolen. He set these on Roseanne's desk, then took out the forged adoption papers and the photograph the Dunbrooks had provided.

"Her name's Callie Dunbrook now. She deserves to know how it happened. My family deserves to know."

"If this is true, if any portion of this is true, I don't see how my regrettable affair with Marcus has anything to do with it."

"Accumulating data. How long were you involved?"

"Nearly a year." Roseanne sighed and sat back. "He was twenty-five years older than me, and quite fascinating. He was charismatic, commanding, attractive and attentive. I thought we were very sophisticated and modern to have an affair that seemed to satisfy us both and hurt no one."

"Did you ever discuss your work, your patients?"

"I'm sure I did. I'm in pediatrics. A major part of Marcus's practice was adoption. We were both dedicated to children. It was one of the things that brought us together. I certainly don't remember him ever trying to draw specific information from me, and none of my patients was kidnapped. I would have known."

"But some were adopted."

"Of course. That's hardly surprising."

"Were any of the parents who brought newly adopted infants to you for care sent by his recommendation?"

Now she blinked. "Yes, I imagine. I'm sure there were a few. We were, as I said, acquaintances, then intimate. It would be only natural—"

"Tell me about him. If he was charismatic, compelling and attractive, why did the affair end?"

"He was also cold and calculating." She fingered the photos and papers on her desk. "A very calculating man, and one with no sense of fidelity. You may find that odd as we were having an extramarital affair, but I expected him to be faithful while we were. And he wasn't. His wife certainly knew about me, and if she had any trouble with that she put on an excellent public front. Word was she was

slavishly devoted to him and their son, and turned a blind eye on his other women.”

Her lips twisted, making it clear what she thought of such a woman. “I, however, preferred clear vision. When I discovered he was having another affair while we were involved, I confronted him. We argued, bitterly, and broke it off. I could tolerate quite a bit, but learning he was cheating on me with his secretary was just a bit too much of a cliché.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

“Young. I was nearly thirty when Marcus and I became involved. She was barely more than twenty. She dressed in bold colors and spoke in a quiet voice—a contrast I mistrusted as a woman. And once I knew about her, I remembered how she’d so often greeted me with a little smirk. I have no doubt she knew about me long before I knew about her. I heard she was one of the few from his practice here Marcus took with him when he went to Seattle.”

“Do you know anything about Carlyle or her since?”

“His name comes up from time to time. I heard he divorced Lorraine, and was surprised when he remarried it wasn’t the secretary. I believe someone told me she married an accountant, had a child.”

She tapped the pen again. “You’ve intrigued me, Mr. Cullen. Enough that I may ask a few questions in a few quarters myself. I don’t like being used. If it turns out Marcus used me in this way, I want to know about it.”

“He’s dead.”

Her mouth opened, then closed again with her lips a long firm line. “When?”

“About two weeks ago. Cancer. He was living in the Caymans with wife number three. I can’t get answers from him directly. His son is reluctant to take our evidence seriously.”

“Yes, I know Richard slightly. He and Marcus were estranged, I believe. Richard was, and is, very devoted to his mother and his family. Have you spoken with Lorraine?”

“Not yet.”

“I imagine Richard will slap you legally, in whatever way possible, if you try. She doesn’t get out socially as much as she did. From what I’ve heard she’s quite frail. Then she was always frail. Will you be in Boston long?”

“I can be—or I can be reached wherever I am.”

“I’d like to satisfy myself about this. Leave me a number where you can be reached.”

Doug settled into his hotel room, searched a beer out of the minibar and called Lana.

The man’s voice that answered simply said, “Yo!”

“Ah . . . I’m trying to reach Lana Campbell.”

“Hey, me too. Is this Doug?”

“Yeah, it’s Doug. What do you mean? Where is she?”

“Keeping at arm’s length so far, but I’m hopeful. Hey, sexy lady, phone’s for you.”

There was some noise, some giggling—which he identified as Ty—then a very warm female laugh. “Hello?”

“Who was that?”

“Doug? I was hoping you’d call.”

Something that sounded like an ape, followed by hysterical childish laughter drowned out her voice. He could hear movement, then the background noise dimmed.

“God, it’s a madhouse in there. Digger’s cooking. Are you in the hotel?”

“Yeah, just. Sounds like quite a party.”

“It was your idea to install Digger in my house without asking me, I’ll point out. Lucky for you, he’s a very reassuring, not to mention entertaining, presence. He’s wonderful with Ty. Thus far, though it’s a struggle, I’ve been able to resist my lust for him. Though he warns me it’s a losing battle.”

Doug dropped down on the bed, scratched his head. “I’ve never been jealous before. It’s lowering to have my first experience with it over a guy who looks like a garden gnome.”

“If you could smell the spaghetti sauce he’s got simmering, you’d be insane with jealousy.”

“The bastard.”

She laughed, then lowered her voice. “When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know. I’ve talked to some people today, hope to talk to more tomorrow. I might fly out to Seattle before I come back. I’m just playing it by ear. Does that mean you miss me?”

“I guess I do. I’ve gotten used to you being here, or a few miles away. I never thought I’d get used to that sort of thing again. I suppose I should ask you what you’ve found out.”

He stretched out on the bed, basking a little in the idea that she missed him. “Enough to know Carlyle liked women, and more than one at a time. I’ve got a gut feeling the secretary is a key link. I’m going to try to focus in on finding her. I meant to ask, am I supposed to bring you back a present from Boston?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, I’ve got something in mind. Any news I should know about?”

“They spent hours cleaning up the site. I know the team’s discouraged, and shaken. I think there are some serious concerns the funding might be cut off—at least temporarily. If the police have any leads, they aren’t sharing.”

“Take care of yourself, and Ty-Rex.”

“You can count on that. Come home soon, Doug. Come home safe.”

“You can count on that.”

At three A.M., the phone beside the bed rang, and shot his heart straight into his throat. It was pounding there as he grabbed for the receiver.

“Hello.”

“You have a lot to lose and nothing to gain. Go home, while you still have one.”

“Who is this?” He knew it was useless to ask. Frustratingly useless as the line went dead.

He set the phone down, lay back in the dark.

Someone knew he was in Boston, and didn't like the idea.

That meant there was still something, or someone, in Boston to find.

Twenty-five

It wasn't just the long hours, or the fact that her work was both physically and mentally demanding. Callie had worked longer hours, and under much more arduous conditions.

Here, the weather was sliding gracefully from summer toward fall, offering warm days and cool nights. But for a few scattered hints of yellow on the poplars, the leaves were still lush and green. The sky remained bold and blue.

Under other circumstances, any other circumstances, working conditions would have been ideal.

Callie would have traded those balmy September days for baking heat or torrential rains, for clouds of biting insects and threats of sunstroke.

Because her thoughts leaned that way, she knew she came home exhausted every evening not because of the work itself. It was her scattered focus, the fractured concentration.

She had only to look over at the charred ground where Digger's trailer had been to relive it all.

Intellectually, she knew her reaction was exactly what they wanted. But the core of the problem was not knowing

who *they* were. If an enemy had a face, she thought—she hoped—she could and would fight it. But there was no one to fight, and no place for her to gather and channel her anger.

It was the sense of uselessness, she knew, that brought on the dragging fatigue.

How many times could she study the dateline she and Jake had put together? How often could she reconfigure the connections, scrape at the layers of people and years and events?

At least Doug was doing something tangible by talking to people in Boston. Yet if she'd gone in his stead, given herself the satisfaction of action, she'd have let the team down when they needed her most.

She had to be here, going through the routine, hour by hour and day by day. The facade of normality was essential, or the project would erode like her own morale.

She knew the team looked to her to set the tone. Just as she knew they were talking about details of her personal life. She'd noted the glances shot her way, the whispered conversations that stopped abruptly when she walked into a room.

She couldn't blame them. Hot news was hot news. And the gossip tangled on the grapevine sizzled that Dr. Callie Dunbrook was the long-lost Jessica Cullen.

She'd refused to give interviews or answer questions. It was one thing to want to dig down to the truth, and another to lay herself bare for the media and the curious.

But the curious came anyway. She was well aware that as many people stopped by the dig to see her as to see the project itself.

Though she'd never been one to shy away from the spotlight, it was an entirely different matter when that light glared on you, and not on your life's work.

She was irritable, jumpy and distracted. All three moods collided when the door to the bathroom opened while she was sulking in the shower.

She grabbed the handheld showerhead off its hook, gripped it like a weapon while the sharp violin notes from *Psycho* squealed in her head.

She curled her fingers at the edge of the shower curtain, prepared to whip it back.

"It's Rosie."

"Goddamnit to hell and back." Callie thunked the showerhead back in place. "I'm naked in here."

"I certainly hope so. I'd be more worried about you if you'd started taking showers with your clothes on. Bathroom's about the only place I figure we can talk in private."

Callie tugged the curtain back an inch. Through the steam, she watched Rosie drop the lid on the toilet and sit.

"If I'm in the john, it's because *I* want privacy."

"Exactly. So." Rosie crossed her legs. "You need to snap out of it, pal of mine."

"Snap out of what?" Callie yanked the curtain back into place, dunked her head under the spray. "Seems to me there ought to be a little more respect around here. People bopping into the bathroom while other people are wet and naked."

"The bags under your eyes are big enough to hold a week's worth of groceries. You've lost weight. And your temper, never sterling to begin with, is getting ugly. You can't go threatening to hack off a reporter's tongue with a trowel. It's bad PR."

"I was working. I told him no comment on the personal stuff. I even offered to take time to talk to him about the project. But he wouldn't back off."

"Sweetie, I know this is tough going for you. You need to let me, Leo, Jake, even Digger do the front work with the media for the time being."

"I don't need a shield, Rosie."

"Yes, you do. From now on, I'm taking media control. If you try to argue with me about it, you and I are going to have our first real fight. We've known each other about six years now, by my count. I'd hate to spoil that record. But I will take you down, Callie, if you force me to."

Callie inched the curtain open again, glared out. "Easy to say when I'm wet and naked."

"Get dry and dressed. I'll wait."

"Do I look that bad?"

“It’s started to wear more than the edges. The fact is, I haven’t seen you look this beaten up since you and Jake imploded.”

“I can’t get away from it.” Couldn’t get away from Jake either, she remembered. From talk of him, memories of him, thoughts of him. “At the dig, in town, here. It all crawls over me like ants.”

“People talk. That’s part of the problem with the species. We just can’t shut up.” She waited as Callie turned the water off, then rose to get a towel for her. “The team doesn’t mean to put more pressure on you. But we wouldn’t do what we do if we weren’t curious by nature. We want to know. It’s why we dig.”

“I’m not blaming them.” She stepped out, took the towel. As modesty had never been a real issue, she wrapped her hair in it, then reached for another. “Having everybody walk on eggshells around me makes me jittery. And knowing Digger lost that ugly tin can he called home because somebody wanted to get at me bothers me. It bothers me a lot.”

“Digger’ll buy himself another tin can. You and Jake weren’t seriously hurt. That’s more important.”

“I know the priorities, Rosie. And I know, intellectually, the pattern of causing fear and doubt and distraction. But it’s a pattern because it works. I’m afraid and confused and distracted, and I don’t feel like I’m any closer to finding what I’m looking for.”

She toweled off, grabbed the fresh underwear she’d brought in with her. “Why haven’t you asked me about it? About the Cullens, and what it feels like to find out you started out life as somebody else?”

“I started to once or twice. But I figure, when you’re ready, I won’t have to ask. And I don’t think you should need to be told the team is behind you. But I’m telling you anyway.”

“If I wasn’t part of the team, the project wouldn’t be in trouble.”

Rosie picked up a jar of body cream from the back of the john. Opened it, sniffed. Lips pursed in approval, she slid her finger into the jar, then rubbed cream on her arms.

“You are part of the team. You made me part of it. You go, I go. You go, Jake goes. Jake goes, Digger goes. The project’s in a lot more trouble if that happens. You know that, too.”

“I could talk Jake into staying on.”

“You overestimate your powers of persuasion. He’s not going to let you out of his sight. In fact, I’m surprised, and not a little disappointed, I didn’t find the two of you in the shower. It would’ve gone to the first page of Rosie’s personal memory book.”

“We’ve got enough gossip around here without Jake and me taking showers together.”

“Now that you mention it.” She dropped the jar of cream into Callie’s hand, played with a bottle of moisturizer while Callie massaged cream on her arms and legs. “If I did have a question, it would pertain to that particular area. What’s up with you two?”

Callie hitched on fresh jeans. “I don’t know.”

“If you don’t, who does?”

“Nobody. We’re still sort of...we’re trying to...I don’t know,” she repeated, and reached for her shirt. “It’s complicated.”

“Well, you’re complicated people. That’s why it was so interesting watching it the first time around. Like being witness to a nuclear reaction. This time it’s more like watching a slow-burning fire, and not being entirely sure if it’s just going to keep smoldering or burst into active flame at any given moment. I always liked seeing you together.”

“Why?”

Rosie gave a quick, musical laugh. “Coupla sleek, handsome animals stalking around, not sure if they should rip each other to shreds or mate.”

She took the moisturizer, slathered it on her face. “You’re full of analogies.”

“I’ve got a romantic nature. I like seeing the two of you, always did. Right now that man just wants to cuddle you up, but he doesn’t know how. And he’s smart enough to be cautious because if he cuddles the wrong way you’ll peel the skin off his bones. That right there’s a conundrum for

him. Because your temperamental nature's just one of the things he loves about you."

Slowly, Callie unwound the towel, picked up her comb. "I like being sure of things." She tapped the comb on her palm before running it through her wet hair. "I was never sure he loved me. I thought he cheated on me. Veronica Weeks."

"Shit, she drew a bead on him from day one—and as much because she was jealous of you as because your man's one sexy hunk. She wanted to cause trouble for you. Hated your guts."

Callie combed her hair back from her face. "Mission accomplished." Then she lowered the comb. "How come you knew that, and I didn't?"

"Because it was in your face, sweetie pie. And I was just an observer. But I don't think he ever dipped a toe into that pool, Cal. She wasn't his type."

"Get out. Tall, built, available. Why wasn't she his type?"

"Because she wasn't you."

On a long breath, Callie studied her own face in the mirror. Objectively, honestly. "I'm okay to look at. If I take the time to fiddle around, I can be pretty damn attractive. But that's the limit. Veronica was beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous."

"Where'd you pick up the insecurity complex?"

"It came with the package when I fell in love with him. You know his rep, you know how he's always touching women, flirting with them."

"The touching and flirting's just one of the ways he communicates. The rep was before you. And all of that," Rosie continued, "is part of what you fell for."

"Yeah." Disgusted with herself, Callie dragged the comb through her hair again. "What I fell for, then immediately started trying to change. Stupid. I just couldn't believe he wouldn't jump on other women. Especially Veronica Weeks and her obvious invitation—*especially* when I found her underwear under our bed."

"Oh." Rosie drew the word out into three syllables.

“She set me up, and I fell for it.” She threw the comb in the sink. “I *hate* that. I fell for it because I didn’t believe he loved me, at least not enough. So I pushed, and kept pushing, and when I couldn’t get an answer to either question, I pushed him right out the door.”

“Now you’ve let him back in. Wouldn’t hurt to let yourself enjoy that part.” Rosie stepped up to the sink, met Callie’s eyes in the mirror over it. “Did he cheat on you, Cal?”

“No. He screwed up in other areas, but he never cheated on me.”

“Okay. Any screwups on your part?”

Callie hissed out a breath. “Plenty.”

“All right. Now listen to wise Aunt Rosie. If my life was in this kind of flux, I’d appreciate having a big, strong man willing to stand behind, beside or in front of me. In fact, I appreciate having a big, strong man about any time at all. But that’s just me.”

Callie tipped her head until it bumped lightly against Rosie’s. “Why aren’t you married and raising babies?”

“Honey, there are so many big, strong men out there. Who can pick just one?” She patted Callie’s shoulder. “I’ve got some herbal pads that’ll work wonders on those duffel bags under your eyes. I’ll get you a couple. You slap them on, stretch out for a half hour.”

She felt pretty foolish lying down on top of her sleeping bag with pads that smelled like freshly cut cucumber covering her lids. And she imagined she looked like a blond version of Little Orphan Annie.

But they felt good. Cool and soothing. And though she rarely thought about her appearance when working, Callie had a healthy sense of vanity. She didn’t enjoy knowing she’d been walking around looking awful.

Maybe she’d give herself a facial. Rosie always had plenty of girl stuff in her pack. She’d spruce up a little. And she’d remember to put on makeup in the morning.

There was no reason to go around looking like a hag just because she felt like one.

She couldn't manage the thirty minutes, but considered it a victory of willpower that she'd lasted fifteen. She got up, tossed the pads away, then took a long, critical study of herself in the little hand mirror from her pack.

She'd looked worse, she decided. But she'd sure as hell looked better.

She'd go down, forage some food from the kitchen, then see what Rosie recommended she slap on her face. She could handle leaving her skin smothered in gunk while she worked on the dailies.

Considering it an intelligent compromise, she started down. Then stopped halfway down the stairs when she saw Jake at the door, and her parents on the other side.

They made an awkward tableau, she thought. How many times had they actually met, face-to-face? Twice? No, three times, she corrected.

Another mistake, she supposed. She'd considered Jacob Graystone so alien to her parents' lifestyle that she'd made no real effort to blend him into her family circle. And there was no doubt in her mind now that he'd had exactly the same reservation with her and his own family.

It was hardly any wonder they were so awkward with each other. Even without everything that had happened since July.

She skimmed her fingers through her hair and hurried the rest of the way down.

"Well, this is a surprise." She tried to keep her voice easy and bright, but the tension inside her, around her, was thick enough to drink. "You should've told me you were coming down, I'd have guided you in. It couldn't've been easy to find us."

"We only got lost twice." Vivian stepped in, locked her arms around Callie.

"Once," Elliot corrected. "The second time was just a reconnoiter. And we'd've been here an hour ago if your mother hadn't insisted we stop for this."

“A birthday cake.” Vivian loosened her hold on Callie as Elliot held up the bakery box. “We could hardly come all this way to wish you a happy birthday and not bring a cake. I know it’s not till tomorrow, but I couldn’t resist.”

Callie’s smile felt frozen, but she reached out for the box. “It’s never the wrong time for sugar.”

She could feel the curiosity and speculation pumping in from the living room where some of the team were sprawled. “Ah, this is Dory, Matt, Bob. And you remember Rosie.”

“Of course. Nice to meet you.” Vivian ran a hand up and down Callie’s arm as she spoke. “Wonderful to see you again, Rosie.”

“Why don’t we take this back to the kitchen? It’s the only place we have enough chairs anyway.” She turned, shoving the cake box at Jake before he could escape. “I’ll make some coffee.”

“We don’t want you to go to any trouble.” Though Elliot followed along. “We thought you might like to go out to dinner. We’ve got a room in a hotel just over the river. We’re told the restaurant’s very good.”

“Well, I . . .”

“I can lock the cake up somewhere,” Jake offered. “Otherwise, it’ll be a memory when you get back.”

“Like I’d trust you around baked goods.” Callie took the cake back and made the decision on impulse. “I’ll hide it. And you’ll have to come with us.”

“I’ve got work,” he began.

“Me too. But I’m not turning down a free meal away from the horde, and I’m not leaving you with this cake. I’ll be down in ten,” she told her surprised parents, then hurried out with the cake.

Jake drummed his fingers on his thigh, thought of half a dozen ways he could make Callie pay for putting him on the spot. “Listen, I’m going to cut out. I know you want some time alone with Callie.”

“She wants you to come.” There was such simple bafflement in Vivian’s voice, Jake nearly laughed.

“Just tell her I headed back to the site.”

“She wants you to come,” Vivian repeated. “So you’ll come.”

“Mrs. Dunbrook—”

“You’ll need to change your shirt. And wear a jacket. A tie would be nice,” she added, “but they aren’t required.”

“I don’t have one. With me, I mean. I own a tie, it’s just that I don’t... have one with me,” he finished, feeling like an idiot.

“The shirt and jacket will be fine. Go on and change. We’ll wait.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Elliot waited until they were alone to lean down and kiss his wife. “That was very sweet of you.”

“I don’t know how I feel about it, or him, but if she wants him, she gets him. That’s all there is to it. He was so flustered about the tie. I might just forgive him for making her unhappy.”

He wasn’t just flustered. He was totally out of his depth. He didn’t know what to say to these people under the best of circumstances. And these were far from the best.

The shirt needed to be ironed, he discovered. He didn’t have a goddamn iron handy. The only reason he had the dress shirt and jacket was for the occasional television interview or university visit.

Trying to remember if the shirt had been laundered after the last wearing, he sniffed at it. Okay, points for him. It didn’t smell. Yet.

He’d probably sweat through it before they got to the entrée.

If Callie had pushed him into this to punish him, she’d hit a bull’s-eye.

He dragged on the shirt and had to hope the jacket would hide most of the wrinkles.

He dawdled now, refusing to go back out there until the last possible minute. He changed his work boots for a pair of slightly more presentable Rockports. Then he ran a hand over his face and remembered he hadn’t shaved in days.

He snagged his kit and stomped off to the bathroom to take care of it.

A guy shouldn't have to put on a damn jacket and shave to have dinner with people who were going to look at him like the suspicious ex-husband. He shouldn't have to try to weather what was bound to be an emotional evening.

He had work to do and thoughts to think. And he just didn't need the aggravation.

He was scraping the razor through lather when the knock sounded. "What?"

"It's Callie."

He shoved the door open, one-handed, then grabbed her and yanked her in. "Why are you doing this to me? What have I done to you lately?"

"It's dinner." She arched her head back to avoid getting smeared with shaving cream. "You like to eat."

"Get me out of this."

Her brows winged up. "Get yourself out of it."

"Your mother won't let me."

Her heart warmed. "Really?"

"She made me change my shirt."

"It's a nice shirt."

He hissed out a breath. "It's wrinkled. And I don't have a tie."

"It's not that wrinkled, and you don't need a tie."

"You put on a dress." He batted it out, a vicious accusation. He turned back to the mirror and, scowling, continued to shave.

"You're nervous about having dinner with my parents."

"I'm not nervous." He cursed when he nicked his chin. "I don't see why I'm having dinner with them. They don't want me horning in."

"Didn't you just say my mother wouldn't let you get out of it?"

He sucked in a breath and scalded her with a look. "Don't confuse the issue."

Look how sweet he was, she thought. Just look at the sweetness she'd ignored. "Are we trying to get somewhere together, Graystone?"

“I thought we were somewhere.” Then he paused, rinsed off the blade. “Yeah, we’re trying to get somewhere.”

“Then this is part of it. It’s a part I can’t skip over again.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going, aren’t I?” But he shifted his gaze, ran it down her. “Why’d you have to go put on a dress?”

She lifted her hands, managed to turn a little circle to show off the way the short, snug black material clung. “You don’t like it?”

“Maybe I do. What’s under it?”

“If you’re a good boy and behave, you may just find out for yourself later.”

He tried not to think about that. It seemed rude to think about getting Callie out of the little black dress when he was sitting at a table for four with her parents.

And the conversation was so pointedly about anything but her parentage, the facts of it rang like bells.

They talked about the dig. A topic that seemed safest all around. Though no one mentioned the deaths, the fires.

“I don’t think Callie’s ever mentioned what got you into this kind of work.” Elliot approved the wine, and glasses were poured all around.

“Ah . . . I was interested in the evolutions and formations of cultures.” Jake ordered himself not to grab for his glass and glug wine like medicine. “What causes people to form their traditions, build their societies in the way . . .”

And the man wasn’t asking for a damn lecture. “Actually, it started when I was a kid. My father’s part Apache, part English, part French Canadian. My mother’s part Irish, Italian and German and French. That’s a lot mixed into one. So how do you get there? All those pieces have a trail back. I like following trails.”

“And you’re helping Callie follow hers now.”

Everything stilled for a moment. He could feel Vivian stiffen beside him even as he saw Callie lift a hand, lay it on her father’s in a gesture of gratitude.

“Yeah. She doesn’t like help, so you have to badger her.”

“We raised her to be independent, and she took it very much to heart.”

“Then you didn’t intend to raise her to be stubborn, hardheaded and obstinate?”

Elliot pursed his lips, then sipped his wine with a gleam of humor in his eyes. “No, but she had her own ideas about that.”

“I call it being self-sufficient, confident and goal-oriented.” Callie broke off a piece of bread, nibbled. “A real man wouldn’t have a problem with it.”

He passed her the butter. “Still here, aren’t I?”

She buttered a piece of bread, handed it to him. “Got rid of you once.”

“That’s what you think.” He shifted back to Elliot. “Are you planning to come by the dig while you’re here?”

“Yes indeed. Tomorrow, if that’s convenient for both of you.”

“If you’ll excuse me a minute.” Vivian pushed back from the table. As she rose, she laid a hand on Callie’s shoulder, squeezed.

“Ah...I’ll go with you. What?” she hissed as they walked away from the table. “I’ve never understood this girl thing about going to the john in groups.”

“There’s probably some anthropological basis for it. Ask Jacob.” Inside the rest room, Vivian did indeed take out her compact. “You’re twenty-nine years old. You’re in charge of your own life. But despite everything, I’m still your mother.”

“Of course you are.” Worried, Callie stepped in, pressed her cheek to Vivian’s. “Nothing changes that.”

“And as your mother, I exercise the right to stick my nose into your business. Are you and Jacob reconciled?”

“Oh. Well. Hmmm. I don’t know if that’s a word that will ever apply to me and Jake. But we’re sort of together again. In a way.”

“Are you sure this is what you want, and not because your emotions are in turmoil?”

“He’s always been what I wanted,” Callie said simply.

"I can't explain why. We messed it up so bad the first time."

"You're still in love with him?"

"I'm still in love with him. He makes me mad, and he makes me happy. He challenges me, and this time, either because he's trying harder or because I'm letting him, he comforts me. I know we're divorced, and I hadn't seen him in almost a year. I know the things I said when we broke up, and I meant them. Or I wanted to mean them. But I love him. Does that make me crazy?"

Vivian brushed a hand over Callie's hair. "Whoever said love is supposed to be sane?"

Callie let out a half laugh. "I don't know."

"It isn't always, and it isn't always comfortable. But it is, almost always, a hell of a lot of work."

"We didn't put much work into the first time. Neither one of us really suited up for it."

"You had good sex. Please." Vivian leaned back against the sink when Callie registered surprise. "I've had plenty of good sex myself. You and Jacob have a strong physical attraction to each other. He's good in bed?"

"He's . . . he's excellent."

"That's important." Vivian turned to the mirror, dusted powder on her nose. "Passion matters and sex is a vital form of communication in a marriage, as well as a pleasure. But equally important, from my point of view, is that he's sitting out there with your father. He came here with us tonight, and he didn't want to. That tells me he's willing to work. You make sure you shovel your own load, and the two of you may just have something."

"I wish . . . I wish I'd talked to you about him before. About us before."

"So do I, baby."

"I wanted to do it myself. To make it work, to handle it all. I messed up."

"I'm sure you did." She laid her hands on Callie's cheeks. "But I'm also absolutely certain he messed up more."

Callie grinned. "I love you, Mom."

Callie waited for his comments on the drive home, then finally asked, "So? What did you think?"

"About what?"

"About dinner."

"Good. I haven't had prime rib in months."

"Not the food, you moron. Them. My parents. Dr. and Mrs. Dunbrook."

"They're good, too. They're holding up their end. It takes a lot of spine to do that."

"They liked you."

"They didn't hate me." He rolled his shoulders. "I figured they would. And that we'd get through the meal being chilly and correct and polite. Or they'd slip poison in my food when I wasn't looking."

"They liked you," she repeated. "And you held up your end, too. So thanks."

"I did wonder about this one thing."

"Which is?"

"Are you going to get two birthdays every year? I don't like shopping in the first place, and if I'm supposed to come up with two presents, it's really going to tick me off."

"I haven't seen one yet."

"I'll get around to it." He pulled in the lane, bumped up the narrow gravel road. "You've got a situation, babe. Small town, smaller dig. Your parents are bound to run into the Cullens if they stay more than a night in the area."

"I know. I'll deal with it when I have to."

She got out of the car, stood for a moment in the cooling night air. "Love's a lot of work, so I'm told. So we'll work."

He took her hand, lifted it to his lips.

"You never used to do that," she told him. "You do it a lot now."

"A lot of things I didn't used to do. Wait a minute." His fingers dipped into her cleavage.

She gave a low chuckle. "Now *that*, you used to do."

He slid it out of her bodice, held it in front of her face.

Dangling from his thumb and index finger was a bracelet, glittering gold, sparkling from the etchings cut in a complex Byzantine design. "Now how'd that get in there?"

All she could manage was, "Oh, wow."

"Happy birthday."

"It's...it's jewelry. You never...you never gave me jewelry."

"That's a rotten lie. I gave you a gold band, didn't I?"

"Wedding rings don't count." She snatched the bracelet out of his hand, then examined it. The gold was so fluid, she almost expected it to drip out of her fingers. "It's beautiful. Seriously. Jeez, Jacob."

Delighted with her reaction, he took it, hooked it around her wrist. "I heard a rumor that the contemporary female enjoys body adornments. Looks good on you, Cal."

She traced her finger over the gold. "It's... Wow."

"If I'd known a bauble would shut you up, I'd've buried you in them a long time ago."

"You can't spoil it with insults. I love it." She caught his face in her hands, kissed him. She drew back, just enough so that she could meet his eyes, look into them and see herself.

And kissed him again, sliding into him as her hands slipped back into his hair.

Then with a quiet purr, the kiss deepened. And the pleasure. Soft and slow and sweet, while his arms came around her. They stood, swaying in the night, melting into each other.

On a sigh, she turned her cheek to his and watched the dance of fireflies around them. "I really love it."

"I got that impression."

He took her hand again, walked her to the house. He could hear the sounds of the television as he eased the front door open. "Crowded in there. Let's go straight up."

"Your room's down here."

"I behaved," he reminded her, and tugged her quickly upstairs. "Now I want to know what's under the dress."

"Well, a promise is a promise." She stepped into her room, then stared. "Where the hell did that come from?"

The bed was in the center of the room. It was old, the iron headboard painted silver. There were new sheets on the mattress, and a hand-lettered sign propped on the pillow.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CALLIE

“Mattress came from the discount place by the mall. The headboard and frame from a yard sale. The team chipped in.”

“Wow.” Delighted, she hurried over to sit on the side of the bed and bounce. “This is great. Really great. I should go down and thank everyone.”

Grinning, Jake closed the door at his back, flipped the lock. “Thank me first.”

Twenty-six

Maybe it was the new bed, or the sex. Maybe it was the fact that she felt she'd passed through this birthday in two stages, but Callie's mood was strong and bright.

She felt so in tune with her team—and so guilty at the memory of searching backpacks—that she gave everyone birthday cake for breakfast.

She brewed iced tea for her cold jug, licked icing off her fingers and was delighted to see Leo wander into the kitchen.

"Happy birthday." He set a package down on the counter. "And I want to make it clear that I had nothing to do with it."

Callie poked the box with her index finger. "It isn't alive, is it?"

"I can't be held responsible."

She poured the tea into her jug, then carried the box to the table to open. The wrapping was covered with balloons and the bow was enormous and pink. Once it was open, she dug through Styrofoam peanuts, then pulled out a shallow, somewhat square-shaped dish glazed in streaks of blue, green and yellow.

“Wow. It’s a . . . what?”

“I said I had nothing to do with it,” Leo reminded her.

“Ashtray?” Rosie ventured.

“Too big.” Bob looked over her shoulder to study it. “Soup bowl?”

“Not deep enough.” Dory pursed her lips. “Serving bowl, maybe.”

“You could put, like, potpourri in it. Or something.” Fran picked up her own jug as everyone crowded around the table to see.

“Dust catcher,” was Matt’s verdict.

“Art,” Jake corrected. “Which needs no other purpose.”

“There you go.” Callie turned it over to show the base. “Look, she signed it. I have an original Clara Greenbaum. Man, it’s got some weight to it. Plus, it’s a very . . . interesting shape and pattern. Thanks, Leo.”

“I am not responsible.”

“I’ll call the artist and thank her.” Callie set it in the middle of the table, stepped back. It was, very possibly, the ugliest thing she’d ever seen. “See, it looks . . . artistic.”

“Potpourri.” Rosie gave her a bolstering pat on the shoulder. “Lots and lots of potpourri.”

“Right. Well, enough of this festive frivolity.” She moved over to dump ice in her jug and close it. “Let’s get to work.”

“What are you going to call it when you thank her?” Jake wondered as they started out to the car.

“A present.”

“Good thinking.”

Suzanne wiped her nervous hands on the hips of her slacks as she walked to the door. There was a flutter just under her heart, another in the pit of her stomach.

And there was a part of her that wanted to keep that door firmly shut. This was *her* home. And the woman outside was partially responsible for damaging it.

But she steeled herself, squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and opened the door to Vivian Dunbrook.

Her first thought was the woman was so lovely—so perfectly dressed in a tailored gray suit accented with good, understated jewelry and wonderful classic pumps.

It was a knee-jerk female reaction, but it didn't stop Suzanne from remembering she'd changed her outfit twice after Vivian had phoned. Now she wished she'd worn her navy suit instead of the more casual black slacks and white blouse.

Fashion as the equalizer.

"Mrs. Cullen." Vivian's fingers gripped tighter on the handle of the bag she carried. "Thank you so much for seeing me."

"Please come in."

"Such a beautiful spot." Vivian stepped inside. If there were nerves, they didn't show in her voice. "Your gardens are wonderful."

"A hobby of mine." Back straight, face composed, Suzanne led the way into the living room. "Please, sit down. Can I get you anything?"

"No, please, don't trouble." Vivian chose a chair, ordered herself to sit slowly and not just collapse off her trembling legs. "I know you must be very busy. A woman in your position."

"My position?"

"Your business. So successful. We've enjoyed your products very much. My husband particularly. Elliot has a weakness for sweets. He'd like to meet you and your husband, of course. But I wanted, first... I hoped we could talk. Just you and I."

She could be just as cool, Suzanne told herself. Just as classy and polite. She sat, crossed her legs, smiled. "Are you in the area long?"

"Just a day or two. We wanted to see the project. It isn't often Callie has a dig close enough for us to... Oh, this is awkward."

"Awkward?" Suzanne repeated.

"I thought I knew what to say, how to say it. I practiced what I would say to you. I locked myself in the bathroom

for an hour this morning and practiced in front of the mirror. Like you might for a play. But . . .”

Emotion clogged Vivian’s voice. “But now, I don’t know what to say to you, or how to say it. I’m sorry? What good is it for me to tell you I’m sorry? It won’t change anything, it won’t give back what was taken from you. And how can I be sorry, all the way sorry? How can I regret having Callie? It’s not possible to regret that, to be sorry for that. I can’t even imagine what you’ve been through.”

“No, you can’t. Every time you held her, it should’ve been me holding her. When you took her to school the first day and watched her walk away from you, it should’ve been me who felt so sad and so proud. I should’ve told her bedtime stories and worried late at night when she was sick. I should’ve punished her when she disobeyed and helped her with her homework. I should’ve cried a little when she went on her first real date. And I should’ve been allowed to feel that sense of loss when she went off to college. That little empty space inside.”

Suzanne fisted a hand over her heart. “The one that has pride at the edges of it, but feels so small and lonely inside. But all I had was that empty space. That’s all I’ve ever had.”

They sat, stiffly, in the lovely room, with the hot river of their bitterness churning between them.

“I can’t give those things back to you.” Vivian kept her head up, her shoulders stiff and straight. “And I know, in my heart, that if we’d learned this ten years ago, twenty, I would’ve fought to keep them from you. To keep her, whatever the cost. I can’t even wish it could be different. I don’t know how.”

“I carried her inside me for nine months. I held her in my arms moments after her first breath.” Suzanne leaned forward as if poised to leap. “I gave her life.”

“Yes. And that I’ll never have. I’ll never have that bond with her, and I’ll always know you do. So will she, and it will always matter to her. You will always matter to her.

Part of the child who was mine all of her life is yours, now. She'll never be completely mine again."

She paused, fighting for composure. "I can't possibly understand how you feel, Mrs. Cullen. You can't possibly understand how I feel. And maybe in some selfish part of ourselves we don't want to understand. But I ache because neither of us can know what Callie's feeling."

"No." Her heart quivered in her breast. "We can't. All we can do is try to make it less difficult."

There had to be more than anger here, Suzanne reminded herself. There had to be more, for the child who stood between them. "I don't want her hurt. Not by me or you, not by whoever's responsible for this. And I'm afraid for her, afraid of how far someone will go to prevent her from finding what she's looking for."

"She won't stop. I considered asking you to go with me. If both of us asked her to let it be . . . I even talked to Elliot about it. But she won't stop, and it would only upset her if we asked something she can't give."

"My son's in Boston now. Trying to help."

"We've asked questions in the medical community. I can't believe Henry . . . my own doctor." Her hand lifted to her throat, twisted the simple gold necklace she wore. "When she finds the answers, and she will, there'll be hell to pay. Meanwhile, she's not alone. She has her family, her friends. Jacob."

"It's hard to tell which group he fits into."

For the first time since she'd come into the house, Vivian smiled and meant it. "I hope the two of them figure it out this time. And get it right. I . . . I should go, but I wanted to give you these."

She touched the bag she'd set down beside the chair. "I went through the photographs and snapshots in our albums. I made copies of what I thought you'd . . . what I thought you'd like to have. I, ah, wrote the dates and occasions on the back when I remembered."

She rose, picked up the bag and held it out. Staring at it, Suzanne got slowly to her feet. There was a fist around her

heart, squeezing so tight she wondered she could breathe at all.

"I wanted to hate you," she declared. "I wanted to hate you and I wanted you to be a horrible woman. I'd tell myself that was wrong. How could I want my daughter raised by a horrible, hateful woman? But I wanted it anyway."

"I know. I wanted to hate you. I didn't want you to have this lovely home, or to hear you speak of her with so much love. I wanted you to be angry and cold. And fat."

Suzanne let out a watery laugh. "God. I can't believe how much better that makes me feel." She let herself look into Vivian's eyes. She let herself see. "I don't know what we're going to do."

"No, neither do I."

"But right now, I'd really like to look at the pictures. Why don't we take them back to the kitchen? I'll make coffee."

"That would be absolutely great."

While Suzanne and Vivian spent two emotional hours going through Callie's pictorial history over coffee and crumb cake, Doug once again sat in Roseanne Yardley's office.

"You didn't mention you were Suzanne Cullen's son."

"Does it make a difference?"

"I admire a woman who achieves success on her own terms. And I attended a conference some years ago on children's health and safety. She was a speaker. A powerful one, who spoke eloquently of her own experience. I thought then she was a very brave woman."

"I've begun to see that for myself."

"I've spent most of my life concerned with the health and well-being of children. And I've always considered myself astute. It's difficult to accept I might have been in any way involved with a man who exploited them, for profit."

"Marcus Carlyle arranged to have my sister taken and sold. He undoubtedly did the same with a number of others. And he very likely used you. A casual mention of a pa-

tient. Parents who may have lost a child and were unable to conceive another. Relatives of parents who were childless. One or more of your patients might very well have been a baby stolen from another part of the country.”

“I spent some difficult hours thinking of those things. You won’t get to Lorraine,” she said after a moment. “Richard will block you there. And to be frank, she’s not particularly strong. She never was. Nor did she ever exhibit any interest in Marcus’s work. But...” She slid a piece of paper across the desk toward him. “This might be a better, more useful contact. To the best of my information that’s Marcus’s secretary’s location. I know people who know people who knew people,” she said with a sour smile. “I made some calls. I can’t promise that’s accurate or up-to-date.”

He glanced down, noted Dorothy McLain Spencer was reputed to live in Charlotte. “Thank you.”

“If you find her, and the answers you’re looking for, I’d like to know.” She rose. “I remember something Marcus said to me one evening when we were discussing our work and what it meant to us. He said helping to place a child in a stable and loving home was the most rewarding part of his job. I believed him. And I would swear he believed it, too.”

Lana found herself smiling the minute she heard Doug’s voice over the phone. Deliberately, she made her voice breathless and distracted. “Oh... it’s you. Digger,” she said in a stage whisper, “not now.”

“Hey.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this way, but Digger and I are madly in love and running off to Bora Bora. Unless you’ve got a better offer.”

“I could probably swing a weekend at the Holiday Inn.”

“Sold. Where are you?”

“On my way to the airport. I’ve got a line on Carlyle’s secretary, so I’m heading to Charlotte to check it out. With the connections, it’s going to take me all damn day

to get there. I wanted to let you know where I'd be. Got a pad and pencil?"

"I'm a lawyer."

"Right." He gave her the hotel he'd booked. "Pass that on to my family, will you?"

"ASAP."

"Anything going on I should know about?"

"I'm going to be able to move back into my office in a week. Two at the most. I'm pretty excited."

"No more leads on the arson?"

"They know how, but not who. Same goes, to date, for the trailer. We miss you around here."

"That's nice to know. I'll call once I check into the hotel. When I get back, I'm taking Digger's place."

"Oh, really?"

"He's out, I'm in. Nonnegotiable."

"A challenging phrase to a lawyer. Come back soon and we'll talk about it."

She was still smiling when she hung up. Then immediately picked up the phone again to put the plan that had formed in her mind into action.

Time for a break, chief."

With her face all but in the dirt, Callie gently blew soil away from a small stone protrusion. "I've got something here."

Rosie cocked an eyebrow. "You've got something every day with your nice pile of bones. Makes the rest of us look like slackers."

"This is stone."

"It's not going anywhere. It's lunch break."

"I'm not hungry."

Rosie sat to open Callie's tea jug. "Thing's still full. Want a lecture on dehydration?"

"I've been drinking the water. I don't think this is a tool, Rosie. Or a weapon."

"Sounds like a job for a geologist." Since she'd poured out tea already, Rosie drank it before hopping down to

take a look. “Definitely been worked.” She ran a thumb over the smoothed edge Callie had uncovered. “Considerably. It looks like the rhyolite. Typical of what we’ve been finding.”

“It feels different.”

“It does.” Rosie sat back on her heels as Callie worked with brush and probe. “Want pictures?”

Callie grunted. “Don’t bother Dory. Just grab the camera. There’s a nub here. Doesn’t feel natural.”

She continued to work while Rosie retrieved one of the cameras. “Another group of people just drove up. This place has been a regular Disneyland ride all morning. Ease back, you’re casting a shadow.”

Callie waited until Rosie took the shots, then shifted to her trowel, carefully explored the earth. “I can feel the edges of it. It’s too small for a hand ax, too big for a spear point. Wrong shape for either anyway.”

She brushed at the loosened dirt, went back to probing.

“You want half this sandwich?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m drinking your tea. I’m not going back for my Gatorade.” With the sandwich and drink, she sat down again, watched the stone shape grow. “You know what that looks like to me?”

“I know what it’s starting to look like to me.” Excitement was beginning to skip down her spine as she worked, but her hands remained steady and sure. “Christ, Rosie. It’s a day for art.”

“It’s a goddamn cow. A goddamn stone cow.”

Callie grinned down at the fat body, the facial details carved into stone. “A dust catcher. What will our anthro have to say about man’s ancient need for tchotchkes? Is this sweet or what?”

“Majorly sweet.” Rosie rubbed her eyes as her vision blurred. “Whew! Too much sun. You want more pictures?”

“Yeah, let’s use the trowel for scale.” She picked up the camera herself, framed the shots. She was reaching for her clipboard when she noticed Rosie hadn’t moved.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Little woozy. Weird. I think I’d better...” But she stumbled, nearly pitched over when she got to her feet. Even as Callie reached out, Rosie collapsed forward against her.

“Rosie? Jesus. Hey! Somebody give me a hand.” She braced herself, held the weight while people ran over.

“What is it?” Leo boosted himself into the hole. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. She fainted. Let’s get her out of here. She’s out cold,” she told Jake when he swung down with them.

“Let me have her.” He shifted Rosie into his arms. “Dig, Matt.”

He held her up, free-lifting a hundred and thirty pounds of dead weight. The team and visitors gathered in, hands reaching, then laying her on the ground.

“Everybody move back. I’m a nurse.” A woman pushed through. “What happened?”

“She said she was feeling dizzy, then she just fainted.”

“Any medical conditions?” the woman asked as she checked Rosie’s pulse.

“No, nothing I know of. Rosie’s healthy as a horse.”

With one hand still monitoring the pulse, the nurse lifted one of Rosie’s eyelids to check her pupils. “Call an ambulance.”

Callie burst through the doors of the emergency room right behind the gurney. The only thing she was sure of now was that Rosie hadn’t simply fainted.

“What is it? What’s wrong with her?”

The nurse who’d ridden in the ambulance from the site grabbed Callie’s arm. “Let them find out. We need to give the attending as much information as possible.”

“Rosie—Rose Jordan. Ah, she’s thirty-four. Maybe thirty-five. She doesn’t have any allergies or conditions that I know of. She was fine. Fine one minute and unconscious the next. Why hasn’t she come to?”

“Did she take any drugs or medications?”

“No, no. I told you she’s not sick. And she doesn’t take drugs.”

“Just wait over there. Somebody will be out to talk to you as soon as they can.”

Jake strode in behind her. “What did they say?”

“They’re not telling me anything. They took her back there somewhere. They’re asking me a bunch of questions, but they’re not telling me anything.”

“Call your father.”

“What?”

“He’s a doctor. They’ll tell him things they might not tell us.”

“God, I should’ve thought of that myself. I can’t think,” she added as she pulled out her phone. She stepped outside with it, breathed slow and steady as she called her father’s cell phone.

“He’s coming,” she told Jake. “He’s coming right away.” She reached down, gripped his hand when she saw the nurse come back.

“Let’s sit down.”

“My God. Oh my God.”

“They’re working on her. You need to help us. You need to tell me what kind of drugs she took. The sooner they know that, the quicker they can treat her.”

“She didn’t take any drugs. She doesn’t take drugs. I’ve known her for years and I’ve never seen her so much as puff on a joint. She’s clean. Jake?”

“She doesn’t use,” he confirmed. “I was working ten feet away from her most of the morning. She never left the area until lunch break. Then she went directly over to Callie’s sector.”

“She didn’t take anything. She ate a half a sandwich, drank a couple glasses of iced tea. I was excavating. She took pictures for me. Then she said something about having too much sun, feeling woozy.” She leaned forward, gripped the nurse’s wrist.

“Look at me. Listen to me. If she took something, I’d tell

you. She's one of my closest friends. Tell me her condition."

"They're working on her. Her symptoms indicate a drug overdose."

"That's not possible." Callie looked at Jake. "It's just not possible. It has to be some mistake. Some sort of..." When her stomach pitched, she reached out blindly for Jake. "It was my tea. She drank my tea."

"Was there something in the tea?" the nurse demanded.

"I didn't put anything in it. But..."

"Somebody else might have," Jake finished. He yanked out his own phone. "I'm calling the police."

She sat outside on the curb with her head on her knees. She'd had to escape the smells of sickness and injury, the sounds of voices and phones. The sight of the orange plastic chairs in the waiting area. The stifling box that held so much pain and fear.

She didn't look up when her father sat beside her. She sensed him, the scent, the movement, and simply leaned her body into his.

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"No. No, honey. They've stabilized her. She's very weak, but she's stable."

"She's going to be all right?"

"She's young, she's strong and healthy. Getting her treatment quickly was key. She ingested a dangerous dosage of Seconal."

"Seconal? Could it have killed her?"

"Possibly. Not likely, but possibly."

"It had to be in the tea. It's the only logical answer."

"I want you to come home with us, Callie."

"I can't." She pushed to her feet. "Don't ask me."

"Why?" Angry now, he rose, hurried after her, grabbed her arm. "This isn't worth your life. It could be you in there. You're ten pounds lighter than your friend. Maybe fifteen. You could have ingested that tea. Could have been working alone, slipped into a coma without anyone noticing. The dosage she took could have killed you."

“You’ve answered your own question. I’ve already started it, Dad. It can’t be stopped. I wouldn’t be any safer in Philadelphia. Not now. We’ve uncovered too many layers, and they can’t be buried again. I won’t be safe until all of it’s uncovered. I’m afraid now that none of us will.”

“Let the police handle it.”

“I’m not going to get in their way, I promise you. Hewitt’s calling in the FBI, and I’m all for it. But I’m not standing still either. Whoever’s doing this is going to find out I’m not a victim.” She watched Jake step out, met his eyes. “And I don’t quit.”

It was nearly dusk when she stood with Jake on the now deserted site. “Leo’s going to want to shut it down. At least temporarily.”

“And we’re going to talk him out of it,” Callie said. “We’re going to keep this going. And when Rosie’s back on her feet, she’ll go right back to work.”

“You may be able to talk Leo into it, but how many people are you going to convince to stay on the dig?”

“If it’s down to you and me, it’s down to you and me.”

“And Digger.”

“Yeah, and Digger,” she agreed. “I’m not going to be chased away. I’m not going to let whoever’s responsible pick the time and place to come after me. Not again.”

She looked pale and drawn in the softening light, he thought. Honed down to worry and determination. And remembered how she’d looked in the moonlight when she’d risen over him in bed. The way her face had glowed with laughter and arousal. There’d been freedom there, for both of them, to simply be.

And while they’d given themselves to each other, while they’d steeped themselves in each other, someone—close—had been planning to hurt her.

“It was one of our own team.” He said it flatly, the anger dug too deep to show.

“The site was crawling with people today. Towners, media, college classes.” Then she sighed. “Yeah, it was

one of ours. I had the damn jug on the counter with the lid off. I've gone back over it. Leo came in with the present. I took it over to the table to open it. Back to the counter. We were all around somewhere. Everybody knows that's my jug, and most days I work solo, at least through to lunch break. That's my pattern. Whoever did it knows my pattern."

"You didn't go for the tea this morning."

"No. The water jug was handier. Rosie—" She broke off, confused when he turned around and walked away. When he just stood at the edge of her sector, staring down, she walked over, put a tentative hand on his back.

He whirled, grabbed her and held so tight she expected her rib cage to shatter. "Hey. Whoa. You're shaking."

"Shut up." His voice was muffled against her hair, then against her mouth. "Just shut up."

"Okay, now I'm shaking. I think I need to sit down."

"No. Just hold on, damnit."

"I am." She locked a hand around her own wrist. "I'm starting to think maybe you do love me."

"You could've passed out down there. Who knows how long it might've been before one of us noticed?"

"I didn't. It didn't happen. And Rosie's in the hospital because of it."

"We're going to take the team apart. One by one. We not only keep the project going, we keep the team intact until we find the one responsible."

"How do we keep the team intact?"

"We're going to lie. We'll use the mummy's-curse angle. Start the rumor. Some local rednecks want to pay us back for screwing up the development, and they've been sabotaging the project. We make them believe we believe it, convince them we have to stick together."

"Rah-rah?"

"Partly, and partly for science, partly for personal safety. Everybody's one big happy family. While whoever's done this thinks we're off on that angle, we narrow the field."

“We can eliminate Bob. He was on the team before I knew about the Cullens.”

Jake shook his head. No chances now. “We can put him on a secondary list. We don’t eliminate anyone until we have absolute proof. This time, we’re working on the guilty-until-proven-innocent theme.” He brushed the back of his knuckles over her cheek. “Nobody tries to poison my wife.”

“Ex-wife. We need to bring Leo in on this.”

“We’ll have a closed-door meeting back at the house. Make it very obvious and official.”

Leo argued, blustered, cursed and eventually caved in to the twin-pronged assault.

“The police or the state are bound to shut us down in any case.”

“Until they do, we stick.”

He stared at Callie. “You really think you can convince the team, one of whom you believe is a murderer, to continue to dig?”

“Watch me.”

He took off his glasses, squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to go along with you, with both of you. But there are conditions.”

“I don’t like conditions. You?” she asked Jake.

“Hate them.”

“You’ll live with these, or I’m going out there and telling those kids to go home. Kids,” he repeated.

“Okay, okay,” Callie grumbled.

“The conditions are that I’m calling in a couple more men. Men I know and trust. They’ll be fully informed of the situation. They’ll work, but their main purpose will be to watch and to form impressions. It’ll take me a day or two to set it up.”

“That’s agreeable.” Callie nodded.

“I also want to speak with the authorities about the possibility of having a police officer join the team. Undercover.”

“Come on, Leo.”

“Those are the terms.” Leo got to his feet. “Agreed?”

They agreed, and called the rest of the team in for a kitchen-table meeting. Callie passed out beer while Leo started things off with a booster speech.

“But the police wouldn’t tell us anything.” Jittery, Frannie looked at face after face, never lighting on one for more than a finger snap. “They just asked a lot of questions. Like one of us made Rosie sick on purpose.”

“We think somebody did.” At Callie’s statement, there was absolute silence. “We put a lot of people out of work,” she continued. “And some of those people are pretty steamed about it. They don’t understand what we’re doing here. More, they don’t give a shit. Somebody set a fire in Lana Campbell’s office. Why?” She waited a beat and, as Frannie had, watched faces. “Because she’s the Preservation Society’s lawyer and largely responsible for us being here. Somebody torched Digger’s trailer, blew the hell out of some of our equipment, some of our records.”

“Bill’s dead,” Bob said quietly.

“Maybe it was an accident, maybe it wasn’t.” Jake studied his beer and was aware of every movement, every breath around him. “Could be one of the people we’ve pissed off hurt him, hurt him more than they meant to. But that upped the odds. And it added to the disturb-the-graves-and-face-the-curse deal laymen like to spook each other with. Bad shit happens, they can start gossiping that the project’s cursed.”

“Maybe it is.” Dory pressed her lips together. “I know how that sounds, but bad shit *is* happening. It keeps happening. Now Rosie . . .”

“Spirits don’t dump barbiturates in jugs of iced tea.” Callie folded her arms. “People do. And that means we’re going to have to keep the dig clear of all outsiders. No more tours, no more outdoor classrooms, no more visitors past the fence line. We stick together. We take care of each other, watch out for each other. That’s what teams do.”

“We’ve got important work to do,” Jake stated. “We’re

going to show these local assholes we won't be run off. The project depends on every one of us. So . . ."

Jake stretched a hand out over the table.

Callie laid hers on his. One by one, others put their hands out until everyone was connected.

Callie skimmed faces once more. And knew she held hands with a murderer.

Twenty-seven

The call from the front desk announcing the delivery of a package from Lana Campbell interrupted Doug as he was plotting out his approach. He didn't know why Lana would send him a package, or why the hell a bellman couldn't bring it up, but he pulled on a pair of shoes, grabbed his room key and went down to retrieve it.

And there she was. Absolutely perfect, every gorgeous hair in place. He knew he was grinning like an idiot as he strode across the small lobby, lifted Lana right off her feet and caught that pretty mouth with his.

"Some package." He set her down, but he didn't let go.

"I hoped you'd like it."

"Where's Ty?"

She lifted her hands to his cheeks, and now she kissed him. "You say exactly the right things at the right times. He's spending a couple of days with his grandparents in Baltimore. He's over the moon about it. Why don't we go up to your room? I've got a lot to tell you."

"Sure." He looked down at her feet where she'd set her briefcase, a wheeled carry-on, her laptop case. She was

carrying a purse the size of Idaho. “All this? How long were you planning to stay?”

“Now that’s not the right thing to say.” She sailed past him, pressed the Up button on the elevator.

“How about if I say I’m really glad to see you?”

“Better.”

He hauled her bags inside, pushed the button for his floor. “But I also wonder what you’re doing here.”

“Acceptable. First, I wanted Ty tucked away right now, and I felt Digger would do more good with Callie and Jake than with me. I also felt I might be able to give you a hand. You deserve a sidekick.”

“I’d say I got top of the line, sidekick wise.”

“Bet your ass.” She stepped out with him on his floor and walked down the hall beside him. “I could only clear my calendar for a couple of days. But I thought I’d be more useful here than there. So I’m here.”

“So, it wasn’t because you were pining away for me and your life wasn’t worth living if you had to spend another moment away from me?”

“Well, that factored in, of course.” She stepped into the room, glanced around. It had two full-sized beds—one still unmade—a small desk, a single chair and one stingy window. “You do live spare.”

“If I’d known you were coming, I’d’ve gotten something . . . else.”

“This is fine.” She set her purse down on the second bed. “I need to tell you what happened yesterday.”

“Is telling me right now going to change anything?”

“No. But you need to—”

“Then first things first.” He drew the jacket she wore off her shoulders. “Nice material,” he said, and tossed it on the bed beside her purse. “You know one of the first things I noticed about you, Lana?”

“No. What?” She stood very still while he unbuttoned her blouse.

“Soft. Your looks, your skin, your hair. Your clothes.” He slid the blouse away. “A man’s just got to get his hands

on all that soft.” He trailed a fingertip down the center of her body to the hook of her slacks.

“Maybe you should put the Do Not Disturb sign out.”

“I did.” He lowered his mouth, nibbled on hers as the fluid material pooled at her feet.

She tugged his shirt up, over his head. “You’re a clear-thinking, careful man. That’s one of the first things I noticed about you. I find that kind of thing very attractive.” Her breath caught when he swept her up into his arms. “And there’s that, too.”

“We’re practical, straightforward people.”

“Mostly,” she managed when he laid her on the bed.

He covered her body with his. “Nice fit.”

She let herself go, let the anxiety and excitement of the past hours melt away. He smelled of his shower, the hotel soap. She found even that arousing. To be here, so far from home in this anonymous room on sheets where he’d slept without her.

She could hear the drone of a vacuum cleaner being run in the corridor outside. And the slam of a door as someone went on their way.

She could hear her own heart beat in her throat as his lips nuzzled there.

The long, loving stroke of his hands over her warmed her skin. Her blood, her bones. So she sighed his name when his lips came back to hers. And yielded everything.

He’d dreamed of her in the night, and he rarely dreamed. He’d wished for her, and he rarely wished. All that, it seemed, had changed since she’d slipped into his life. What he’d once stopped himself from wanting was now everything he wanted.

A home, a family. A woman who would be there. It was all worth the risk if she was the woman.

He pressed his lips to her heart and knew if he could win that, he could do anything.

She moved under him, a shuddering, restless move as he sampled her with his tongue. Now the need to excite her, to hear her breath thicken and catch, to feel that heart he wanted so much to hold thunder, rose up in him.

Not so patient now, not so easy. As her breath went choppy, he dragged her up so they were kneeling on the bed, struggling to strip away the rest of their clothes.

When she bowed back, an offering, his mouth raced over her.

This is what she wanted now. Speed and need. A wild, wet ride. The thrill sprinted through her, turning her body into a quaking mass that craved more. She reared up, clamping her legs around him, curling over him to fix her teeth on his shoulder.

When he filled her, body and heart, she spoke his name. Just his name.

Spent, sated, he held on to her. The temptation was great to simply snuggle down on the bed, drag the covers over their heads and shut out everything else.

“I want time with you, Lana. Time that’s not part of anything else.”

“Normal time.” She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “We’ve hardly had any of that. What would it be like, do you think?”

“Quiet.”

She laughed. “Well, there’s not a lot of that in my house.”

“Yes, there is. There’s a nice sense of quiet with a kid running around.”

“Dogs barking, phones ringing. I’m an organized soul, Doug, but there are a lot of compartments in my life. A lot to handle.”

“And because you make it look easy, I shouldn’t think it is. I’ve never thought it was.” He drew back. “I admire what you’ve done with your life, and Ty’s. How you’ve done it.”

“There you go, saying the right thing again.” She eased away, rising to unzip her bag.

He noted that the short, thin robe was neatly folded and right on top. It made him smile. “Were you born tidy?”

“I’m afraid so.” She belted the robe, then sat on the side

of the opposite bed. “And practical. Which is why when I’d prefer to snuggle up on that bed with you for the next hour or so, I’m going to spoil the mood. Something happened yesterday.”

She told him about Rosie, watched his relaxed expression chill, then heat. Though he rose, yanked on his jeans, paced, he didn’t interrupt with comments or questions until she was finished.

“Did you talk to Callie today?”

“Yes, before I left, and when I got to the airport here. She’s fine, Doug, if a little irritated with me for interrupting her work with the second call.”

“This can’t be put down to accident or impulse, or even a vicious kind of distraction. This was premeditated, with her as the specific target.”

“She knows that, just as she knows whoever laced the tea was one of her own team. She won’t be careless. Right now, we have to leave it to her to handle that end. We’ll handle this one.”

“I’ve got a list of Spencers—the secretary’s last name. As far as we know. I got them out of the phone book, and I’ve been running Internet searches. I’m down to six who might work. The others have lived here too long to fit. I was working out how best to approach them when the desk called me downstairs.”

“We could use the telemarketing angle, do phone surveys and try to eliminate a few more.”

“Are you now or have you ever been a part of an organization that markets infants?”

She was opening her briefcase now, taking out a pad. “I was thinking more along the lines of targeting the woman of the house—do you now or have you ever worked outside the home? In what field and so on.”

“It’ll take time. And you have to figure a lot of people just hang up on phone solicitations and surveys.”

“Yes. I’d be one of them.” She doodled absently on the pad. She could read him now, and nodded. “And yes, there’s something to be said for the more direct approach.

Just go knock on doors and ask if we're speaking to Marcus Carlyle's former secretary."

"That was my plan. Tell you what, since I've got a sidekick, we can play both angles. I'll knock on doors, you stay here and play annoying telemarketer."

"So you can keep me safely locked up in a hotel room? I don't think so. We go together, Douglas. *Side* being the operative part of sidekick."

"Just stop and think for a minute." He followed her as she went into the bathroom, worked the shower controls until she was satisfied with the temperature. "We don't know what we're dealing with. You've already had your office destroyed, been scared enough to send Ty away. Think about him if something happens to you."

She slipped out of the robe, hung it neatly on the hook behind the door, then stepped under the spray. "You're trying to scare me, and that's the right button to push."

"Good."

"But I can't and won't live that way. It took me two months after Steve was killed to work up the courage to go into a goddamn convenience store, in broad daylight. But I did it because you can't constantly be afraid of what might happen. If you do, you lose control of what *is* happening, and all the joy and pain it holds for you."

"Damn." He pulled off his jeans, stepped into the shower behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist. "You don't leave me any room to argue."

She patted his hand, then stepped out before her hair got wet. "I'm a professional."

"The list is out there on the desk. There's a city map with it. We might as well plot out the most convenient route."

"I'll start that." She dried off, put the robe back on.

But when he came out to join her, she wasn't working on anything. Instead she stood by the desk holding a little Boston Red Sox ball cap in her hands. "You got this for Tyler?"

"Yeah, I thought he'd get a kick out of it. When my

grandfather used to travel, he'd always bring me a ball cap or a toy. Some little thing."

He picked up his shirt again, uneasy with the way she simply stood, running the bill of the cap through her fingers. "I didn't get it for him to score points with him, or you. Well, not entirely."

"Not entirely."

A ripple of irritation crossed his face. "Having been a small boy once, I know the value of a ball cap. I saw it at the airport and picked it up. When I was paying for it, the point angle occurred to me."

"He asked when you'd be back."

"Yeah?"

It was the instant delight in Doug's voice that struck her first. Instant, natural and true. Her heart tripped. "Yes, he did. And he'll love this. Points or not, it was very sweet of you to think of it."

"I didn't forget you either."

"Didn't you?"

"Nope." He opened a drawer. "I didn't leave it out because I wasn't sure what the maid might make of it."

Lana stared as he pulled out a can of Boston baked beans. When he dropped it into her hand, grinned at her, her heart not only tripped, it fell with a splat.

"That just tears it. I'm done in by a can of beans." She pressed it against her heart and began to weep.

"Oh Jesus, Lana, don't cry. It was a joke."

"You sneaky son of a bitch. This was not going to happen to me." She waved him away, opened her purse and pulled out a pack of travel tissues. "I knew I was in trouble when you stepped off the elevator. You got off, and when I saw you, my heart . . ."

She tapped the silly can of beans against her breast. "My heart leaped. I haven't felt that jolt since Steve. I never expected to feel it again. I thought, I hoped, that one day I'd find someone I could love. Someone I was comfortable with, who I could live with. But if I didn't, that was all right. Because I'd had something so extraordinary

already. I never believed I'd feel anything this strong again. Not for anyone. No, don't say anything. Don't."

She had to sit, steady herself. "I didn't want to feel like this again. Not like this. Because when you do, there's so much to lose. It would've been so much easier, so much easier if I could have loved you a little. If I could've been content and have known you'd be good to Ty. Good for him. That would've been enough."

"Somebody told me that you can't live your life worrying about what could happen, or you miss what's happening."

She sniffled. "Clever, aren't you?"

"Always have been. I will be good to Ty." He sat beside her. "I'll be good to you."

"I know it." She laid a hand on his knee. "I can't change Ty's name. I can't take that away from Steve."

Doug looked down at her hand. At the wedding ring she continued to wear. "Okay."

"But I'll change mine."

He looked up, met her eyes. The flood of emotion was so huge, it almost swamped him. But he took her hand, the one that wore another man's ring. "You know, this is starting to tick me off. First, you beat me to asking for a date, then you seduce me before I make my move. You follow me here. And now you propose to me."

"Is that your way of saying I'm pushy?"

"No, I can just say you're pushy. It's my way of saying I'd like to ask you this time."

"Oh. Well, that's all right then. Forget what I said."

He opened her hand, kissed her palm. "Marry me, Lana."

"I'd love to, Douglas." She rested her head on his shoulder, sighed. "Let's get this job done so we can go home."

They had a nice working rhythm, Lana decided as they drove to house number four. She imagined they looked like a very safe, all-American couple. Which was why those first three doors had opened to them so easily.

When they found the right door, she doubted it would open quite so smoothly.

“Lovely neighborhood,” she considered as they drove streets lined with big, well-tended homes, rolling lawns. The cars in the driveways were all late models.

“Money,” he said.

“Yes, money. She’d have that. And would probably be smart enough to spend it well, and discreetly. Nothing big and splashy to draw too much attention. Just quiet class. It should be coming up on your left.”

It was a rosy old brick with a white veranda with flowering vines trailing up both sides to shield it from its neighbors. The drive was flanked by two tall magnolias. And in it sat a vintage Mercedes sedan in soft yellow.

There was a realtor’s sign in the yard.

“It’s on the market. Interesting. Pulling up stakes?” he considered. “Nobody but you and my family know we’re here, but somebody knew I was poking around in Boston.”

“Mmm.” Lana played the angles in her head as he pulled to the side of the shady street. “If she’s in any way connected to what’s happening now, she’d know we’re pulling the threads. Relocating would be a natural step. And it certainly gives us a logical way inside.”

“House hunting.”

“The affluent and happy young couple, looking for their dream house.” She tossed her hair, then took out a tube of lipstick. Flipping down the vanity mirror on the visor, she applied it in smooth, meticulous strokes. “We’ll be the Beverlys—that’s my maiden name—from Baltimore. Keep it simple.”

She capped the tube, replaced it. “We’re relocating here because you’ve accepted a position at the university. Wear your glasses.”

“Teaching positions don’t pay that well.”

“It’s family money.”

“Cool. We’re loaded, huh?”

“Modestly. And I’m a lawyer. We’ll stick with that because it may present an opening. Corporate law. I rake in

the dough. We'll ad-lib. We've been doing fine so far. If we can get into the house."

They walked toward the house, holding hands. They rang the bell. After a short wait a woman in trim black pants and a white shirt answered; Lana's hopes skidded. She was entirely too young to be Dorothy Spencer.

"May I help you?"

Stuck, she decided to play it out. "I hope so. My husband and I saw the house was for sale. We're looking for a house in the area."

"I don't think Mrs. Spencer has a showing scheduled for this afternoon."

"No." Hopes lifted a level. "No, we don't have an appointment. We were driving by, admiring the homes. I suppose it might be inconvenient to see the inside right now. Are you the owner? Could we make an appointment for later today or tomorrow?"

"No, I'm the housekeeper." As Southern hospitality won out, she stepped back. "If you'd like to wait here, I'll check with Mrs. Spencer."

"Thank you so much. Roger," Lana continued as the housekeeper started down the hall, "isn't it lovely?"

"Roger?" he queried.

"I did fall for him first. Such nice light," she continued. "And look at the floors."

"The other place was closer to the university."

She beamed, delighted with him. "I know, honey, but this one has such character." She turned, acknowledged the woman in the slim beige suit who came toward them.

Could be the right age, Lana thought. Looked younger, but women often found ways to look younger. "Mrs. Spencer?" She took a step forward, extending her hand. "We're the incredibly rude Beverlys. I'd apologize for intruding, but I'm too delighted to get even this small glimpse of your home."

"The realtor didn't mention she was sending anyone by."

"No, we haven't been there yet. We were driving through the area and spotted the sign. When we decided to move south, this is exactly the sort of house I dreamed of."

“Tiffany.” Doug squeezed Lana’s hand. “We’ve just started to look. I won’t be transferring until the first of the year.”

“You’re just moving to Charlotte?”

“We will be,” he confirmed. “From Baltimore. It is a beautiful house. Big,” he added with a wary glance at Lana.

“I want big. And we need the room to entertain. How many bedrooms—” She shook her head as if stopping herself, laughed a little. “I’m sorry. I know we should let you go, and make an appointment. I’m pushing a bit. Roger thinks January gives us plenty of time. But when I think about having everything packed and moved, learning a new area—new stores, new doctors, new everything—all while still dealing with two careers, it’s daunting. And I’m in a rush to start.”

“I have a little time if you want a look.”

“I would love it.” Lana started toward the main parlor behind her. “If it wouldn’t be indelicate, could you tell me your asking price?”

“Not at all.” She named a sum, waited a beat, then continued. “The house was built in the late eighteen-hundreds, and has been carefully maintained and restored. It offers original features as well as a state-of-the-art kitchen, a master suite that includes a large dressing area and a spa. Four bedrooms and four baths, as well as a small apartment off the kitchen. Ideal as a maid’s quarters, or for your mother-in-law.”

Doug laughed. “You don’t know my mother-in-law. You don’t sound local.”

“I’m not. I’ve lived in Charlotte for four years, but I’m originally from Cleveland. I’ve lived in a number of areas.”

“What fabulous windows. And the fireplace! Does it work?”

“Yes, it’s fully functioning.”

“Wonderful craftsmanship,” Lana added as she ran a finger over the mantel and got a closer look at the photographs scattered over it. “Did you travel for your work or your husband’s?”

“Mine. I’m a widow.”

“Oh. This is the first time I’ve relocated. Out of the state, I mean. I’m excited, and nervous. I love this room. Oh, is this your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“She’s lovely. Are these floors original?”

“Yes.” As Mrs. Spencer glanced down, Lana signaled Doug to join her at the fireplace. “Yellow pine.”

“I don’t suppose the rugs go with the house. They’re extraordinary.”

“No. They don’t. If you’d like to come this way.” She walked through a set of open pocket doors into a cozily feminine sitting room. “I use this as a little reading room.”

“I don’t know how you can bear to sell. But I suppose your daughter’s grown and moved out, you’d be happier with something smaller.”

“Different, in any case.”

“Are you retired, Dorothy?”

There was a flicker of confusion, of suspicion as she turned back to Lana. “Yes, for some time now.”

“And did you pass your interest in the business to your daughter? The way you passed your name. Do they call you Dory, too?”

She stiffened and saw out of the corner of her eye that Doug blocked the hallway door while Lana stood by the pocket doors. “Dot,” she said after a moment. “Who are you?”

“I’m Lana Campbell, Callie Dunbrook’s attorney. This is Douglas Cullen, her brother. Jessica Cullen’s brother.”

“How many babies did you help sell?” Doug demanded. “How many families did you destroy?”

“I don’t know who you are or what you’re talking about. I want you out of my house. If you don’t leave immediately, I’ll call the police.”

Doug stepped to the side, picked up the phone. “Be my guest. We’ll all have a nice, long talk.”

She snatched the phone, spun away to the far side of the room. “Get me the police. Yes, it’s an emergency. You have some nerve, coming into my home this way,” she snapped. Then she jerked up her chin. “Yes, I want to report a break-

in. There's a man and woman in my house, refusing to leave. Yes, they're threatening me, and they've made upsetting statements about my daughter. That's right. Please hurry."

She clicked the phone off.

"You didn't give them your name or address." Lana started forward, threw up her hands as Dorothy heaved the phone at her.

"Nice save," Doug commented when she made a fumbling catch inches before it smacked into her face. He took both Dorothy's arms, pushed her into a chair. "Hit redial."

"Already did."

It rang twice before she heard a breathless voice say, "Mom?"

She hung up, cursed, then dragged her address book out of her bag. "She called her daughter. Damn it, I should've memorized Callie's cell number. Here." She punched numbers quickly.

"Dunbrook."

"Callie, it's—"

"Jesus, Lana, will you quit?"

"Just listen. It's Dory. We found Dorothy Spencer. We found Carlyle's secretary. Dory's her daughter."

"No mistake?"

"None. Dot Spencer just called her. She knows."

"All right. I'll call you back."

"She'll be okay," Lana told Doug as she disconnected. "She knows who and what to look for now. She won't get away," she added as she walked toward Dorothy. "We'll find her, just as we found you."

"You don't know my daughter?"

"Unfortunately, we do. She's a murderer."

"That's a lie." Dorothy bared her teeth.

"You know better. Whatever you and Carlyle did—you, him, Barbara Halloway, Henry Simpson—whatever you did, you didn't resort to murder. But she did."

"Whatever Dory's done was to protect herself, and me. Her father."

"Carlyle was her father?" Doug asked.

Dorothy sat back as if perfectly at ease, but her right

hand continued to open and close. "Don't know everything, do you?"

"Enough to turn you over to the FBI."

"Please." With a careless shrug, Dorothy crossed her legs. "I was just a lowly secretary, and one blindly in love with a powerful man. A much older man. How could I know what he was doing? And if you ever prove he was, you'll have a harder time proving I was involved."

"Barbara and Henry Simpson can implicate you. They're happy to." Doug smiled to add punch to the lie. "Once they were promised immunity, they had no problem dragging you in."

"That's not possible. They're in Mex—" She broke off, tightened her lips.

"Talk to them lately?" Lana made herself comfortable in the opposing chair. "They were picked up yesterday, and they're already being very cooperative. They're already building a case against you. We're only here now because of Doug's personal interest. We wanted to talk to you before you were taken in for questioning. You didn't get out in time, Dot. You should've run."

"I've never run. That idiot Simpson and his trophy wife can say anything they want. They'll never have enough to indict me."

"Maybe not. Just tell me why," Doug demanded. "Why did you take her?"

"I took no one. That would've been Barbara. There were others, of course." She drew a breath. "And, if and when it becomes necessary, I can and will name names. For my own deal."

"Why take any of them?"

"I want to call my daughter again."

"Answer the questions, we'll give you the phone." Lana set it in her lap, folded her hands over it. "We're not the police. You know enough about the law to understand that nothing you say to us is admissible. It's hearsay."

She stared at the phone. Lana saw the genuine worry. She's afraid for her daughter, she thought. Whatever she is, she's still a mother.

“Why did he do it?” Doug pressed. “All I’m asking you is why he did it.”

“It was Marcus’s personal crusade—and his very profitable hobby.”

“Hobby,” Lana whispered.

“He thought of it that way. There were so many couples with healthy bank balances who couldn’t conceive. And so many others who were struggling financially who had child after child. One per couple, that was his viewpoint. He handled a number of adoptions, legitimate ones. They were so complicated, so drawn out. He saw this as a way to expedite.”

“And the hundreds of thousands of dollars he earned from the sale of children didn’t enter into it.”

She sent Lana a bored look. “Of course it did. He was a very astute businessman. Marcus was a powerful man in every way. Why weren’t you enough for your parents?” she asked Doug. “Why wasn’t one child enough? In a way, they were surrogates for another couple. One who desperately wanted a child and had the means to support that child very well. Who were loving people in a stable relationship. That was essential.”

“You gave them no choice.”

“Ask yourself this: If your sister was given the choice today, who would it be? The people who conceived her, or the parents who raised her?”

There was conviction in her voice now. “Ask yourself that question, and think carefully before you continue with this. If you walk away, no one else has to know. No one else has to be put through the emotional turmoil. If you don’t walk away, you won’t be able to stop it. All those families torn apart. Just for your satisfaction.”

“All those families torn apart,” Lana said as she rose, “so Marcus Carlyle could make a profit from playing God.”

She handed Doug the phone. “Call the police.”

“My daughter.” Dorothy sprang to her feet. “You said I could call my daughter.”

“I lied,” Lana said, and took great personal satisfaction in shoving the woman back into the chair.

Twenty-eight

A few hundred miles away, Callie scrambled out of a six-foot hole even as she clicked off her cell phone. It was temper that propelled her up and out, that had her lips peeling back from her teeth when she spotted Dory briskly crossing the field toward the cars and trucks parked on the side of the road.

She shot off in a sprint, cutting through the mounds, leaping over a stunned Digger by the kitchen midden.

It was his instinctive shout that had Dory whipping her head around. Their eyes met, one thudding heartbeat. Callie saw it then—the rage, the acknowledgment, the fear—then Dory broke into a run.

Through the buzzing in her ears, Callie could hear other shouts, a quick, surprised laugh, a blistering guitar riff from someone's radio. But all that was distant, down some long, parallel tunnel.

Her focus had fined down to one goal. She saw nothing but Dory. And she was gaining.

When Bob crossed Dory's path, he came into Callie's field of vision, his clipboard in his hand, his mouth moving

to the tune of whatever played in his headset. He went over like a tenpin, papers flying, as Dory rammed him.

Neither woman slowed pace. He was still flat out when Callie pumped her legs, flew over him and, using the momentum, plowed her body into Dory's.

The force sent them both sailing over buckets and tools, an airborne instant before they hit the ground with a jar of bones and a tangle of limbs.

There was a red haze in front of her eyes, a primal, violent beat in her blood. She heard someone screaming, but her own breath only grunted out as she used fists, feet, elbows, knees. They rolled over dirt, grappling, clawing. Something sharp dug hard into Callie's back, and her eyes watered with the bright pain as her hair was viciously yanked.

She scented blood, tasted it, then kicked in blind fury as she was lifted straight up into the air.

She couldn't separate the sounds that rose around her. She could see nothing but the woman on the ground, people gathering around her. She kicked back, hard, then went down again with a thud. Even with her arms pinned she fought to free herself so she could fall on Dory again.

"Stop it! Goddamn it, Callie, stop or I'm going to have to hurt you."

"Let go of me. Let go! I'm not finished."

"She is." Jake tightened his hold, struggled to get his own wind back. "From the looks of it, I'd say you broke her nose."

"What?" The mists were clearing. Her breath was in rags, her hands still fisted. But the wild rage began to level. Blood was spilling out of Dory's nose, and her right eye was already swollen. As Leo tried to mop up the damage, Dory moaned and wept.

"She's the one," Callie panted out. "She's the one."

"I got that part. If I let you go, are you going to jump her again?"

"No." Callie sucked in a wheezing breath. "No."

"Hell of a tackle, Dunbrook." He loosened his hold but didn't release her. It took some maneuvering to shift him-

self so that he crouched between her and Dory. After a brief study of her face, he winced. "Man, look at you. She landed a few."

"I don't feel anything yet."

"You will."

"Move aside, Jake. I'm not going to hit her again, but I've got something to say to her."

Cautious, he kept a hand on her shoulder, moved enough for her to lean past him.

"Shut up." Though she looked directly at Dory as she spoke, everyone else dropped into silence. "The tackle was for Rosie."

"You're crazy." Still weeping, Dory held both hands up to her bruised face and rocked.

"The nose, that's for Bill. The black eye, we'll give that to Dolan."

"You're crazy, you must be crazy." On a pathetic sob, Dory held up her blood-smeared hands as if in plea to the rest of the team. "I don't know what she's talking about."

"Any other damage," Callie continued, "we'll just chalk up to you being a lying, murdering bitch. And what's to come is for what you helped do to my family."

"I don't know what she's talking about. She attacked me. You all saw it. I need a doctor."

"Jeez, Callie." Frannie bit her lip and huddled behind Dory. "I mean, jeez. You just jumped on her and started punching. She's really hurt."

"She killed Bill. And she put Rosie in the hospital." Her hand snaked out, grabbed Dory by her torn shirt before anyone could stop her. "You're lucky Jake pulled me off."

"Keep her away from me," Dory pleaded as she cringed back. "She's lost her mind. I'm going to have you arrested."

"We'll see who spends tonight in jail."

"I think everybody should calm down. I think everybody should just calm down." Bob raked his fingers through his messy hair. "That's what I think."

"You're sure about this, Callie?" Leo demanded.

"Yeah, I'm sure. They've got your mother, Dory. But you know that already. It's all falling apart on you. It started

falling apart when Suzanne recognized me. You worked hard to keep it together. You killed to keep it together. But you're done now."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Well." Leo let out a windy sigh as he got to his feet. "Let's call the police and sort this out."

Jake dabbed antiseptic on the claw marks along Callie's collarbone. He'd moved her away from the rest of the team, leaving them tending to Dory.

He glanced over his shoulder, noted that Bob was patting Dory's shoulder and Frannie offering her a cup of water. "She's smart, and she plays a good game. She's working on convincing everybody you went after her out of the blue."

"It won't stick. Doug and Lana have Dorothy Spencer in Charlotte. That's enough of a connection to convince Hewitt to take her in for questioning."

"She's not here alone."

Callie hissed out a breath. Lana's call had wiped everything but Dory out of her mind. "I wasn't thinking. I just acted. But damn it, Jake, she would've gotten away. She was heading for the cars. She'd've been gone if I hadn't gone after her."

"I'm not arguing with that. You stopped her; she had to be stopped. We can count on Doug and Lana to give the Charlotte cops the picture. We've got more pieces, and we'll put them together until we have the whole picture."

"She ate meals with us. She cried over Bill, and after the trailer went up, she worked harder than anyone to clear the site."

"And she'd have killed you if she could." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Now she's going to work all the angles. So we've got to be—"

"Calm and focused," she finished. "I need to get up, move around before I'm stiff as a plank. Give me a hand?"

He helped her up, watched her take a few limping steps.

“Babe, you need a soak in hot water, a rubdown and some good drugs.”

“Oh boy, do I. But it can wait. Maybe you could call the troops in Charlotte, let them know we’ve got Dory under wraps.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of it. Stay away from her, Cal.” He noted the direction of her stone-cold gaze. “I mean it. The less you say to her, the less she knows. And the more you’ll have to give the cops.”

“I hate when you’re logical, rational and right.”

“Wow. I bet that hurt, too, didn’t it?”

It made her smile, and curse as her lip throbbed. Then she squared her shoulders as she saw the sheriff’s cruiser pull up. “Well, here we go.”

Sheriff Hewitt folded a piece of gum into his mouth. He kept his attention on the deputy who helped Dory into another cruiser for transportation to the ER.

“It’s an interesting story, Dr. Dunbrook, but I can’t arrest a woman for murder on your say-so.”

“It’s more than my say-so. The dots are all there. You just have to connect them. She’s Marcus Carlyle’s daughter, by Dorothy McLain Spencer, who was his secretary. She lied about who she was.”

“Well now, she says not. Isn’t denying the blood kin, just saying that she’s who she says she is.”

“And didn’t bother to mention it when Lana’s office went up, when Bill was killed, when she knew that I was looking for Carlyle and anyone linked to him.”

He blew out a breath. “Says she didn’t know about that.”

“That’s just bullshit. Are you going to believe that she just happened to show up on this project? The daughter of the man who’s responsible for kidnapping me just happens to join my team?”

“Fact is, you just happened to show up on this project. But I’m not saying I believe her.” He held up a hand before

Callie could explode. "There's a few too many coincidences to suit me, and she's one of them. That's a long way from charging her with killing that boy, or Ron Dolan. Can't even prove she was here when Dolan was killed. I'm going to be talking to her further. I'm going to be talking to the Charlotte police and the FBI. I'm going to do my job."

He shifted his attention, studied her bruised face. "Might be a good idea if you let me do it, instead of trying to do it for me."

"She was running."

"I'm not saying she wasn't. She claims she was just stretching her legs when you jumped her. And your witnesses have conflicting observations on that. You ought to consider the fact I'm not charging you with assault."

"You ought to consider the fact she decided to stretch her legs when her mother called from Charlotte to warn her she'd been found."

"I'm going to check that out. Dr. Dunbrook, I don't tell you how to dig up this field. Don't tell me how to investigate a case. Best thing for you to do is go on back to the house, put some ice on that cheekbone there. Looks painful. I want everybody to stay where I can find them while I'm sorting this out."

"Maybe you should find out if Dorothy Spencer's taken any trips to Woodsboro lately, because Dory didn't do all this alone."

He pointed a finger at her. "Go on home, Dr. Dunbrook. I'll be in touch when there's something you need to know."

She kicked a stone as he walked away. "Calm and focused, my ass."

She soaked a symphony of bruises in the tub, took a Perocet and stewed. There had to be more that could be done, and she intended to do it.

She pulled on her baggiest pants and shirt, and though she cast a longing glance at the bed, she limped her way downstairs.

Conversation shut off like a turned tap when she walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator for a drink.

"Maybe you should have some tea. Ah, some herbal tea." Frannie sprang to her feet, then just stood twisting her fingers together.

"We got any?"

"Yeah, I could make it for you. She was running," Frannie burst out, then shot a defiant look at the others around the table. "She was. And if she hurt Bill and Rosie then I'm glad you kicked her ass."

She stalked to the stove, grabbed a pot. She was sniffing as she filled it with water.

"Thanks, Frannie." Callie turned as Jake came in. "I know everybody's upset and confused. I know everybody liked Dory. I liked her, too. But unless somebody wants to stand up and say they put Seconal in my jug, the Seconal that put Rosie in the hospital, that leaves Dory."

"Cal says Dory did it." Digger jerked his head in a nod. "Dory did it."

"Yeah, but..." Bob shifted in his seat. "It's not right to turn on her like this. It isn't right to turn on one of our own."

"She knocked you flat on your ass," Digger reminded him.

"Well, yeah, but still."

"Was she running?" Callie demanded.

"I guess. I don't know. I wasn't paying attention. Man, Callie, she was the one who called the ambulance for Rosie. And when Bill... when that happened, she fell to pieces."

"She told Sonya Callie wanted her off the project." Frannie blinked at tears as she set the pot on the stove. "You can ask her, ask Sonya. She said how Callie wanted her gone because she thought she was fooling around with Jake, and how Callie's jealous of every other woman on the project, and she was just waiting for a chance to kick her off."

"Christ." Matt rubbed his face. "That doesn't mean anything. That's just girl shit. Look, I don't know what's going

on. I don't think I want to. I just can't see that Dory had anything to do with Bill. I just can't see it."

"You don't have to." Jake opened a bottle of water. "I just got off the phone with Lana. She and Doug just landed at Dulles. The FBI is questioning Dorothy Spencer. And they're sending an agent here to talk to her daughter. Could be they can see it."

Callie took her tea into Jake's office, sat down, and looked at the time line of her life.

"One of those events changes, everything that follows is affected." Knowing Jake was in the doorway, she sipped at the tea, kept studying the chart. "I still haven't figured out if I'd alter any of the events if I had the choice. If I didn't break my arm, maybe I wouldn't have spent so much time reading all those books on archaeology. If I hadn't booted you out the door, maybe we wouldn't be working on patching things up. If I hadn't turned down the dig in Cornwall to take that sabbatical, I wouldn't have been available for this one. Suzanne Cullen might never have seen me, recognized me. Bill would be alive, but everything Carlyle did would still be buried."

He sat on the worktable beside her. "Philosophy sucks."

"I'm almost finished brooding. You know that crap about me being jealous of Dory's bogus, right? If I'd been thinking straight, I could've stopped her another way. Just called out, asked her to hold up a minute. Something. Then if she'd run, everyone would've seen it. But I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to stop her." She shook her head. "Not even that. I just wanted to hurt her."

"Damn straight," he agreed.

"I should've figured you'd understand the sentiment." She drank some tea and it soothed. "Now I feel sort of let down. I'm counting on the police and FBI to nail it, but it's like I've dug down, layer by layer, and I see pieces of what's under there, but I can't seem to make the whole thing out. And something tells me the whole thing isn't going to be what I wanted to find in the first place."

“A good digger knows you can’t choose what you find.”

“There you go, being rational again.”

“I’ve been practicing.” He picked up her hand, examined the scraped knuckles, wiggled her fingers. “How’s this feeling?”

“Like I plowed it into bone at short range several times.”

Still, she used it to pick up the phone when it rang. “Dunbrook. Sheriff Hewitt.” She rolled her eyes derisively toward Jake, then froze. Saying nothing, she pushed off the table, stood with the phone at her ear another moment, then lowered it. Shut it off.

“They lost her.” She set the phone down carefully before she could give in to rage and heave it through the window. “She walked out. Just fucking walked out of the hospital when the deputy was distracted. Nobody remembers seeing her leave, nobody knows where she went or how she got there. She’s just gone.”

Doug swung by his mother’s. The phone, he’d decided, wasn’t the way to tell her what they’d learned. He wasn’t sure what her reaction might be and knew, at this time of day, before his grandfather had closed the bookstore, before his father had made the trip from his last class across the county line, she’d most likely be alone.

When he was sure she was all right, he’d drive to Lana’s. They’d go together to hook up with Callie and Jake.

He pulled up behind her car.

He wanted to box all of this up, close the lid and set it aside so they could all get on with their lives. He wanted a chance at that life. The sheer normality of it. He wanted to be able to tell his mother he was in love, planning to give her a ready-made grandchild, and he hoped more as time went on.

He walked in the front. He hadn’t paid enough attention to the life his mother had made for herself, he admitted. How she’d built a business, created a home. The way she surrounded herself with pretty things, he mused as he

picked up an iridescent green bowl from a table. The strength and will it must have taken to create even those small bits of normalcy when her spirit had been shattered.

He regretted, very much, not only the way he'd ignored what she'd managed to do, but that he'd resented it.

"Mom?"

"Doug?" Her voice carried down the stairs. "You're back! I'll be right down."

He wandered into the kitchen, sniffed the air gratefully when he scented fresh coffee. He poured a cup, then decided to pour a second. They'd sit at her table, drink her coffee while he told her what they'd learned.

And he'd tell her something he'd stopped telling her too long ago to remember. He'd tell his mother he loved her.

He heard the click of heels on wood—quick, brisk, female. And when he turned, nearly bobbed the second cup of coffee.

"Wow," he managed. "What's up with you?"

"Oh. Well. Just . . . nothing really."

She blushed. He didn't know mothers *could* blush. And apparently he'd forgotten how beautiful his own mother was.

Her hair was swept around her face, and her lips and cheeks were attractively rosy. But the dress was the killer. Midnight blue and sleek, it was short enough to show off terrific legs, scooped low enough at the bodice to give more than a hint of cleavage, and snug enough in between to show off curves he wasn't entirely comfortable thinking about his mother having.

"You hang around the house like this very often?"

Her color still high, she tugged self-consciously at the skirt. "I'm going out shortly. Is that coffee for me? Let me get you some cookies."

She hurried to the counter to pick up a clear glass jar.

"Where are you going?"

"I have a date."

"A what?"

"A date." Flustered, she circled cookies on a plate, just

as she had when he'd come home from school. "I'm going out to dinner."

"Oh." A date? Going out to dinner with some guy? Dressed like . . . barely dressed at all.

She set the plate down, lifted her chin. "With your father."

"Excuse me?"

"I said I have a dinner date with your father."

He sat down. "You and Dad are . . . *dating*?"

"I didn't say we were dating, I said we had a date for dinner. Just dinner. Just a casual dinner."

"There's nothing casual about that dress." Shock was slowly making room for amusement, and trailing just behind was a nice warm pleasure. "His eyes are going to pop right out of his head when he gets a load of you."

"It looks all right? I've only worn it to a couple of cocktail events. Business functions."

"It looks amazing. You look amazing. You're beautiful, Mom."

Surprise, then tears filled her eyes. "Well, for goodness sake."

"I should have told you that every day. I should've told you I love you, every day. That I'm proud of you, every day."

"Oh, Douglas." She lifted a hand to her heart as it simply soared. "There goes the thirty minutes I spent on my face."

"I'm sorry I didn't. I'm sorry I couldn't. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you because I was afraid you blamed me."

"Blamed you for . . ." Even as the tears spilled over, she lowered her cheek to the top of his head. "Oh, Douglas. No. My poor baby," she murmured, and his throat clogged. "My sweet little boy. I let you down in so many ways."

"No, Mom."

"I did. I know I did. I couldn't seem to help it. But for you to think that. Oh, baby." She eased back to kiss his cheeks, then cover them with her hands. "Not for a minute. Not ever. I promise you, not once—even at the worst—did I blame you. You were just a little boy."

She pressed her lips to his brow. "My little boy. I love you, Doug, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you, every day. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you. I shut you out. I shut your father out. Everyone. Then when I tried to open up again, it was too late."

"It's not too late. Sit down, Mom. Sit down." He held her hands as she lowered into the chair beside him. "I'm going to marry Lana Campbell."

"You... Oh my God." Her fingers squeezed his, and more tears spilled over as she began to laugh. "Oh my God! Married. You're getting *married*. What are we drinking coffee for? I have champagne."

"Later. Later when we're all together."

"I'm so happy for you. But your grandfather, he's going to flip. Completely flip. Oh, I can't wait to tell Jay. I can't wait to tell everyone. We'll have a party. We'll—"

"Slow down. We'll get to that. I love her, Mom. I fell in love with her, and everything inside me changed."

"That's just the way it's supposed to be. God, I need a tissue." She got up, pulled three out of the box on the counter. "I like her very much. I always did. And her little boy—" She broke off. "Oh my, I'm a grandmother."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Give me a minute." She pressed a hand to her stomach, breathed deep. "I feel good about it," she realized. "Yes, I feel just fine about that."

"I'm crazy about him. I need you to sit down again, Mom. There are some other things I need to tell you. About Jessica."

"Callie." Suzanne came back to the table and sat. "We should call her Callie."

Twenty-nine

Where would she go?" Callie paced Jake's office, pausing every few steps to study the time line. "No point in going back to Charlotte when her mother's in custody. Her father's dead. But would she risk trying to get out of the country, head down to the Caymans?"

"There might be money there," Lana offered. "Money comes in handy when you're on the run."

"We've established Carlyle was ill, largely incapacitated," Callie went on. "If they were still marketing babies, it's unlikely he played a central role. He was old, sick, out of the country. He was dying. If they weren't still in the business, why go to such lengths to stop me from tracking him down? From finding out? If and when I found him, if and when I gathered enough information to interest the authorities, he'd be gone. Or close to it."

"Logically, his connections feared exposure." Jake continued scribbling on a pad. "Loss of reputation, possible prosecution and imprisonment. Or the business was still operating, which again leads to fear of exposure, prosecution and imprisonment, with the added incentive of loss of income."

"I don't know how you can talk about it like a business." Doug jammed his hands in his pockets. "Loss of damn income."

"You have to think as they do," Callie replied. "See as they do. It's how you understand their . . ." She gestured at Jake. "Culture, the societal structure of their community."

"Your own community may still be compromised." Lana motioned toward the door that connected to the living area. "She didn't do this by herself."

"It's not one of them." Jake pushed through papers he'd spread over his work area, checked data, went back to his pad. "She slipped in because she had a useful skill as well as forged credentials. Not that hard to pass the ID—it only required a decent hand with a computer to generate a connection to the university. A dig like this draws students, draws grads and itinerant diggers. But she had a specific skill."

"Photography," Callie confirmed. "She's a damn good photographer."

"Maybe she makes her living that way." Doug lifted his shoulders. "Her legitimate living."

"She didn't know that much about digging, but she learned fast. She worked hard," Callie added. "Bob and Sonya were here before any of this started. They're clear. Frannie and Chuck come as a set. She didn't know a hell of a lot, but he did. No way this is his first dig. I'd say the same about Matt. He's too knowledgeable about the procedure."

"We've had others come and go since July, and we can't be sure about them." Jake set down his pencil. "But this core group's probably solid."

"Probably," Doug echoed.

"We work with speculation, based on data and instinct," Jake pointed out. "We input what we've got, get the best possible picture, then take the leap."

He picked up a marker and, taking his pad, moved over to the time-line chart.

"I believe the police will find her, just as they'll track down the Simpsons." Lana lifted her hands. "Once they do, they'll gather up the rest. You've already broken the back of the organization. You have your answers."

“There’s more. Still more underneath. I haven’t got it all.” Callie stopped pacing to stand behind Jake. “What’re you doing?”

“Blending time lines. Yours, Carlyle’s, Dory’s.”

“What’s the point?” Doug asked.

“The more data, the more logical any possible speculation.” Callie skimmed the new references as Jake lined them up. The date of Carlyle’s first marriage, the birth of his son, his move to Boston.

“Big gap between the marriage and the arrival of the bouncing baby boy,” she commented.

“People often wait several years before starting a family. Steve and I waited nearly four.”

“It wasn’t as usual to wait this long forty, fifty years ago. And six years plus, that’s a chunk. Lana, do you have the data on his adoption practice before Boston handy?”

“I can look it up. I brought all my file disks. Can I use your computer, Jake?”

“Go ahead. I’m adding on the dates of your mother’s miscarriages, the stillbirth. Be interesting, wouldn’t it, to have a look at the first Mrs. Carlyle’s medical records?”

“Mmm. You can’t be sure, yet, that’s Dory’s real date of birth.”

“Bound to be close enough. She’s about your age, Cal. Makes her around twenty years younger than Richard Carlyle. According to my math, Carlyle would’ve been over sixty when she was born.”

“Sexagenarian sperm’s been known to get lucky,” Callie commented. “How old’s Dorothy?”

“Late forties, I guess,” Doug said from behind her.

“Well into her fifties,” Lana corrected without looking around. “But very well put together.”

Jake nodded, continued to calculate. “Maybe ten years older than Carlyle junior.”

Doug watched them work. It was similar to watching them cook breakfast, he thought. The moves, the rhythm. “I’m not following this.”

“Lana?” Callie studied the segments, the lines, the grid Jake was creating. “Got anything?”

"I'm getting it. The first adoption petition I found was filed in 'forty-six. Two that year."

"Two years after the marriage," Callie murmured. "Long enough. He'd been in practice, what, six years before he developed an interest in adoptions?" She stepped back, studied the entire chart, watched the pattern and connections form.

"It's a big leap," she said to Jake.

"A logical hypothesis based on available data."

"What is?" Doug stepped up to the chart, trying to find what they could see that he couldn't.

"Richard Carlyle was the first infant stolen by Marcus Carlyle. But not for profit. Because he wanted a son."

Doug shoved his glasses farther up his nose. "You get that from this?"

"Just take a look at it," Callie insisted. "He shifts the focus of his practice two years after his marriage, six years after he began his career. What if he and his wife were having problems conceiving? He develops a personal interest in adoption, researches it, gets to know all the ins and outs of the procedure."

"Then why not just adopt?" Lana put in.

"You have to speculate on his pattern." Jake picked up the coffeepot, shook the dregs, looked hopefully at Callie.

"Not now."

He shrugged, set it down again. "He likes being in charge, calling the shots. His known history of infidelity indicates a man who uses sex, and who sees his prowess as part of his identity."

"Not being able to conceive a child would damage his ego." Doug nodded. "It's all right for the next guy, that's just great. But he's not going to let it be known he may be shooting blanks. But then how—"

"Wait." Callie held up a hand. "One layer at a time. He's not going to publicize an adoption. It doesn't suit his self-image. But he wants a child, and he'd be the type who'd want a son. A girl isn't going to do. He'd want to know exactly who and where that child came from. He wouldn't tolerate the rules they had back then of sealing records on

birth parents. And he's looking around. Look at all these people who have children. Two, three, four kids. Much less worthy than he. Less financially secure, less important. Less."

"It fits." Lana swiveled her chair around. "With what we know about him, it fits his profile."

"He's been representing adoptive parents for years now. He knows the routine, he knows doctors, other lawyers, agencies. He socializes with them. People create their own tribes within tribes," Jake continued. "They form circles with like minds, or with those who bring a knowledge or skill to the group. Using this system, he finds birth parents who may fit his criteria. He takes his time. Then with or without a private arrangement with those birth parents, he takes his son. I'll bet my Waylon Jennings CD collection there'll be no adoption petition or decree on Richard Carlyle filed in the courts, but that fake ones exist somewhere."

"Shortly after, he relocates to Houston. New city, new practice, new social group."

"And because it worked, because he got what he wanted the way he wanted, he saw it as a means to . . . What did Dorothy call it?" Doug asked Lana.

"His mission, his profitable hobby."

"He saw it as his way to meet the needs of other worthy, childless couples. His way." Doug nodded. "And to profit from it. That's, ah, fetched."

"Fetched?" Callie repeated.

"Not so much far-fetched. But pretty fetched."

"Cute. Fetched or not, it's a reasonable supposition. Then you add that somewhere along the line Richard found out. It caused a rift between father and son. Marcus treated his mother shabbily, and perhaps because she didn't give him a son the more traditional way, this increased or caused his infidelities."

"They didn't divorce until he was twenty." Jake tapped his fingers on the time line. "The year Dory was born."

"The marriage suited Carlyle. But now his son's grown. And, possibly, it was during this time Richard discovered the truth. The family's fractured. The marriage is over."

“And Carlyle’s had an illegitimate child with his secretary. That’d be a slap in the face for mother and son.” Now Doug picked up the coffeepot, set it down again. “It’s an interesting theory, but I don’t see how it helps locate Dory.”

“There’s another layer.” Callie turned to the time line again. It all seemed so clear to her now. Just brush that last bit of dirt away and everything was right there. “Look at the dates again. The move from Boston to Seattle. About as far away as you can manage. Why? Because your secretary, who you’ve been intimate with, who knows your personal business, your criminal activities, who’s been part of both for years, has just told you she’s pregnant. But not with your child. With your son’s.”

“Dorothy Spencer and Richard Carlyle?” Lana leaped up, hurried over to stand at the chart.

“A young, impressionable boy—maybe one who’s just discovered he’s not who he thought he was. He’s shaken,” Callie surmised. “He’s vulnerable. And he’s angry. The older, attractive woman. If he knows his father’s been with her, it only adds to the pull. ‘I’ll show that bastard.’ Dorothy’s late twenties now, staring at thirty. She’s been working for—and sleeping with—Carlyle for a long time. Given him her first youth. Maybe he made promises, but even if he didn’t she’d be tired of being the other woman. The cliché. And getting nothing out of it. Here’s the son. Young, fresh. Another hook into Carlyle.”

“If we assume she was sleeping with him since she was eighteen, nineteen,” Lana put in, “and there were no previous pregnancies, it might be Carlyle was sterile.”

“Or they were very careful, and very lucky,” Jake said. “More logical to believe it was the younger Carlyle who impregnated her, than the older. He’s sixty and, according to known data and current supposition, had never before conceived a child.”

“Carlyle wasn’t protecting his estranged, dying father,” Callie concluded. “He was protecting his daughter.”

“The question was, where would she go?” Jake drew a circle around Richard Carlyle’s name on the chart. “To Daddy.”

“You run this theory by the cops, they’re going to think you’re crazy or brilliant.” Doug blew out a breath. “But if they’re open to it, and they toss it at Dorothy, she might slip.”

“Let me put it together. On paper.” Lana pushed up her sleeves. “Make it as objective and detailed as possible.” This time she picked up the coffeepot. “But I could use some caffeine.”

“Jeez. Okay, okay, I’ll make it.” In disgust, Callie grabbed the pot. She strode out, then slowed as she wound her way through the living room. She recognized the heroic snores that could only be Digger’s. The lump in the recliner had to be Matt.

She knew the lovebirds had taken a room upstairs, and Leo had stayed over and taken another.

Though she agreed with Jake’s rundown of her team, she detoured upstairs, poked in each room to count heads. Satisfied, she went down to the kitchen, measured out coffee.

“Everybody here?” Jake asked from behind her. “I figured you’d look—and if you didn’t, I would.”

“All present and accounted for.” She dashed salt into the coffee, then poured in the water, set the machine to brew. “If we’re right, this has been going on for three generations. Whether or not Richard Carlyle took an active part, he knew. There’s something even more hideous about that. Passing down this, well, evil, from father to son to daughter.”

“A powerful patriarch using his influence, the strength of his personality, family loyalties. It was the structure the preceding generations grew up in. Their base.”

“And if Richard discovered he was in the same position as I am? Worse, much worse, because his parents, or at least his father, knew. Knew and orchestrated. How could he be a part of perpetuating it, of covering it up, of profiting from it?”

He crossed to her, traced his fingers gently over her bruised cheekbone. “You know as well as I do that environment and heredity help structure an individual. Nature and nurture. He made his choices and they took him down

a different path from any you could've taken. Your genes, your upbringing, your own sense of self wouldn't have allowed it."

"Would I have protected my father anyway? The father I knew and loved? If I'd discovered he was a monster, would I have protected him?"

"I know the answer. Do you?"

She sighed, reached for fresh mugs. "Yes. I wouldn't have been able to. It would have ripped me into pieces, but I couldn't have."

"You found what you were digging for, Cal."

"Yeah. Now it's exposed, in the air. And I have to put it on display. I don't have a choice."

"No." He took her shoulders, drew her back, kissed the top of her head. "You wouldn't."

She turned as the phone rang. "Jesus, it's two in the morning. Who the hell's calling? Dunbrook."

"Hello, Callie."

"Hello, Dory." Callie grabbed a pencil, scrawled on the wall by the phone. *Call the cops. Trace the call.* "How's the nose?"

"It hurts like a bitch. And believe me, you're going to pay for that."

"Come on over. We can go another round."

"We'll go another round, I promise. But you're going to have to come to me."

"When and where?"

"You think you're so smart, so cool, so clever. I've been running rings around you for weeks. I still am. I've got your mother, Callie."

The blood stopped pumping through her veins, iced over. "I don't believe you."

There was a laugh, full of horrible humor. "Yes, you do. Don't you wonder which mother? Don't you want to find out?"

"What do you want?"

"How much are you willing to pay?"

"Tell me what you want and I'll get it."

"I want my mother!" Her voice spiked. The wild rage in

it curdled Callie's stomach. "Are you going to get her for me, you bitch? You ruined her life, and I'm going to ruin yours."

"They're only questioning her." As she began to shake, Callie gripped the counter. "They might have let her go by now."

"Liar! Another lie about my mother and I'll use this knife I'm holding on yours."

"Don't hurt her." Terror clawed icy fingers down her spine. "Don't hurt her, Dory." She reached for Jake's hand, squeezed hard. "Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it."

"Call the police, and she's dead. Understand? Call the police, and you'll have killed her."

"Yes. No police. This is between you and me. I understand that. Can I talk to her? Let me talk to her, please."

"Let me talk to her, please," Dory mimicked. "You're talking to *me*! I'm running the show now, Dr. Bitch. I'm in charge."

"Yes, you're in charge." Callie fought to keep her voice steady.

"And you'll talk to me. We'll talk about payment, about what you're going to have to do. Just you and me. You come alone or I'll kill her. I'll kill her without a second thought. You know I will."

"I'll be alone. Where?"

"Simon's Hole. You've got ten minutes or I start cutting her. Ten minutes, and the clock just started ticking. Better hurry."

"Cell phone," Jake said the minute she hung up. "They're going to try to triangulate."

"No time. She's got my mother. Jesus, ten minutes." She was bolting for the front door.

"Hold it. Goddamn it, you can't go running out without thinking."

"She gave me ten minutes to get to the pond. I can barely make it now. She's got my mother. She's going to kill her if I don't come. Now and alone. For God's sake, I don't even know which one she's got."

He held on a moment longer, then pulled the knife from his boot. "Take this. I'll be right behind you."

"You can't. She'll—"

"You have to trust me." He took her arms again. "There's no room, no time for anything else. You have to trust me. I'm trusting you."

She stared into his eyes and made the leap. "Hurry," she said, and ran.

Sweat trickled down her back as she pushed the Rover to dangerous speeds on narrow, winding roads. Every time her tires screamed on pavement, she bore down harder. Every time she looked down at the luminous dial of her watch, her heart skipped.

It could be a lie, it could be a trap. Still she drove faster than sanity allowed, concentrating on her own headlights as they sliced through the dark.

She made it in nine minutes.

She saw nothing in the field, in the water, in the trees. It didn't stop her from bolting out of the car, swinging over the fence.

"Dory! I'm here. I'm alone. Don't hurt her."

She walked toward the water, toward the trees with fear skating up and down her spine. "It's between you and me, remember. You and me. You can let her go. I'm here."

She saw a light flash, spun toward it. "I'll do whatever you want me to do."

"Stop right there. You made good time. But you could've called the cops on the way."

"I didn't. For God's sake, she's my mother. I won't risk her just to punish you."

"You've already punished me. And for *what*? To prove how smart you are? Not so smart now, are you?"

"It was my life." She moved forward on legs gone weak and trembly. "I just wanted to know how it happened to me. Wouldn't you, Dory?"

"Stay where you are. Keep your hands where I can see them. Marcus Carlyle was a great man. A visionary. And he was smart. Smarter than you'll ever be. Even dead he's better than you."

“What do you want me to do?” Her eyes were adjusted now. She saw Dory, her face ugly with bruises and hate. And sensed something—someone else—just at the edge of her vision. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Suffer. Stay where you are.” Dory stepped back, into the shadows. Seconds later a form rolled forward, halfway to the edge of the pond.

Callie saw a glint of blond hair, a hint of pale skin, and started to spring forward.

“I’ll kill her. You stay back or I’ll kill her.” She held up a gun. “Look at this! I said I had a knife, didn’t I? I seem to be mistaken. This looks like a gun. In fact, it looks like the same gun I used to nearly put a hole in your very sexy ex-husband. I could have, you know.”

She shone the light so Callie was forced to shield her eyes from the glare. “It would’ve been easy. I’d already killed Dolan. That was sort of an accident. I’d intended to knock him out. An impulse thing when I saw him sneaking around—just as I was sneaking around.”

She laughed, poked the bound-and-gagged form with her foot. Callie thought she heard a soft moan, and prayed.

“But I hit him harder than I meant to. Seemed the best thing was to dump him in Simon’s Hole. I hoped you’d get blamed for it, but that didn’t work out.”

I’ll be right behind you, Jake had said, she remembered. Trust him. She had to stay calm and trust.

“You burned down Lana’s office.”

“Fire purges. You should never have hired her. You should never have started poking around in something that didn’t *matter* to you.”

“I was curious. Let her go now, Dory. There’s no point in hurting her. She didn’t do anything. I did.”

“I could kill you.” She lifted the gun, trained it on Callie’s heart. “Then it would be over for you. But that’s just not good enough. Not anymore.”

“Why Bill?” Callie inched forward as Dory stepped back.

“He was handy. And he asked too many questions. Didn’t you notice that? What’s this, what’s that, what are

you doing? Irritated the hell out of me. And he kept wanting to know about the grad classes I was taking, about my training. Just couldn't mind his own business. Just like you. Why, look what I found."

She shoved with her foot again, and another bound figure rolled toward the water. "Running rings around you. See? I've got both your mothers."

Jake came in from the east side of the woods. Quiet and slow, without a light to guide him.

Letting her go alone had been the hardest thing he'd ever done.

He kept low, straining his ears for any sound, his eyes for any movement.

The sound of voices made his heart trip, but he forced himself not to spring up and run toward them. He was armed with only a kitchen knife now. It had been the closest thing to grab, and time was all that mattered.

He shifted direction, moving through the dark toward the sound of voices. And stopped, heart hammering, when he saw the human outline standing in front of an oak.

No, not standing, he realized and, signaling for silence, crept closer.

Two figures, two men. Callie's fathers were bound to the tree, gagged. Their heads sagged onto their chests.

He held up a hand again as he heard the indrawn breath behind him.

"Probably drugged," he whispered. "Cut them loose." He passed the knife to Doug. "Stay with them. If they come to, keep them quiet."

"For Christ's sake, Jake, she's got both of them."

"I know it."

"I'm going with you." He closed a hand over his father's limp fingers, then gave the knife to Digger. "Take care of them."

Callie's heart went numb. The mother who had birthed her, the mother who had raised her. Now both their lives depended on her. "You...you're right. You've run rings around me. But you didn't do this alone. Where's your father, Dory? Can't you face it, Richard? Can't you face it even now?"

"Figured that out, did you?" Grinning widely, Dory gestured with her free hand. "Come on out, Dad. Join the party."

"Why couldn't you leave it alone?" Richard stepped out beside his daughter. "Why couldn't you let it stay buried?"

"Is that what you did? Just accepted. Never looked? How long have you lived wondering, Richard? How can you let this happen now? You're just like me. He took you. Never gave you a choice. Never gave anyone a choice."

"He did it for the best. Whatever he was, he gave me a good life."

"And your own mother?"

"She didn't know. Or didn't want to know, which amounts to the same thing. I walked away from him, walked away from my father and what he was doing."

Her palms were sweating, and still they itched for the knife in her boot. She could kill, she realized, to save her mother—her mothers—she could kill without hesitation. "And that was enough? Knowing what you knew, you did nothing to stop it."

"I had a child of my own to think of. A life of my own. Why sully it with scandal? Why should my life be ruined?"

"But you didn't raise that child. Dorothy did. With plenty of influence from Marcus."

"It wasn't my fault," he insisted. "I was barely twenty. What was I supposed to do!"

"Be a man." Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Dory watching Richard. Probe the right spot, she ordered herself. Carefully, carefully. "Be a father. But you let him step in and take over. Again. He twisted her, Richard. Can you stand there and let this go on? Can you be a part of it? Can you protect her now, knowing she's killed?"

"She's my child. Nothing that's happened was her fault. It was his, and I won't let her be hurt now."

“That’s right. Not my fault,” Dory agreed. “It’s yours, Callie. You brought it all on yourself.” She glanced down at the women sprawled at her feet. “And them.”

“All you need to do is go away for a few weeks,” Richard said. “Disappear long enough to stall the police investigation so that I can get Dory somewhere safe. So I can arrange for Dorothy’s release. Without you, they lose their most vital link. That’s all you have to do.”

“Is that what she told you? Is that how she talked you into spying on the house, into helping her blow up the trailer? Is that how she convinced you to help her do this tonight? Are you so blind you can’t see she’s only interested in causing pain? In revenge?”

“Nobody else has to get hurt,” he insisted. “I’m asking you to give me time.”

“She’ll just lie.” Dory shook back her hair. “She’ll say what she thinks you want to hear. She wanted my grandfather to pay. My mother to pay. Everyone to pay. But she’ll pay now.”

Crouching, she held the gun to one blond head.

“Dory, no!” Richard shouted even as Callie sucked in air to scream.

“Which one will you save?” She shoved the other figure into the water. “If you dive in after her, I’ll shoot this one. If you try to save this one, the other drowns. Tough call.”

“Dory, for God’s sake.” Richard lurched forward, only to freeze when she swung the gun at him.

“Stay out of this. You’re pathetic. Hell, let both of them drown.” She shoved the limp body into the pond, then aimed the gun at Callie. “While you watch.”

“Go to hell.” Braced for the bullet, Callie prepared to dive.

She sensed the movement, barely registered it as Jake rushed out of the trees. She was in the air, over the water, when she heard the shot.

She felt the sting, a quick bite of pain across her shoulder, but she was in the water, swimming desperately to where she’d seen the first of her mothers slide under.

She still didn’t know which one.

But she knew she'd never save them both.

She filled her lungs with air and plunged. She was blind now, diving deep into the black, praying for any sign of movement, any shape.

Her lungs burned, her limbs went heavy and weak in the cold water, but she pushed down, farther down. And when she saw the glimmering shadow, gritted her teeth and kicked with all her strength.

She grabbed hair, pulled. With no time to use the knife, she hooked a hand under rope, using it to tow as she kicked hard toward the surface. Lungs screaming, muscles weeping, she hauled the dead weight up.

White lights danced in front of her eyes. She prayed it was moonlight on the surface. She was clawing at the water now, fighting not to panic as it seemed to come alive and drag her down. Her boots were like lead, and her right arm quivered from the strain.

When her air gave out, she flailed, struggled against her body's desperate need to breathe. Weakened, floundering, she began to sink.

Then she was rising up again as hands pulled her toward the surface.

She broke through, choking, coughing up water, wheezing as air, blessed air, filled her lungs. Still she shoved weakly at Jake as he towed them both toward the bank.

"No. The other one. The other went in a few feet up. Please."

"Doug's in. It's all right. Get her up. Let's get her out. Take her!"

She thought he shouted to someone on the bank, but she couldn't see. The white dots swimming in front of her eyes had gone red, swirling. Her ears were ringing. More hands grabbed for her as she started to crawl her way out.

She rolled toward the unconscious figure, pushed at the hair. And saw Suzanne's face.

"Oh God, oh God." She cast one desperate look toward the pond. "Jake, please, God."

"Hold on." He dove back into the water.

"Is she breathing?" With shaking fingers, she pushed at

tangled hair to try to find a pulse. "I don't think she's breathing."

"Let me." Lana pushed her aside. "Lifeguard, three summers." She tipped Suzanne's head back and began mouth-to-mouth.

Callie shoved herself up, staggered toward the water.

"No." Matt held the gun now, kept it trained on Dory as she lay facedown on the ground. Richard sat beside her, his head in his hands. "You'd never make it, Cal. Then somebody'll have to jump in for you. Cops're coming," he said as the sirens cut the air. "Ambulance, too. We called both as soon as we heard the gunshots."

"My mother." Callie looked toward the pond, back toward Suzanne. Then simply collapsed to her knees when three heads broke the surface.

She heard the wretched coughing behind her. "She's breathing," Lana called out.

"Somebody cut those ropes off her." Trying not to weep, Callie crawled over to help pull Vivian to shore. "Cut those goddamn ropes off her."

A hand came out of the water, took Callie's wrist. "We got yours," Doug managed.

Callie reached out. "We got yours."

Epilogue

Shortly past dawn Callie walked into the hospital waiting room. It was a scene she'd seen too many times to count, but this time it warmed her heart.

Her team, every one of them, was sprawled on any available surface. Since it made her weepy, she was glad none of them was awake to see her cry.

They'd come through for her. At the worst possible moment of her life, they'd come through.

She walked to Lana first, shook her gently by the shoulder.

"What? Oh, God." She pushed at her hair. "Must've dozed off. How are they?"

"Everyone's doing fine. My father and Jay are being released. They want to keep my mother and Suzanne for a few more hours at least. Doug and Roger are still with Suzanne, but they'll be out in a minute."

"How are you?"

"Grateful. More than I can say. I appreciate everything you did, right down to getting the dry clothes."

"No problem. We're family now. I guess in more ways than one."

Callie crouched down. "He's a really good man, isn't he? My brother."

"Yes, he is. He cares very much about you. You've got a family here," she said, gesturing at the sleeping forms, "that changes on you from time to time. You've got another. That changed on you, too."

"I didn't know it was Suzanne I was pulling up." The horror of it was going to live inside her, for a very long time. "I had to make a decision. Go after the one who'd been in the longest."

"She might have died if you hadn't made that decision. That makes it the right one. How's the shoulder?"

Callie worked it gingerly. "Pretty sore. You know how they say it's just a flesh wound? Whole different perspective on that when it's your flesh. Take Doug and Roger home, okay? Doug's worn out, and Roger's too old to be worried this way. Jay, he's not going to leave until Suzanne's released. I think they've got a thing going. Again."

"That would be a nice circle, wouldn't it?"

"I like it. Lana, make them believe everything's all right now."

"Everything is all right now, so that'll be easy. The police have Dory and Richard. There are no more secrets there."

"When it comes out, there'll be others like me. Others like Suzanne and Jay, like my parents."

"Yes. Some will want to dig, discover. Others will want to leave it buried. You did what was right for you, and by doing it, you stopped it from going any further. Let that be enough for you, Callie."

"The single person most responsible was never punished."

"Can you believe that when you do what you do? Do you really think it all ends with bones in the ground?" Lana looked down at her hand, at the finger where her wedding ring had once been.

She'd taken it off, had put it—lovingly—away. And when she had, she'd felt Steve watching her. Lovingly.

“It doesn’t,” she said.

Callie thought of how often she heard the murmurs of the dead when she worked. “So, my consolation is, if there’s a hell, Marcus Carlyle is frying in it?” She considered a moment. “I think I can live with that.”

“You go home, too.” Lana patted her arm. “Take your family here and go home.”

“Yeah. Good idea.”

It took an hour to clear them out. Everyone had to sneak in to see Rosie despite the fact she was scheduled for release that morning.

On the drive back, Callie kept her eyes closed. “I’ve got a lot to say to you,” she told Jake. “But my mind’s pretty fuzzy.”

“Plenty of time.”

“You came through for me, in a big way. And I knew you would. I wanted you to know that I knew you would. I was standing there, scared down to the bone, and I thought, Jake’s right behind me. So it’s got to be okay.”

“She fucking shot you.”

“Okay, you could’ve been about thirty seconds quicker. But I’m not holding that against you. You saved my life, and that’s a fact. I couldn’t get her up alone, and I was going down with her. I needed you, and you were there. I’m never going to forget it.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.”

She opened her eyes when she felt the car stop. Blinking, she stared at the field. “What the hell are we doing here? Jesus, this sure isn’t the time for work.”

“No, but it’s a good spot. Important to remember this is a good spot. Come on with me, Cal.”

He got out, waited for her to join him. Taking her hand, he walked to the gate.

“You think I’m going to be jittery on the dig now, nervous around the water.”

“Doesn’t hurt to put it in its place.” He led her through the gate. “You’ll handle it.”

“Yes, I will. And you’re right. It’s a good spot. An important spot. I won’t forget that either.”

"I've got some things to say to you, and my mind's not fuzzy."

"Okay."

"I want you back, Callie. All the way back."

Still facing the pond, she shifted only her eyes to look at him. "Oh yeah?"

"I want us back, like we were. Only better." Because he wanted to see more of her face, he reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear. "I'm not going to let you go again. I'm not going to let you let us go again. I heard that shot, saw you go into the water. That could've been it."

He broke off, turned away. "That could've been it," he repeated. "I can't wait anymore to settle this between us. I can't waste any more time." He turned back, his eyes smoky in the dim light. His face grim. "Maybe I screwed up some."

"Maybe?"

"So did you."

Her dimples fluttered. "Maybe."

"I need you to love me the way you did before things got away from us."

"That's stupid, Graystone."

"The hell it is." He started to jerk her around, remembered her shoulder, then stepped in front of her. "I didn't give it back to you, the way you were looking for. This time I will."

"It's stupid because I never stopped loving you, you big jerk. No you don't." She threw up a hand, slapped it against his chest to ward him off when she saw the gleam in his eyes. "This time you ask."

"Ask what?"

"You know what. You want me all the way back, then you do it right. You get down on one knee, and you ask."

"You want me to get down on my knees?" He was sincerely horrified. "You want to see me grovel and beg?"

"Yes, I do. Oh yeah. Assume the position, Graystone, or I walk."

"For Christ's sake." He spun around, paced away, muttering to himself.

"I'm waiting."

"All right, all right. Damn it. I'm working up to it."

"I got shot tonight." She fluttered her lashes when he looked back at her. "I nearly drowned. That could've been it," she added, tossing his own words in his face. "And somebody's wasting time."

"You always did fight dirty." Scowling, he strode back, seared her with one look, then knelt.

"You're supposed to take my hand and look soulful."

"Oh, shut up and let me do this. I feel like an idiot. Are you going to marry me, or what?"

"That's not the way to ask. Try again."

"Mother of God." He huffed out a breath. "Callie, will you marry me?"

"You didn't say you love me. And I figure you have to say it ten times to my one for the next five years to even the score."

"You're really getting a charge out of this, aren't you?"

"The biggest."

"Callie, I love you." And the smile that warmed her face loosened the tightness in his chest. "Damn it, I loved you from the first minute I looked at you. It scared me to death, and it pissed me off. I didn't handle it well. I didn't handle it well because for the first time in my life, there was a woman who could hurt me. Who mattered more than I could stand. That really pissed me off."

Moved, she reached down to touch his cheek. "Okay, you've groveled enough."

"No, I'm going to finish this. I got you into bed, fast. Figured it'd burn out. Didn't happen. Yanked you into marriage. Figured everything would level off then. Seemed logical. Didn't happen either. And that—"

"Pissed you off."

"Damn right it did. So I messed things up. I let you mess them up. And I walked away because I was damn sure you'd come running after me. Didn't happen. I won't ever walk away again. I love who you are. Even when you drive me crazy, I just love who you are. I love you. I'm racking those up, aren't I?"

“Yeah.” She blinked at tears. “Doing good. I won’t walk either, Jake. I won’t expect you to know what I need or want. Or assume I know what you’re feeling or thinking. I’ll tell you. I’ll ask you. And we’ll find the way.”

She bent down to kiss him, but when he started to rise, she pushed him down again.

“What now?”

“Got a ring?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“A ring’s appropriate. But lucky for you, I happen to have one.” She pulled the chain from under her shirt, lifted it off and spilled it, and her wedding band, into his hand.

He stared at it with emotion storming through him. “This looks familiar.”

“I didn’t take it off until you showed up here. I asked Lana to bring it with her when she got the dry clothes from the house.”

It was warm from her body, and if he hadn’t already been on his knees, seeing her wedding ring would have dropped him on them. “You wore this the whole time we were separated?”

“Yeah. I’m a sentimental slob.”

“That’s a coincidence.” He tugged a chain from under his shirt, showed her the matching band. “So am I.”

She closed her hand over it, used it to nudge him to his feet. “What a pair we are.”

He closed his mouth over hers, with his hand fisted over her ring at the small of her back. “I wanted to prove I could live without you.”

“Ditto.”

“We both proved we could. But I’m a hell of a lot happier with you.”

“Me too. Oh God.” Despite the pain in her shoulder, she wrapped her arms around him. “Me too. It’s not going to be Vegas this time.”

“Hmm?”

“We’ll find the place, have a real wedding. And we’re buying a house.”

“Are we?”

“I want a base. We’ll figure out where. I want a home with you. Someplace we can try to plant roots.”

“No kidding?” He framed her face, then simply laid his forehead on hers. “So do I. I don’t care where, we can stick a pin in a map. But I want a home this time. Callie, I want kids.”

“Now you’re talking. Our own tribe, our own settlement. This time we build something. This is a good spot.” She let out a long breath. “We’ll find one just as good. We’ll find ours.”

“I love you.” He kissed each of her dimples. “I’ll make you happy.”

“Doing a good job right now.”

“And you love me. Crazy about me.”

“Apparently.”

“That’s good.” He took her hand, strolled with her back toward the car. “Because there’s this one thing. About the wedding.”

“No Elvis impersonators, no Vegas. Nohow. We’re taking this seriously.”

“Absolutely serious. It’s just the wedding is sort of, superfluous, seeing as we’re still married.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “Excuse me?”

He opened the chain, slid her ring off. “I never signed the divorce papers. See, you were supposed to come after me, hunt me down and stuff them down my throat. That was my scenario.”

He opened his chain, took his ring off as she gaped at him.

“You didn’t sign them? We’re not divorced?”

“Nope. Here, put this back on.”

“Just one damn minute.” She curled her fingers into her palm. “What if I’d fallen for somebody else, planned to marry somebody else? What if?”

“I’d have killed him, buried him in a shallow grave. And comforted you. Come on, Cal, let me put it back on your finger. I want to go home and sleep with my wife.”

“You think this is funny, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah.” He gave her that quick, dazzling grin. “Don’t you?”

She folded her arms, narrowed her gaze. Tapped her foot. He just kept grinning.

Then she stuck out her hand. “You’re so lucky my sense of humor is as warped as yours.”

She let him slide the ring on, then took his and did the same. And when he swept her off her feet, carrying her through the gate as a groom might a bride over the threshold, she laughed.

She looked over his shoulder at the work yet to be done, the past yet to be uncovered. They’d dig it out, she thought. Everything there was to find they’d find. Together.



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To my precious Logan, son of my son.
Life will be your treasure box, filled
with the sparkle of laughter, the
gleam of adventure, the shine of
discovery, the flash of magic. And
through all these jewels streams
the steady glow of love.

NORTHERN
LIGHTS

DARK

Finish, good lady; the bright day is done,
And we are for the dark.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!

JOHN MILTON



PROLOGUE

JOURNAL ENTRY · *February 12, 1988*

Landed on Sun Glacier about noon. The flight in rattled the hangover right out of me, and severed those strangling roots of reality that is the world below. The sky's clear, like blue crystal. The kind of sky they slap on postcards to lure the tourists in, complete with a shimmering sun dog around the cold, white sun. I'm taking it as a sign that this climb was meant to be. The wind's about ten knots. Temp's a balmy ten below. Glacier's broad as Whoring Kate's ass, and icy as her heart.

Even so, Kate gave us a proper send-off last night. Even gave us what you could call a group rate.

Don't know what the hell we're doing here, except you gotta be somewhere doing something. A winter climb on No Name's as good a something as any, and better than most.

A man needs a week's adventuring now and then, adventuring that excludes bad liquor and loose women. How else are you going to appreciate the liquor and the women if you don't get away from them for a while?

And bumping into a couple of fellow Lunatics turned not only my

luck at the table but my mood in general. There's little that bums me more than working a job for a daily wage like the rest of the mice on the wheel, but the woman sure will push the buttons.

My windfall should satisfy my girls, so now I'm taking a few days with pals just for me.

Going up against the elements, risking life and limb in the company of other men just as foolish is something I've got to have, just to remind me I'm alive. To do it not for pay, not for duty, not because a woman's nagging your balls blue, but just for pure idiocy is what keeps the spirit sparked.

It's getting too crowded below. Roads going where they never used to go, people living where they never used to live. When I first came, there weren't so many, and the damn Feds weren't regulating everything.

A permit to climb? To walk on a mountain? Screw that, and screw the tight-assed Feds with their rules and their paperwork. The mountains were here long before some government bureaucrat figured out a way to make a buck off them. And they'll be here long after he's winding red tape in hell.

And I'm here now, on this land that belongs to no one. Holy ground never can.

If there was a way to live on the mountain, I'd plant my tent and never leave. But holy or not, she'll kill you, quicker than a nagging wife, and with less mercy.

So I'll take my week, with like-minded men, climbing this peak that has no name and rises above the town and the river and the lakes, that skirts the boundaries the Feds throw up on land that mocks their puny attempts to tame and preserve.

Alaska belongs to none but itself, no matter how many roads or signs

or rules are erected on her. She is the last of the wild women, and God love her for it. I do.

We've established our base camp, and already the sun's dropped below the great peaks and plunged us into the dark of winter. Huddled in our tent, we eat well, pass a joint around, and talk of tomorrow.

Tomorrow we climb.



EN ROUTE TO LUNACY · *December 28, 2004*

Strapped into the quivering soup can laughingly called a plane, bouncing his way on the pummeling air through the stingy window of light that was winter, through the gaps and breaks in snow-sheathed mountains toward a town called Lunacy, Ignatious Burke had an epiphany.

He wasn't nearly as prepared to die as he'd believed.

It was a hell of a thing to realize when his fate hung precariously in the hands of a stranger who was buried in a canary yellow parka and whose face was nearly concealed by a battered leather bush hat perched on top of a purple watch cap.

The stranger had seemed competent enough in Anchorage, and had given Nate's hand a hearty slap before wagging a thumb at the soup can with propellers.

Then he'd told Nate to "just call me Jerk." That's when the initial unease had set in.

What kind of an idiot got into a flying tin can piloted by a guy named Jerk?

But flying was the only sure way to reach Lunacy this late in the year.

Or so Mayor Hopp had informed him when he'd conferred with her over his travel arrangements.

The plane dipped hard to the right, and as Nate's stomach followed, he wondered just how Mayor Hopp defined *sure*.

He'd thought he hadn't given a good damn one way or the other. Live or die, what did it matter in the big scheme? When he'd boarded the big jet at Baltimore-Washington, he'd resigned himself that he was heading to the end of his life in any case.

The department shrink had warned him about making major decisions when he was suffering from depression, but he'd applied for the position as chief of police in Lunacy for no reason other than that the name seemed apt.

And he'd accepted the position with a who-gives-a-shit shrug.

Even now, reeling with nausea, shivering with his epiphany, Nate realized it wasn't so much death that worried him, but the method. He just didn't want to end the whole deal by smashing into a mountain in the fucking gloom.

At least if he'd stayed in Baltimore, had danced more affably with the shrink and his captain, he could've gone down in the line of duty. That wouldn't have been so bad.

But no, he'd tossed in his badge, hadn't just burned his bridges but had incinerated them. And now he was going to end up a bloody smear somewhere in the Alaska Range.

"Gonna get a little rough through here," Jerk said with a drawn-out Texas drawl.

Nate swallowed bile. "And it's been so smooth up to now."

Jerk grinned, winked. "This ain't nothing. Ought to try it fighting a headwind."

"No, thanks. How much longer?"

“Not much.”

The plane bucked and shuddered. Nate gave up and closed his eyes. He prayed he wouldn't add to the indignity of his death by puking on his boots first.

He was never going up in a plane again. If he lived, he'd drive out of Alaska. Or walk. Or crawl. But he was never going into the air again.

The plane gave a kind of jerking leap that had Nate's eyes popping open. And he saw through the windscreen the triumphant victory of the sun, a wondrous sort of lessening of gloom that turned the sky pearly so that the world below was defined in long ripples of white and blue, sudden rises, shimmering swarms of icy lakes and what had to be miles of snow-draped trees.

Just east, the sky was all but blotted out by the mass the locals called Denali, or just The Mountain. Even his sketchy research had told him only Outsiders referred to it as McKinley.

His only coherent thought as they shuddered along was that nothing real should be that massive. As the sun beamed God fingers through the heavy sky around it, the shadows began to drip and spread, blue over white, and its icy face glinted.

Something shifted inside him so that, for a moment, he forgot the roiling of his belly, the constant buzzing roar of the engine, even the chill that had hung in the plane like fog.

“Big bastard, ain't he?”

“Yeah.” Nate let out a breath. “Big bastard.”

They eased west, but he never lost sight of the mountain. He could see now that what he'd taken as an icy road was a winding, frozen river. And near its bank, the spread of man with its houses and buildings and cars and trucks.

It looked to him like the inside of a snow globe that had yet to be shaken, with everything still and white and waiting.

Something clunked under the floor. "What was that?"

"Landing gear. That's Lunacy."

The plane roared into a descent that had Nate gripping his seat, bracing his feet. "What? We're landing? Where? Where?"

"On the river. Frozen solid this time of year. No worries."

"But—"

"Going in on the skis."

"Skis?" Nate abruptly remembered he hated winter sports. "Wouldn't skates make more sense?"

Jerk let out a wild laugh as the plane zeroed in on the ribbon of ice. "Wouldn't that be some shit? Skate plane. Hot damn."

The plane bumped, skidded, slid along with Nate's belly. Then glided gracefully to a stop. Jerk cut the engines, and in the sudden silence Nate could hear his own heart tattooing in his ears.

"They can't pay you enough," Nate managed. "They can't possibly pay you enough."

"Hell." He slapped Nate on the arm. "Ain't about the pay. Welcome to Lunacy, chief."

"You're damn right."

He decided against kissing the ground. Not only would he look ridiculous, but he'd probably freeze to it. Instead, he swung his weak legs out into the unspeakable cold and prayed they'd hold him up until he could get somewhere warm, still and sane.

His main problem was crossing the ice without breaking his leg, or his neck.

"Don't worry about your stuff, chief," Jerk called out. "I'll haul it for you."

"Thanks."

Steadying himself, Nate spotted a figure standing in the snow. It was wrapped in a brown, hooded parka with black fur trim. And smoking in short, impatient puffs. Using it as a guide, Nate picked his way over the ripply ice with as much dignity as he could muster.

“Ignatious Burke.”

The voice was raspy and female, and came to him on a puff of vapor. He slipped, managed to right himself, and with his heart banging against his ribs, made the snowy bank.

“Anastasia Hopp.” She stuck out a mittened hand, somehow gripped his with it and pumped righteously. “Little green around the gills yet. Jerk, you play with our new chief on the way from the city?”

“No, ma’am. Had a little weather though.”

“Always do. Good-looking, aren’t you? Even sickly. Here, have a pull.”

She yanked a silver flask out of her pocket, pushed it at him.

“Ah—”

“Go ahead. You’re not on duty yet. Little brandy’ll settle you down.”

Deciding it couldn’t make things worse, he uncapped the flask, took a slow sip and felt it punch straight to his quivering belly. “Thanks.”

“We’ll get you settled in The Lodge, give you a chance to catch your breath.” She led the way along a tromped-down path. “Show you around town later, when your head’s clear. Long way from Baltimore.”

“Yeah, it is.”

It looked like a movie set to him. The green and white trees, the river, the snow, buildings made of split logs, smoke pumping out of chimneys and pipes. It was all in a dreamy blur that made him realize he was as exhausted as he was sick. He hadn’t been able to sleep on any of the flights and calculated it had been nearly twenty-four hours since he’d last been horizontal.

“Good, clear day,” she said. “Mountains put on a show. Kind of picture brings the tourists in.”

It was postcard perfect, and just a little overwhelming. He felt like he’d walked into that movie—or someone else’s dream.

“Glad to see you geared up good.” She measured him as she spoke. “Lot of Lower 48ers show up in fancy overcoats and showroom boots, and freeze their asses off.”

He’d ordered everything he was wearing, right down to the thermal underwear, along with most of the contents of his suitcase from Eddie Bauer online—after receiving an e-mail list of suggestions from Mayor Hopp. “You were pretty specific about what I’d need.”

She nodded. “Specific, too, about what we need. Don’t disappoint me, Ignatious.”

“Nate. I don’t intend to, Mayor Hopp.”

“Just Hopp. That’s what they call me.”

She stepped up on a long wooden porch. “This is The Lodge. Hotel, bar, diner, social club. You got a room here, part of your salary. You decide you want to live elsewhere, that’s on you. Place belongs to Charlene Hidel. She serves a good meal, keeps the place clean. She’ll take care of you. She’ll also try to get into your pants.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a good-looking man, and Charlene’s got a weakness. She’s too old for you, but she won’t think so. You decide you don’t either, that’s up to you.”

Then she smiled, and he saw that under her hood she had a face ruddy as an apple and shaped the same way. Her eyes were nut brown and lively, her mouth long and thin and quirked at the corners.

“We got us a surplus of men, like most of Alaska. That doesn’t mean the local female population won’t come sniffing. You’re fresh meat and a

lot of them are going to want a taste. You do what you please on your free time, Ignatious. Just don't go banging the girls on town time."

"I'll write that down."

Her laugh was like a foghorn—two quick blasts. To punctuate it, she slapped him on the arm. "You might do."

She yanked open the door and led him into blessed warmth.

He smelled wood smoke and coffee, something frying with onions and a woman's come-get-me perfume.

It was a wide room informally sectioned into a diner with two- and four-tops, five booths, and a bar with stools lined up with their red seats worn in the center from years of asses settling down.

There was a wide opening to the right, and through it he could see a pool table and what looked like foosball, and the starry lights of a jukebox.

On the right, another opening showed what looked like a lobby. He saw a section of counter, and cubbyholes filled with keys, a few envelopes or message sheets.

A log fire burned briskly, and the front windows were angled to catch the spectacular mountain view.

There was one enormously pregnant waitress with her hair done in a long, glossy black braid. Her face was so arresting, so serenely beautiful, he actually blinked. She looked to him like the Native Alaskan version of the Madonna with her soft, dark eyes and golden skin.

She was topping off coffee for two men in a booth. A boy of about four sat at a table coloring in a book. A man in a tweed jacket sat at the bar, smoking, and reading a tattered copy of *Ulysses*.

At a far table a man with a brown beard that spilled onto the chest of his faded buffalo-check flannel shirt appeared to be holding an angry conversation with himself.

Heads turned in their direction, and greetings were called out to Hopp as she tossed her hood back to reveal a springy mop of silver hair. Gazes locked onto Nate that ranged from curiosity and speculation to open hostility from the beard.

“This here’s Ignatious Burke, our new chief of police.” Hopp announced this as she yanked down the zipper of her parka. “We got Dex Trilby and Hans Finkle there in the booth, and that’s Bing Karlovski over there with the scowl on what you can see of his face. Rose Itu is waiting tables. How’s that baby today, Rose?”

“Restless. Welcome, Chief Burke.”

“Thanks.”

“This is The Professor.” Hopp tapped Tweed Jacket on the shoulder as she crossed to the bar. “Anything different in that book since the last time you read it?”

“Always something.” He tipped down a pair of metal-framed reading glasses to get a better view of Nate. “Long trip.”

“It was,” Nate agreed.

“Not over yet.” Shoving his glasses back into place, The Professor went back to his book.

“And this handsome devil is Jesse, Rose’s boy.”

The boy kept his head bent over his coloring book, but lifted his gaze so his big, dark eyes peered out under a thick fringe of black bangs. He reached out, tugged Hopp’s parka so that she bent down to hear his whisper.

“Don’t you worry. We’ll get him one.”

The door behind the bar swung open and a big, black truck in a big, white apron came out. “Big Mike,” Hopp announced. “He’s the cook. Was a Navy man until one of our local girls caught his eye when she was down in Kodiak.”

“Snared me like a trout,” Big Mike said with a grin. “Welcome to Lunacy.”

“Thanks.”

“We’re going to want something good and hot for our new chief of police.”

“Fish chowder’s good today,” Big Mike told her. “Ought to do the trick. Unless you’d rather bite into some red meat, chief.”

It took Nate a moment to identify himself as *chief*. A moment when he felt every eye in the room focused on him. “Chowder’s fine. Sounds good.”

“We’ll have it right up for you then.” He swung back into the kitchen, and Nate could hear his bone-deep baritone croon out on “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.”

Stage set, postcard, he thought. Or a play. Anyway you sliced it, he felt like some sort of dusty prop.

Hopp held up a finger to hold Nate in place before marching into the lobby. He watched her scoot around the counter and snag a key from one of the cubbies.

As she did, the door behind the counter swung open. And the bombshell walked out.

She was blonde—as Nate thought suited bombshells best—with the wavy mass of sunlight hair spilling down to brush very impressive breasts that were showcased by the low scoop of her snug, blue sweater. It took him a minute to get to the face as the sweater was tucked into jeans so tight they must have bruised several internal organs.

Not that he was complaining.

The face boasted bright blue eyes with an innocence in direct contrast with the plump, red lips. She was a little generous on the paint, and put him in mind of a Barbie doll.

Man-killer Barbie.

Despite the restriction of the outfit, everything that could jiggle did so as she strolled around the counter on skinny, backless heels, wiggled her way into the diner. And posed languidly against the bar.

“Well, hello, handsome.”

Her voice was a throaty purr—she must’ve practiced it—designed to drain the blood out of a man’s head and send his IQ plummeting to that of a green turnip.

“Charlene, you behave.” Hopp rattled the key. “This boy’s tired and half sick. He doesn’t have the reserves to deal with you right now. Chief Burke, Charlene Hidel. This is her place. Town budget’s paying your room and board here as part of your pay, so don’t feel obliged to offer anything out in trade.”

“Hopp, you’re so *bad*.” But Charlene smiled like a stroked kitten as she said it. “Why don’t I just take you up, Chief Burke, get you all settled in? Then we’ll bring you something hot to eat.”

“I’ll take him up.” Deliberately Hopp closed her fist around the key, letting the big black room number tag dangle. “Jerk’s bringing in his gear. Wouldn’t hurt to have Rose bring him the chowder Mike’s dishing up for him though. Come on, Ignatious. You can socialize when you’re not so ready to drop.”

He could’ve spoken for himself, but he didn’t see the point. He followed Hopp through a doorway and up a flight of steps as obediently as a puppy follows its master.

He heard someone mutter, “Cheechako,” in the tone a man uses to spit out bad meat. He assumed it was an insult, but let it go.

“Charlene doesn’t mean any harm,” Hopp was saying. “But she does like to tease a man to death given half a chance.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mom.”

She gave that foghorn laugh again, and slid the key into the lock on room 203.

“Man took off on her about fifteen years back, left her with a girl to raise on her own. Did a decent enough job with Meg, though they’re at each other like she-cats half the time. Had plenty of men since, and they get younger every year. I said she was too old for you before.” Hopp looked over her shoulder. “Fact is, the way she’s been going, you’re too old for her. Thirty-two, aren’t you?”

“I was when I left Baltimore. How many years ago was that?”

Hopp shook her head, pushed open the door. “Charlene’s got better than a dozen years on you. Got a grown daughter nearly your age. Might want to keep that in mind.”

“I thought you women got off when one of your kind bags a younger man.”

“Shows what you know about females. Pisses us off is what it does, because we didn’t bag him first. Well, this is it.”

He stepped into a wood-paneled room with an iron bed, a dresser and mirror on one side, and a small round table, two chairs and a little desk on the other.

It was clean, it was spare and about as interesting as a bag of white rice.

“Little kitchen through here.” Hopp walked over, yanked back a blue curtain to reveal a pint-sized refrigerator, a two-burner stove and a sink the size of Nate’s cupped palm. “Unless cooking’s your passion or hobby, I’d take my meals downstairs. Food’s good here.

“It’s not the Ritz, and she’s got fancier rooms, but we’re on a budget.” She crossed to the other side, pushed open a door. “Bathroom. This one has indoor plumbing.”

“Woo-hoo.” He poked his head in.

The sink was bigger than the kitchen’s but not by much. It didn’t rate a tub, but the shower stall would do him well enough.

“Got your gear, chief.” Jerk hauled in two suitcases and a duffel as if they were empty. He dumped them on the bed where their weight sagged the mattress. “Need me for anything, I’ll be downstairs grabbing a meal. I’ll bunk here tonight, fly back to Talkeetna in the morning.”

He tapped a finger on his forehead in salute and clomped out again.

“Shit. Hold on.” Nate started to dig into his pocket.

“I’ll take care of tipping him,” Hopp said. “Till you’re on the clock, you’re a guest of the Lunacy town council.”

“Appreciate it.”

“I plan to see you work for it, so we’ll see how it goes.”

“Room service!” Charlene sang it when she carried a tray into the room. Her hips swayed like a metronome as she walked over to set it on the table. “Brought you up some nice fish chowder, chief, and a good man-sized sandwich. Coffee’s hot.”

“Smells great. I appreciate it, Ms. Hidel.”

“Oh now, that’s Charlene to you.” She batted the baby blues, and yeah, Nate thought, she practiced. “We’re just one big happy family around here.”

“That were the case, we wouldn’t need a chief of police.”

“Oh, don’t go scaring him off, Hopp. Is the room all right for you, Ignatious?”

“Nate. Yes, thanks. It’s fine.”

“Put some food in your belly and get some rest,” Hopp advised. “You get your second wind, just give me a call. I’ll show you around. Your first official duty will be attending the meeting tomorrow afternoon at Town

Hall, where we'll introduce you to everybody who cares to attend. You'll want to see the station house before that, meet your two deputies and Peach. And we'll get you that star."

"Star?"

"Jesse wanted to make sure you were getting a star. Come on, Charlene. Let's leave the man alone."

"You call downstairs you need any little thing." Charlene sent him an invitational smile. "*Any* little thing."

Behind Charlene's back, Hopp rolled her eyes toward heaven. To settle the matter, she clamped a hand on Charlene's arm, yanked her toward the door. There was a clatter of heels on wood, a feminine squeak, then the slam of the door behind them.

Through it, Nate could hear Charlene's hushed and insulted: "What's the *matter* with you, Hopp. I was only being friendly."

"There's innkeeper friendly, then there's bordello friendly. One of these days, you're going to figure out the difference."

He waited until he was sure they were gone before he crossed over to flip the locks. Then he pulled off his parka, let it fall to the floor, dragged off his watch cap, dropped it. Unwound his scarf, dropped that. Unzipped his insulated vest and added it to the heap.

Down to shirt, pants, thermal underwear and boots, he went to the table, picked up the soup, a spoon, and carried both to the dark windows.

Three-thirty in the afternoon, according to the bedside clock—and dark as midnight. There were streetlights glowing, he noted as he spooned up soup, and he could make out the shapes of buildings. Christmas decorations in colored lights, in rooftop Santas and cartoon reindeers.

But no people, no life, no movement.

He ate mechanically, too tired, too hungry to notice the taste.

There was nothing out that window but the movie set, he thought. The buildings might have been false fronts, the handful of people he'd met downstairs just characters in the illusion.

Maybe this was all some elaborate hallucination, born out of depression, grief, anger—whatever ugly mix had sent him pinwheeling into the void.

He'd wake up back in his own place in Baltimore and try to drum up the energy to go through the motions for another day.

He got the sandwich, ate that standing at the window as well, looking out at the empty black-and-white world with its oddly celebrational lights.

Maybe he'd walk out there, into that empty world. He'd become a character in the odd illusion. Then he'd fade to black, like the last reel of an old movie. And it would be over.

As he stood, half thinking it could be over, half wishing it would be, a figure stepped into frame. It wore red—bright and bold—that seemed to leap out of that colorless scene and thrum movement into it.

Those movements were definite and brisk. Life with a mission, movement with purpose. Quick, competent strides over the white that left the shadow of footprints in the snow.

I was here. I'm alive and I was here.

He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman, or a child, but there was something about the slash of color, the confidence of the gait, that caught his eye and interest.

As if sensing observation, the figure stopped, looked up.

Nate had the impression of white and black again. White face, black hair. But even that was blurred with the dark and the distance.

There was a long moment of stillness, of silence. Then the figure began to walk again, striding toward The Lodge, and disappearing from view.

Nate yanked the drapes over the glass, stepped away from the window.

After a moment's debate, he dragged his cases off the bed, left them dumped, unpacked, on the floor. He stripped down, ignored the chill of the room against his naked skin, and crawled under the mountain of blankets the way a bear crawls into his winter cave.

He lay there, a man of thirty-two with a thick, disordered mass of chestnut hair that waved around a long, thin face gone lax with exhaustion and a despair that blurred eyes of smoky gray. Under a day's worth of stubble, his skin was pale with the drag of fatigue. Though the food had eased the rawness in his belly, his system remained sluggish, like that of a man who couldn't quite shake off a debilitating flu.

He wished Barbie—Charlene—had brought up a bottle instead of the coffee. He wasn't much of a drinker, which he figured is what had saved him from spiraling into alcoholism along with everything else. Still, a couple of good belts would help turn off his brain and let him sleep.

He could hear the wind now. It hadn't been there before, but it was moaning at the windows. With it, he heard the building creak and the sound of his own breathing.

Three lonely sounds only more lonely as a trio.

Tune them out, he told himself. Tune them all out.

He'd get a couple hours' sleep, he thought. Then he'd shower off the travel grime, pump himself full of coffee.

After that, he'd decide what the hell he was going to do.

He turned off the light so the room plunged into the dark. Within seconds, so did he.



TWO

THE DARK SURROUNDED HIM, sucked at him like mud when the dream shoved him out of sleep. His breath whooshed out as he broke the surface, floundered his way to the air. His skin was clammy with sweat as he fought his way clear of blankets.

The scent in the air was unfamiliar—cedar, stale coffee, some underlying tone of lemon. Then he remembered he wasn't in his Baltimore apartment.

He'd gone crazy, and he was in Alaska.

The luminous dial of the bedside clock read five forty-eight.

So he'd gotten some sleep before the dream had chased him back to reality.

It was always dark in the dream, too. Black night, pale, dirty rain. The smell of cordite and blood.

Jesus, Nate, Jesus. I'm hit.

Cold rain streaming down his face, warm blood oozing through his fingers. His blood, and Jack's blood.

He hadn't been able to stop the blood from oozing any more than he'd been able to stop the rain from streaming. They were both beyond him and, in that Baltimore alley, had washed away what had been left of him.

Should've been me, he thought. Not Jack. He should've been home with his wife, with his kids, and it should've been me dying in a filthy alley in the filthy rain.

But he'd gotten off with a bullet in the leg, and a second, in-and-out punch in the side just above the waist, just enough to take him down, slow him down, so Jack had gone in first.

Seconds, small mistakes, and a good man was dead.

He had to live with it. He'd considered ending his own life, but it was a selfish solution and did nothing to honor his friend, his partner. Living with it was harder than dying.

Living was more punishment.

He got up, walked into the bathroom. He found himself pathetically grateful for the thin spurt of hot water out of the shower head. It was going to take a while for the spurt to carve away what felt like layers of grime and sweat, but that was okay. Time wasn't a problem.

He'd get himself dressed, go downstairs, have some coffee. Maybe he'd give Mayor Hopp a call and go down to take a look at the station house. See if he could be a little more coherent and brush off some of that first impression of a bleary-eyed moron.

He felt more like himself once he'd showered and shaved. Digging out fresh clothes, he layered himself into them.

Picking up his outdoor gear, he glanced at himself in the mirror. "Chief of Police Ignatious Burke, Lunacy, Alaska." He shook his head, nearly smiled. "Well, chief, let's go get you a star."

He headed downstairs, surprised at the relative quiet. From what he'd read, places like The Lodge were the gathering spots for locals. Winter nights were long and dark and lonely, and he'd expected to hear some bar noise, maybe the clatter of pool balls, some ancient country-western tune from the juke.

But when he stepped in, the beautiful Alaskan Rose was topping off coffee, much as she'd been before. It might've been for the same two men, Nate wasn't sure. Her boy was sitting at a table, coloring industriously.

Nate checked the watch he'd set to local time. Seven-ten.

Rose turned from the table, smiled at him. "Chief."

"Quiet tonight."

Her whole face lit with a smile. "It's morning."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's seven o'clock, in the morning. Bet you could use some breakfast."

"I . . ."

"Takes a while to get used to it." She nodded toward the dark windows. "It'll lighten up for a while, in a few hours. Why don't you have a seat. I'll bring you coffee to start you off."

He'd slept around the clock, and didn't know whether to be embarrassed or delighted. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten more than four or five patchy hours of sleep.

He dumped his outer gear on the bench of a booth, then decided to make an effort at community relations. Walking over to Jesse's table, he tapped the back of a chair. "This seat taken?"

The boy took a slow, under-the-bangs peek, and shook his head. With his tongue caught between his teeth, he continued to color as Nate sat down.

"Pretty cool purple cow," Nate commented, studying the current work-in-progress.

"Cows don't come in purple 'less you color them that way."

"I heard that. You take art in high school?"

Jesse's eyes rounded. "I don't go to school yet 'cause I'm only four."

"You're kidding. Four? I figured you for about sixteen." Nate eased

back, winked at Rose as she brought him a thick, white mug and poured coffee into it.

"I had a birthday and we had cake, and a million balloons. Right, Mom?"

"That's right, Jesse." She laid a menu beside Nate's elbow.

"And we're having a baby really soon. And I've got two dogs, and—"

"Jesse, let Chief Burke look at his menu."

"Actually, I was going to ask Jesse to give me a recommendation. What's good for breakfast, Jesse?"

"Short stack!"

"Short stack it is." He handed the menu back to Rose. "We're fine."

"If that changes, you let me know." But she was pink in the cheeks with pleasure.

"What kind of dogs?" Nate asked, and was entertained with the exploits of Jesse's pets throughout breakfast.

A plate of pancakes and a charming young boy were a much better way to start the day than a recurring nightmare. His mood improved, Nate was on the point of calling Hopp when she came through the door.

"Heard you were up and around," she said, and tossed back her hood. Snow showered from her parka. "You look some sturdier than you did yesterday."

"Sorry I faded on you."

"No problem. Got yourself a good night's sleep, decent breakfast, good company," she added with a grin for Jesse. "You up for a tour?"

"Sure." He got up to pile on his outdoor gear.

"Skinnier than I expected."

He looked over at Hopp. He knew he looked gaunt. A man dropped more than ten pounds from a tuned-up one-sixty on a five-ten frame, gaunt was the usual result. "Won't be, I keep eating short stacks."

“Lot of hair.”

He pulled on his watch cap. “It just keeps growing out of my head.”

“I like hair on a man.” She yanked open the door. “Red hair, too.”

“It’s brown,” he corrected automatically, and pulled the cap lower.

“All right. Get off your feet awhile Rose,” she called back, then trudged out into the wind and snow.

The cold struck him like a runaway train. “Jesus Christ. It freezes your eyeballs.”

He jumped into the Ford Explorer she’d parked at the curb. “Your blood’s thin yet.”

“It could be thick as paste, and it’d still be fucking cold. Sorry.”

“I don’t blush at frank language. Of course it’s fucking cold; it’s December.” With her blasting laugh, she started the engine. “We’ll start the tour on wheels. No point stumbling around in the dark.”

“How many do you lose to exposure and hypothermia in a year?”

“Lost more than one to the mountains, but those mostly tourists or crazies. Man called Teek got himself stupid drunk one night, three years ago this January, and froze to death in his own outhouse, reading *Playboy* magazine. But he was an idiot. People who live here know how to take care of themselves, and cheechakos who make it through a winter learn—or leave.”

“Cheechakos?”

“Newcomers. You don’t want to take nature casually, but you learn to live with it, and if you’re smart, you make it work for you. Get out in it—ski, snowshoe, skate the river, ice fish.” She shrugged. “Take precautions and enjoy it, because it’s not going anywhere.”

She drove with steady competence on the snow-packed street. “There’s our clinic. We got a doctor and a practical nurse.”

Nate studied the small, squat building. “And if they can’t handle it?”

“Fly to Anchorage. We’ve got a bush pilot lives outside of town. Meg Galloway.”

“A woman?”

“You sexist, Ignatious?”

“No.” Maybe. “Just asking.”

“Meg’s Charlene’s daughter. Damn good pilot. A little crazy, but a good bush pilot’s got to be, in my opinion. She’d’ve brought you in from Anchorage, but you were a day later than we’d hoped, and she had another booking, so we called Jerk in from Talkeetna. You’ll probably see Meg at the town meeting later.”

And won’t that be fun, Nate thought.

“The Corner Store—got everything you need, or they’ll find a way to get it. Oldest building in Lunacy. Trappers built it back in the early 1800s, and Harry and Deb have added to it since they bought the place in ’83.”

It was twice as big as the clinic, and two stories. Lights were already gleaming in the windows.

“Post office runs out of the bank there for now, but we’re going to break ground for one this summer. And the skinny place next to it’s The Italian Place. Good pizza. No deliveries outside of town.”

“Pizza parlor.”

“New York Italian, came up here three years back on a hunting trip. Fell in love. Never left. Johnny Trivani. Named it Trivani’s at the start, but everybody called it The Italian Place, so he went with it. Talks about adding on a bakery. Says he’s going to get himself one of those Russian mail-order brides you hear about on the Internet. Maybe he will.”

“Will there be fresh blinis?”

“We can hope. Town newspaper runs out of that storefront,” she said, pointing. “The couple who run it are out of town. Took the kids to

San Diego for the school break right after Christmas. KLUN—local radio—broadcasts from that one there. Mitch Dauber runs it almost single-handed. He's an entertaining son of a bitch most of the time."

"I'll tune in."

She circled around, headed back the way they'd come. "About a half mile west of town is the school—kindergarten through twelfth. We've got seventy-eight students right now. We hold adult classes there, too. Exercise classes, art classes, that sort of thing. Breakup to freeze-up we hold them in the evenings. Otherwise, it's daytime."

"Breakup? Freeze-up?"

"Ice breaks up on the river, spring's coming. River freezes up, get out the long johns."

"Gotcha."

"What we got is five hundred and six souls within what we'd call town limits, and another hundred and ten—give or take—living outside and still in our district. Your district now."

It still looked like that stage set to Nate, and far from real. Even farther from being his.

"Fire department—all volunteer—runs out of there. And here's the town hall." She eased the car to a stop in front of a wide log building. "My husband helped build this hall thirteen years ago. He was the first mayor of Lunacy, and held that post until he died, four years ago next February."

"How'd he die?"

"Heart attack. Playing hockey out on the lake. Slapped in a goal, keeled over and died. Just like him."

Nate waited a beat. "Who won?"

Hopp hooted with laughter. "His goal tied it up. They never did finish that game." She eased the car forward. "Here's your place."

Nate peered out through the dark and the spitting snow. It was a trim building, wood frame, and obviously newer than its companions. It was bungalow style, with a small, enclosed porch and two windows on either side of the door, both of them framed with dark green shutters.

A path had been shoveled out or tromped down from the street to the door, and a short driveway, recently plowed from the looks of it, was already buried under a couple inches of fresh snow. A blue pickup truck was parked on it, and another narrow walking path snaked its way to the door.

Lights burned against both windows, and smoke puffed out, a gray cloud, from the black chimney pipe in the roof.

“We open for business?”

“That you are. They know you’re coming in today.” She swung in behind the pickup. “Ready to meet your team?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

He got out, found he was just as shocked by the cold this time around. Breathing through his teeth, he walked behind Hopp down the single-lane path to the outer door.

“This is what we call an Arctic entry up here.” She stepped inside the enclosure, out of the wind and weather. “Helps keep down the heat loss from the main building. Good place to stow your parka.”

She pulled hers off, hung it on a hook beside another. Nate followed suit, then dragged off his gloves, stuck them in one of the parka’s pockets. Then came the watch cap, the scarf. He wondered if he’d ever get used to outfitting himself like an explorer on the North Pole every time he had to go out a door.

Hopp pushed through the other door, and into the scent of wood smoke and coffee.

The walls were painted industrial beige, the floors were speckled

linoleum. A squat woodstove stood in the back right corner. On it a big cast-iron kettle chugged steam from its spout.

There were two metal desks, kissing each other on the right side of the room, and a line of plastic chairs, a low table with magazines arranged on the other. Along the back wall ranged a counter topped with a two-way, a computer and ceramic tabletop Christmas tree in a green that nature never intended.

He noted the doors on either side of it, the bulletin board where notes and notices were pinned.

And the three people who were pretending not to stare at him.

He assumed the two men were his deputies. One looked barely old enough to vote, and the other looked old enough to have voted for Kennedy. Both wore heavy wool pants, sturdy boots, and flannel shirts with badges pinned to them.

The younger one was native Alaskan, with black, ruler-straight hair falling nearly to his shoulders, deep-set almond-shaped eyes dark as midnight, and a painfully young, innocent look to his fine-boned face.

The older was wind-burned, crew cut, sagging in the jowls, and was squinting out of faded, blue eyes fanned by deep grooves. His thick build contrasted with the delicacy of his counterpart. Nate thought he might be ex-military.

The woman was round as a berry, with plump pink cheeks and a generous bosom under a pink sweater embroidered with white snowflakes. Her salt-and-pepper hair was braided into a top-of-the-head bun. She had a pencil sticking out of it and a plate of sticky buns in her hands.

“Well, the gang’s all here. Chief Ignatious Burke, this is your staff. Deputy Otto Gruber.”

Crew cut stepped forward, held out a hand. “Chief.”

“Deputy Gruber.”

"Deputy Peter Notti."

"Chief Burke."

Something in the hesitant smile rang a bell. "Deputy, are you and Rose related?"

"Yes, sir. She's my sister."

"And last but not least, your dispatcher, secretary and bearer of cinnamon buns, Marietta Peach."

"Happy you're here, Chief Burke." Her voice was as southern as a mint julep sipped on a veranda. "Hope you're feeling better."

"Fine. Thank you, Ms. Peach."

"I'm going to show the chief the rest of the station, then I'll leave you all to get acquainted. Ignatious, why don't we take a look at your . . . guest quarters."

She led the way through the door on the right. There were two cells, both with bunk-style cots. The walls looked freshly painted, the floor recently scrubbed. He smelled Lysol.

There were no tenants.

"These get much use?" Nate asked her.

"Drunks and disorderlies, primarily. You have to be pretty drunk and disorderly to warrant a night in jail in Lunacy. You're going to see some assaults, occasional vandalism, but that one's mostly from bored kids. I'll let your staff give you the lowdown on crime in Lunacy. We don't have a lawyer, so if somebody wants one bad enough, they have to call down to Anchorage or over to Fairbanks, unless they know one somewhere else. We do have a retired judge, but he's more likely to be off ice fishing than answering legal questions."

"Okay."

"Boy, you going to keep talking my ear off?"

"I never could learn to keep my mouth shut."

With a half-chuckle, she shook her head. "Let's take a look at your office."

They cut back through the main area where everyone was pretending to work. On the other side of Ms. Peach's counter, just through the doorway, stood the weapons cabinet. He counted six shotguns, five rifles, eight handguns and four wicked-looking knives.

He tucked his hands in his pockets, pursed his lips. "What? No broadsword?"

"Pays to be prepared."

"Yeah. For the coming invasion."

She only smiled and walked through the door next to the cabinet. "Here's your office."

It was about ten feet square with a window behind a gray metal desk. The desk held a computer, a phone and a black gooseneck lamp. Two file cabinets were shoved against the side wall with a short counter running beside them. It held a coffeemaker—already full—and two brown stoneware mugs, a basket with packaged creamer and sugar. There was a corkboard—empty—two folding chairs for visitors and pegs for hanging coats.

The lights mirroring against the black window glass made it seem all the more impersonal and foreign.

"Peach loaded up your desk, but if you need anything else, supply cabinet's down the hall. John's across from it."

"Okay."

"Got any questions?"

"I've got a lot of questions."

"Why don't you ask them?"

"All right. I'll ask this one, since the rest fall down from it anyway. Why'd you hire me?"

“Fair enough. Mind?” she said as she gestured to the coffeepot.

“Help yourself.”

She poured mugs for both of them, handed him one, then sat in one of the folding chairs. “We needed a chief of police.”

“Maybe.”

“We’re small, we’re remote and we pretty much handle our own, but that doesn’t mean we don’t need structure, Ignatious. That we don’t need a line between the right and the wrong and somebody to stand on that line. My man worked for that a lot of years before he sank his last puck.”

“And now you do.”

“That’s right. Now I do. Added to that, having our own police force here means we keep on handling our own. Keep the Feds and the State out of it. Town like this can get ignored because of what it is and where it is. But we got a police force here now, a fire department. We’ve got a good school, good lodge, a weekly newspaper, a radio station. Weather comes in and cuts us off, we know how to be self-sufficient. But we need order, and this building and the people in it are symbols of that order.”

“You hired a symbol.”

“On one hand, that’s just what I did.” Her nut-brown eyes held his. “People feel more secure with symbols. On the other, I expect you to do your job, and a big part of the job, besides keeping order, is community relations—which is why I took the time to show you some of the town’s businesses, give you names of who runs what. There’s more. Bing’s got a garage, fix any engine you bring in, and he runs heavy equipment. Snowplow, backhoe. Lunatic Air runs cargo and people, and brings supplies into town, takes them into the bush.”

“Lunatic Air.”

“That’s Meg for you,” Hopp said with a half-smile. “We’re on the edge of the Interior here, and we’ve built ourselves up from a settlement

of boomers and hippies and badasses to a solid town. You'll get to know the people of that town, the relationships, the grudges and the connections. Then you'll know how to handle them."

"Which brings me back. Why did you hire me? Why not somebody who knows all that already?"

"Seems to me somebody who knew all that already might come into this job with an agenda of his or her own. Grudges, connections of his or her own. Bring somebody from Outside, they come in fresh. You're young; that weighed in your favor. You don't have a wife and children who might not take to the life here and pressure you to go back to the Lower 48. You've got over ten years experience with the police. You had the qualifications I was looking for—and you didn't haggle over the salary."

"I see your point, but there's the other side. I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"Mmm." She finished off her coffee. "You strike me as a bright young man. You'll figure it out. Now." She pushed to her feet. "I'm going to let you get started. Meeting's at two, Town Hall. You're going to want to say a few words."

"Oh boy."

"One more thing." She dug in her pocket, pulled out a box. "You'll need this." Opening it, she took out the silver star, then pinned it to his shirt. "See you at two, chief."

He stood where he was, in the center of the room, contemplating his coffee as he heard the muted voices outside. He didn't know what he was doing—that was God's truth—so the best he could think of was to mark some sort of beginning and go from there.

Hopp was right. He had no wife, no children. He had no one and nothing pulling him back to the Lower 48. To the world. If he was go-

ing to stay here, then he had to make good. If he blew this, this strange chance at the end of the universe, there was nowhere left to go. Nothing left to do.

His stomach jittered with the same sort of queasy nerves he'd experienced on the plane as he carried his coffee out to the communal area.

"Ah, if I could have a couple minutes."

He wasn't sure where to stand, then realized he shouldn't be standing at all. He set down his coffee, then walked over to grab two of the plastic chairs. After carrying them over to the desks, he retrieved his coffee, worked up a smile for Peach.

"Ms. Peach? Would you come on over and sit down?" And though the short stack was heavy in his belly, he boosted up the smile. "Maybe you could bring those cinnamon buns with you. They sure smell tempting."

Obviously pleased, she brought over the plate and a stack of napkins. "You boys just help yourselves."

"I gotta figure this is at least as awkward for all of you as it is for me," Nate began as he plopped a bun on a napkin. "You don't know me. Don't know what kind of cop I am, what kind of man I am. I'm not from around here, and I don't know a damn thing about this part of the world. And you're supposed to take orders from me. You're going to take orders from me," he corrected, and bit into the bun.

"This is pure sin, Ms. Peach."

"It's the lard that does it."

"I bet." He envisioned every one of his arteries slamming shut. "It's hard to take orders from somebody you don't know, don't trust. You've got no reason to trust me. Yet. I'm going to make mistakes. I don't mind you pointing them out to me, as long as you point them out in private. I'm also going to rely on you, all of you, to bring me up to speed. Things I should know, people I should know. But for right now, I'm going to

ask if any of you have a problem with me. Let's get it out in the open now, deal with it."

Otto took a slurp of his coffee. "I don't know if I've got a problem until I see what you're made of."

"Fair enough. You find you've got one, you tell me. Maybe I'll see it your way, maybe I'll tell you to go to hell. But we'll know where we stand."

"Chief Burke?"

Nate looked over at Peter. "It's Nate. I hope to God you people aren't going to take a page from Mayor Hopp and call me Ignatious all the damn time."

"Well, I was thinking that maybe at first me or Otto should go with you on calls, and on patrol. Until you get to know your way around."

"That's a good idea. Ms. Peach and I'll start working out a shift schedule, week by week."

"You can start calling me Peach now. I'd just like to say I expect this place to stay clean, and that chores—which includes scrubbing the bathroom, Otto—get put on the schedule like everything else. Mops and buckets and brooms aren't tools just for women."

"I signed on as deputy, not as a maid."

She had a soft, motherly face. And, like any mother worth her salt, could sear a hole through steel with one firm look. "And I'm being paid to work as dispatcher and secretary, not to scrub toilets. But what has to be done, has to be done."

"Why don't we rotate those chores for the time being?" Nate interrupted as he could see combat fire light both faces. "And I'll talk to Mayor Hopp about our budget. Maybe we can squeeze out enough to hire somebody to come in and swab us out once a week. Who has the keys to the weapon cabinet?"

"They're locked in my drawer," Peach told him.

"I'd like to have them. And I'd like to know what weapons each of you deputies is qualified for."

"If it's a gun, I can shoot it," Otto retorted.

"That may be true, but we're wearing badges." He tipped his chair back so he could see the gun Otto wore in a belt holster. "You want to stick with the .38 for your service revolver?"

"It's my own, and it suits me."

"That's fine. I'm going to take the 9mm SIG from the cabinet. Peter, you comfortable with the nine you're carrying?"

"Yes, sir."

"Peach, can you handle a firearm?"

"I've got my father's Colt .45 revolver locked in my desk, too. He taught me how to shoot when I was five. And I can handle anything in that cabinet, the same as GI Joe here."

"I served in the Corps," Otto retorted, with some heat. "I'm a Marine."

"Okay then." Nate cleared his throat. "How many residents, would you say, own weapons?"

The three of them stared at him until, finally, Otto's lips quirked up. "That'd be about all of them."

"Great. Do we have a list of those residents who're licensed to carry concealed?"

"I can get that for you," Peach offered.

"That'll be good. And would there be a copy of town ordinances?"

"I'll get it."

"One last," Nate said as Peach got up. "If we have occasion to arrest anyone, who sets bail, decides on the term, the payment of fine, and so on?"

There was a long silence before Peter spoke. "I guess you do, chief."

Nate blew out a breath. "Won't that be fun?"

He went back into his office, taking the paperwork Peach gave him. It didn't take long to read through it, but it gave him something to pin up on his corkboard.

He was lining up pages, tacking them on when Peach came in. "Got those keys for you, Nate. These here are for the gun cabinet. These are for the station doors, front and back, the cells and your car. Everything's labeled."

"My car? What've I got?"

"Grand Cherokee. It's parked out on the street." She dumped keys into his hand. "Hopp said one of us should show you how you work the heat block for the engine."

He'd read about those, too. Heaters designed to keep an engine warm when at rest in subzero temperatures. "We'll get to it."

"Sun's coming up."

"What?" He turned, looked out the window.

Then he just stood, his arms at his side, the keys weighing down his hand, as the sun bloomed orange and rose in the sky. The mountains came alive under it, massive and white with the gold streaks sliding over them.

They filled his window. Left him speechless.

"Nothing like your first winter sunrise in Alaska."

"I guess not." Mesmerized, he stepped closer to the window.

He could see the river where he'd landed—a long, saggy dock he hadn't noticed before, and the sheen of ice under the lightening sky. There were hills of snow, a huddle of houses, stands of trees—and he noted, people. There were people, bundled up so thickly they looked like globs of color gliding over the white.

There was smoke rising, and Jesus, was that an eagle soaring over-

head? And as he watched, a group of kids went running toward the iced ribbon of river, hockey sticks and skates over their shoulders.

And the mountains stood over it all, like gods.

Watching them, he forgot about the cold, the wind, the isolation and his own quiet misery.

Watching them, he felt alive.



THREE

MAYBE IT WAS too damn cold, maybe people were on their best behavior, or it might have been that the holiday spirit was entrenched in that week between Christmas and New Year's, but it was nearly noon before the first call came in.

"Nate?" Peach came to his door holding a couple of knitting needles and a hank of purple wool. "Charlene called from The Lodge. Seems a couple of the boys got into a ruckus over a game of pool. Some pushy-shovey going on."

"All right." He got to his feet, fishing a quarter out of his pocket as he walked out. "Call it," he said to Otto and Peter.

"Heads." Otto set down his *Field & Stream* while Nate flipped the coin in the air.

He slapped it on the back of his hand. "Tails. Okay, Peter, you'll come with me. Little altercation over at The Lodge." He snagged a two-way, hooked it to his belt.

He stepped into the entry, began dragging on gear. "If it hasn't broken up by the time we get there," he said to Peter, "I want you to tell me the players straight off, give me the picture. Is it something that's going to turn nasty or can we resolve it with a few strong words?"

He shoved out the door, into the blast of cold air. "That mine?" he asked, nodding toward the black Jeep at the curb.

"Yes, sir."

"And that cord plugged into that pole there would be attached to the heater on the engine."

"You'll need it if it's going to sit for any time. There's a Mylar blanket in the back, and that'll cover up the engine and keep the heat in for up to twenty-four hours, maybe. But sometimes people forget to take them off, and then you're going to overheat. Jumper cables in the back, too," he continued as he pulled the plug. "Emergency flares and first-aid kit and—"

"We'll go over all that," Nate interrupted, and wondered if navigating down a road called Lunatic Street would entail the need of emergency flares and first aid. "Let's see if I can get us to The Lodge in one piece."

He climbed behind the wheel, stuck the key in the ignition. "Heated seats," he noted. "There is a God."

The town looked different in the daylight, no doubt about it. Smaller somehow, Nate thought as he maneuvered on the hard-packed snow. Exhaust had blacked the white at the curbs, and the storefront windows weren't exactly sparkling, and most of the Christmas decorations looked the worse for wear in the sunlight.

It wasn't a postcard, unless you looked beyond the mountains, but it was a few solid steps up from dreary.

Rugged was a better term, he decided. It was a settlement carved out of ice and snow and rock, snuggled tight to a winding river, flanked by forests where he could easily imagine wolves roaming.

He wondered if forest meant bear, too, but decided it wasn't worth worrying about until spring. Unless all that hibernation talk was bullshit.

It took less than two minutes to drive from station house to lodge. He saw a total of ten people on the street and passed a brawny pickup, a clunky SUV, and counted three parked snowmobiles and one set of skis propped against the side of The Italian Place.

It seemed people didn't exactly hibernate in Lunacy, whatever the bears did.

He went to the main door of The Lodge and walked through it just ahead of Peter.

It hadn't broken up. He could hear that plainly enough through the shouts of encouragement—*kick his fat ass, Mackie!*—and the thud of bodies and grunts. What Nate calculated was that a Lunacy-style crowd had gathered, consisting of five men in flannel, one of which turned out to be a woman on closer inspection.

Encircled by them, two men with shaggy, brown hair were rolling around on the floor, trying to land short-arm punches on each other. The only weapon he saw was a broken pool cue.

"Mackie brothers," Peter told him.

"Brothers?"

"Yeah. Twins. They've been beating the hell out of each other since they were in the womb. Hardly ever take a swing at anyone else."

"Okay."

Nate nudged his way through the press of bodies. The sight of him had the shouts toning down to murmurs as he waded in and hauled the top Mackie off the bottom Mackie.

"All right, break it up. Stay down," he ordered, but Mackie number two was already springing up, rearing back. He landed a solid round-house to his brother's jaw.

"*Red River*, numbnuts!" He shouted, then did a victory dance, fists lifted high, as his brother slumped in Nate's arms.

“Peter, for Christ’s sake,” Nate said as his deputy remained immobile.
“Oh, sorry, chief. Jim, settle down.”

Instead, Jim Mackie continued to bounce in his Wolverines to the cheers of the crowd.

Nate saw money being exchanged, but decided to ignore it.

“Take this one.” Nate shoved the unconscious man into Peter, then stepped up to the self-proclaimed champ. “The deputy gave you an order.”

“Yeah?” He grinned, showing blood on his teeth and an unholy gleam in a pair of brown eyes. “So what? I don’t have to take orders from that shithead.”

“Yeah, you do. I’ll show you why.” Nate spun the man around, shoved him against the wall, had his hands behind his back and cuffed in under ten seconds.

“Hey!” was the best the reigning champ could manage.

“Give me grief, and you’ll sit in a cell for resisting arrest, among other things. Peter, bring that one over to the station when he wakes up.”

With no apparent loyalty, the crowd shifted its support to Nate with catcalls and whistles as he muscled Jim Mackie toward the door.

Nate paused when he saw Charlene ease out of the kitchen. “You looking to press charges?” he asked her.

She stared, finally blinked. “I . . . well, hell, I don’t know. Nobody’s ever asked me that before. What kind of charges?”

“They broke some stuff back there.”

“Oh. Well, they always pay for it after. But they did run off a couple of tourists who were going to order lunch.”

“Bill started it.”

“Oh now, Jim, you both start it. Every time. I’ve told you I don’t want you coming in here fighting and causing a ruckus that runs people off. I

don't want to press charges exactly. I just want this nonsense to stop. And payment for damages."

"Got it. Let's go sort this out, Jim."

"I don't see why I have to—"

Nate solved the matter by pushing him out into the cold.

"Hey, Christ's sake, I need my gear."

"Deputy Notti will bring it. Get in the car, or stand here and get frostbite. Up to you." He yanked the door open, gave Jim a heave inside.

Once Nate was behind the wheel, Jim had recovered some dignity, despite the bleeding mouth and puffy eye. "I don't think this is the way to treat people. It ain't right."

"I don't think it's right to coldcock your brother when somebody's holding his arms."

Jim had the grace to look chagrined, and dipped his chin onto his chest. "I was caught up. Heat of the moment. And the son of a bitch *pissed* me off. You're that Outsider's come to be chief of police, aren't you?"

"You're a quick study, Jim."

Jim sulked during the short drive to the station house. Then he trudged along as Nate took him inside.

"Lower 48 here," he said the minute he spotted Otto and Peach, "he doesn't understand how things are done in Lunacy."

"Why don't you explain it all to him?" There was a light in Otto's eyes. It might've been glee.

"Need the first-aid kit. Step into my office, Jim."

Nate led him in, pushed him into a chair, then, after unhooking one of the cuffs, snapped it onto the arm of the chair.

"Aw, come on. If I was going anywhere, I could just take this little dink of a chair with me."

"Sure you could. Then I'd add stealing police property to the mix."

Jim sulked some more. He was a bony man of about thirty, with a shaggy mop of brown hair, a narrow face sunken at the cheeks. His eyes were brown, with the left puffing up nicely from one of those short-armed punches. His lip was split and continued to dribble blood.

"I don't like you," he decided.

"That's not against the law. Disturbing the peace, destroying property, assault. Those are."

"'Round here, a man wants to pound on his fool of a brother, it's his business."

"Not anymore. 'Round here, these days, a man's going to show respect for private property, and public property. He's going to show respect for duly designated officers of the law."

"Peter? That little shithead."

"That's Deputy Shithead now."

Jim blew a sighing breath that had blood spitting out along with the air. "Christ's sake, I've known him since before he was born."

"When he's wearing a badge, and he tells you to settle down, you settle, whether or not you've known him in vitro."

Jim managed to look both interested and baffled. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"I get that." He glanced over as Peach came in.

"Got the first-aid kit and an ice pack." She flipped the ice pack to Jim, set the kit on the desk in front of Nate. Then she fisted her hands on her hips. "Jim Mackie, you just don't grow any smarter, do you?"

"It was Bill started it." Flushing, he pressed the ice pack to his bleeding lip.

"So you say. Where is Bill?"

"Peter's bringing him along," Nate said. "When he wakes up."

Peach sniffed. "Your mother's likely to blacken your other eye when

she has to bail you out.” With that prediction, she walked out, snapped the door closed.

“*Jeez!* You’re not going to put me in jail for punching my own brother.”

“I could. Maybe I’ll cut you some slack, seeing as this is my first day on the job.” Nate leaned back. “What were you fighting about?”

“Okay, listen to this.” Gearing up for his own defense, Jim slapped his hands on his knees. “That brainless jackass said how *Stagecoach* was the best Western ever made when everybody knows it’s *Red River*.”

Nate said nothing for a long moment. “That’s it?”

“Well, *Christ’s sake!*”

“Just want to be clear. You and your brother whaled on each other because you disagreed about the relative merits of *Stagecoach* versus *Red River* in the John Wayne oeuvre.”

“In his what?”

“You were fighting over John Wayne movies.”

Jim shifted on his seat. “Guess. We’ll settle up with Charlene. Can I go now?”

“You’ll settle up with Charlene, and you’ll pay a fine of a hundred dollars *each* for creating a public nuisance.”

“Oh hell now. You can’t—”

“I can.” Nate leaned forward, and Jim got a good look at cool, quiet gray eyes that made him want to squirm in his seat. “Jim, listen to what I’m saying to you. I don’t want you or Bill fighting in The Lodge. Anywhere else for that matter, but for just this minute, we’ll pinpoint The Lodge. There’s a young boy who spends most of his day there.”

“Well, hell, Rose always takes Jesse back in the kitchen if there’s a ruckus. Me and Bill, we wouldn’t do nothing to hurt that kid. We’re just, you know, high-spirited.”

"You'll have to lower those spirits when you're in town."

"A hundred dollars?"

"You can pay Peach, within the next twenty-four hours. You don't, I'm going to double the fine for every day you're late meeting the terms. If you don't want to pay the fine, you can spend the next three days in our fine accommodations here."

"We'll pay it." He muttered, shifted, sighed. "But Christ's sake. *Stagecoach*."

"Personally, I like *Rio Bravo*."

Jim opened his mouth, shut it again. Obviously he took a moment to consider the consequences. "It's a damn good movie," he said after a moment, "but it ain't no *Red River*."

IF NUISANCE CALLS were to be the norm, Nate considered he might have made the right decision in coming to Lunacy. Sibling brawls were probably his top speed these days.

He wasn't looking for challenges.

The Mackie brothers hadn't posed one. His round with Bill had gone along the same lines as his round with Jim, though Bill had argued passionately, and with considerable articulation, regarding *Stagecoach*. He hadn't seemed nearly as upset at being punched in the face as he was about having his favorite movie dissed.

Peter stuck his head in the door. "Chief? Charlene says you should come over and have lunch on the house."

"I appreciate that, but I've got to get ready for this meeting." And he hadn't missed the gleam in Charlene's eyes when he'd hauled off Jim Mackie. "I'd like you to follow this one through, Peter. Go on over there, get a list of damages and replacement costs from Charlene. See

that the Mackie boys get it, and pay the freight within forty-eight hours.”

“Sure thing. You handled that real slick, chief.”

“Wasn’t much to handle. I’m going to write the report. I’m going to want you to look it over, add anything you feel necessary.”

He looked around when he heard a window-rattling roar. “Earthquake? Volcano? Nuclear war?”

“Beaver,” Peter told him.

“I don’t care if it is Alaska, you don’t have beavers big enough to sound like that.”

With an appreciative laugh, Peter gestured to the window. “Meg Galloway’s plane. It’s a Beaver. She’s bringing in supplies.”

Swiveling around, Nate caught sight of the red plane, one that looked the size of a toy to him. Recalling he’d actually flown on one of about the same size, he felt the little pitch in the belly and turned away again.

Grateful for the distraction, he pressed his intercom button when it buzzed. “Yes, Peach.”

“A couple of kids pitching ice balls at the school windows. Broke one before they ran off.”

“We got ID?”

“Yes indeed. All three of them.”

He considered a moment, worked down the order of things. “See if Otto can take it.”

He looked back at Pete. “Question?”

“No. No, sir.” Then he grinned. “Just nice to be doing, that’s all.”

“Yeah. Doing’s good.”

He kept himself busy doing until it was time to leave for the meeting. They were primarily housekeeping and organizational chores, but it helped Nate feel as if he was making his place.

For however long the place was his.

He'd signed on for a year, but both he and the town council had a sixty-day grace period when either side could opt out.

It steadied him to know he could leave tomorrow if he chose. Or next week. If he *was* here at the end of two months, he should know if he'd stick for the term of contract.

He opted to walk to Town Hall. It seemed wimpy somehow to drive so short a distance.

The sky was a clear, hard blue that had the white mass of mountains standing against it as if etched with a thin, sharp knife. The temperatures hovered at inhuman, but he saw a couple of kids burst out of The Corner Store with candy bars in their fists just as kids everywhere burst out of doors with candy. Full of greed and anticipation.

The minute they raced down the sidewalk, hands appeared at the door to turn the Open sign around to Closed.

More cars and trucks were parked on the street now, and others easing along the snow-packed road.

It looked like they'd have a full house at the town meeting.

He felt a quick twist in his gut, one he recognized from his public speaking course in college. A hideous mistake as an elective. Live and learn.

He enjoyed a reasonable amount of conversation. Give him a suspect to interrogate, a witness to interview, no problem—or it hadn't been once upon a time. But ask him to stand up in front of an audience of some sort and speak in coherent sentences? Flop sweat was already snaking a line down his back.

Just get through it, he ordered himself. Get through the next hour, and you'll never have to do this again. Probably.

He stepped inside, into heat and a hubbub of voices. A number of

people stood around a lobby area dominated by the biggest fish Nate had ever seen. He was baffled enough to focus on it, wonder if it was, perhaps, some sort of small, mutant whale—and how in God’s name someone had caught it much less managed to mount it to the wall.

The distraction saved him from worrying overmuch about the number of people looking in his direction, and the number already inside the meeting area, sitting on folding chairs and facing a stage and lectern.

“King salmon,” Hopp said from behind him.

He kept staring at the enormous silver fish that showed its black gums in a kind of sneer. “*That’s* a salmon? I’ve eaten salmon. I’ve had salmon in restaurants. They’re like this big.” He held out his hands to measure.

“You haven’t eaten Alaskan king salmon, then. But truth to tell, this one’s a big son of a bitch. My husband caught it. Came in at ninety-two pounds, two ounces. Short of the state record, but a hell of a prize.”

“What did he use? A forklift?”

She let out her foghorn laugh, slapped him merrily on the shoulder. “You fish?”

“No.”

“At all?”

“Got nothing against it, just never have.” He turned then, and his brows shot up. She’d decked herself out in a sharp-looking business suit with tiny black and white checks. There were pearls at her ears, and a slick coat of red lipstick on her mouth.

“You look . . . impressive, mayor.”

“A two-hundred-year-old redwood looks impressive.”

“Well, I was going to say you look hot, but I thought it would be inappropriate.”

She smiled broadly. “You’re a clever boy, Ignatious.”

“Not really. Not so much.”

“If I can look hot, you can be clever. It’s all presentation. Now why don’t we get this show on the road by me introducing you to the town council members. Then we’ll do our little speeches.” She took his arm the way a woman might as she led a man through a cocktail party crowd. “Heard you dealt with the Mackie brothers already.”

“Just a little disagreement over Westerns.”

“I like those Clint Eastwood movies, myself. The early ones. Ed Woolcott, come over here and meet our new chief of police.”

He met Woolcott, a tough-looking man in his fifties who gave Nate’s hand a politician’s shake. His hair was gray and full, brushed back from a craggy face. A tiny, white scar cut through his left eyebrow.

“I run the bank,” he told Nate—which explained the navy blue suit and pinstriped tie. “I expect you’ll be opening an account with us shortly.”

“I’ll have to take care of that.”

“We’re not here to drum up business, Ed. Let me finish showing Ignatious off.”

He met Deb and Harry Miner, who ran The Corner Store, Alan B. Royce, the retired judge, Walter Notti, Peter’s father, musher and sled-dog breeder—all of whom were on the town council.

“Ken Darby, our doctor, will be along when he can.”

“That’s okay. It’s going to take a while to keep this all straight anyway.”

Then there was Bess Mackie—a beanpole with a shock of henna-colored hair who planted herself in front of him, crossed her arms over her thin chest and sniffed.

“You roust my boys today?”

“Yes, ma’am, you could say that.”

She drew another sharp breath through her thin nostrils, nodded twice. “Good. Next time, you knock their heads together, save me the trouble.”

It was, Nate decided as she strode off to find a seat, a warm enough welcome, considering.

Hopp worked him toward the stage where chairs were set up for her and Nate, and for Woolcott who served as deputy mayor.

“Deb’s going to start things off with some town business, announcements and such,” Hopp explained. “Then Ed’ll have his say, introduce me. I’ll have mine, introduce you. After you say your piece, we’ll close it down. Might be some questions here and there.”

Nate felt his stomach sink. “Okay.”

She motioned him to a chair, took her own, then nodded at Deb Miner.

Deb, a stocky woman with a pretty face framed by wispy blond hair, stepped onto the stage, took her place behind the lectern.

The mike buzzed and squeaked while she adjusted it, and her throat clearing could be heard echoing through the hall. “Afternoon, everybody. Before we get to our main business, I have some announcements. The New Year’s Eve celebration at The Lodge is going to get rolling about nine o’clock. Live music’s provided by The Caribous. We’ll be passing the hat for the entertainment, so don’t be stingy. The school’s holding a spaghetti supper a week from Friday, proceeds going to the uniform fund for the hockey team. We got a good chance at making regional champs, so let’s put the team in uniforms we can be proud of. They start serving at five. Dinner includes the entree, a salad, a roll and a soft drink. Adults six dollars, children six to twelve, four dollars. Under six eat free.”

She went from there to details about an upcoming movie night being held at Town Hall. Nate listened with half an ear, tried not to obsess about his turn at the mike.

Then he saw her walk in.

The red parka, and something about the way she moved told him he was looking at the same woman he'd seen out his window the night before. Her hood was back, and she wore a black watch cap over her hair.

A lot of black, straight hair.

Her face seemed very pale against the two strong colors, her cheekbones very high in that black frame. Even across the hall he could see her eyes were blue. A bright, glacial blue.

She carried a canvas satchel over her shoulder and wore baggy, man-nish trousers with scarred black boots.

Those icy blue eyes zeroed straight to his, held as she strode down the center aisle formed by the folding chairs, then scooted into one beside a whippily built man who looked to be Native.

They didn't speak, but something told Nate they were—not intimate, not physically—but in tune. She shrugged out of the parka while Deb moved from movie night to announcements about the upcoming hockey game.

Under the parka was an olive green sweater. Under the sweater, if Nate was any judge, was a tough, athletic little body.

He was trying to decide if she was pretty. She shouldn't have been—her eyebrows were too straight, her nose a little crooked, her mouth was top-heavy.

But even as he mentally listed the flaws, something stirred in his belly. Interesting, was all he could think. He'd stayed away from women the last several months, which, given his state of mind, hadn't been a real hardship. But this chilly-looking woman had his juices flowing again.

She opened the knapsack, took out a brown bag. And to Nate's baffled amusement dipped a hand in and came out with a fistful of popcorn. She munched away, offering some to her seat companion while Deb finished up the announcements.

While Ed took the lectern, made his comments about the town council and the progress they'd made, the newcomer pulled a silver thermos out of her sack, and poured what looked to be black coffee into its cup.

Who the hell was she? The daughter of the Native guy? The ages were about right, but there was no family resemblance he could see.

She didn't flush or flutter when he stared at her, but nibbled her snack, sipped her coffee and stared right back.

There was applause as Hopp was introduced. With an effort, Nate forced himself to put his head back in the game.

"I'm not going to waste time politicking up here. We decided to incorporate our town because we want to take care of our own in the tradition of our great state. We voted to build the police station, to form a police department. Now we went through a lot of debating, a lot of hot words on all sides and a lot of good, hard sense, too, on all sides. The upshot was, we voted to bring in a man from Outside, a man with experience and no connection to Lunacy. So he'd be fair, so he'd be smart, so he'd enforce the law without prejudice and with equality. Proved that much today when he slapped cuffs on Jim Mackie for wrestling around with his brother at The Lodge."

There were some chuckles over that, and the Mackie brothers, faces battered, grinned from their chairs.

"Fined us, too," Jim called out.

"And that's two hundred in the town coffers. Way you two carry on, you'll pay for the new fire truck we're wanting by yourselves. Ignatious Burke comes to us from Baltimore, Maryland, where he served on the Baltimore Police Department for eleven years, eight of those years as detective. We're lucky to have somebody with Chief Burke's qualifications looking after us Lunatics. So put your hands together and welcome our new chief of police."

As they did, Nate thought: Oh, shit, and pushed himself to his feet. He stepped toward the lectern, his mind as blank as a fresh blackboard. And from the crowd, someone called out, "Cheechako."

There were murmurs, mutters and a rise of voices poised on argument. The irritation that spiked through him carved away the nerves.

"That's right, I am. Cheechako. An Outsider. Fresh from the Lower 48."

The murmurs quieted as he scanned the crowd.

"Most of what I know about Alaska I got out of a guidebook or off the Internet or from movies. I don't know much more about this town except it's damn cold, the Mackie brothers like to pound each other and you've got a view that'll stop a man's heart in his chest. But I know how to be a cop, and that's why I'm here."

Used to know, he thought. Used to know how. And his palms went damp.

He was going to fumble—he could feel it—then his gaze met those glacier blue eyes of the woman in red. Her lips curved, just a little, and her eyes stayed on his as she lifted the silver cup to sip.

He heard himself speak. Maybe it was just to her. "It's my job to protect and serve this town, and that's what I'll do. Maybe you'll resent me, coming from Outside and telling you what you can't do, but we'll all have to get used to it. I'll do my best. You're the ones who'll decide if that's good enough. That's it."

There was a sprinkling of applause, then it grew. Nate found his gaze locked with the blue-eyed woman's again. His stomach knotted, unknotted, knotted up again as that top-heavy mouth tipped up at one corner in an odd little smile.

He heard Hopp adjourn the meeting. Several people surged forward to speak to him, and he lost the woman in the crowd. When he caught sight of her again, it was to see the red parka heading out the back doors.

“Who was that?” He eased back until he could touch Hopp’s arm. “The woman who came in late—red parka, black hair, blue eyes.”

“That would be Meg. Meg Galloway. Charlene’s girl.”

SHE’D WANTED A GOOD LOOK at him, a better look than the one she’d caught the day before when he’d stood in the window looking like the brooding and bitter hero of some gothic novel.

He was good-looking enough for the part, she decided, but up close he seemed more sad than bitter.

Too bad really. Bitter was more her style.

He’d handled himself, she’d give him that. Rolled with the insult—that asshole Bing—said his piece and after a little hitch, moved on.

She supposed if they had to have a police force poking around Lunacy, they could’ve done worse. Didn’t matter to her, as long as he didn’t stick his nose in her business.

Since she was in town, she decided to run a few errands, load up on supplies.

She saw the Closed sign on The Corner Store, sighed heavily. Then fished her ring of keys out of her bag. She found the one marked CS, then let herself in.

Grabbing a couple of boxes, she began to work her way through the aisle. Dry cereal, pasta, eggs, canned goods, toilet paper, flour, sugar. She dumped one box on the counter, filled the second.

She was hauling over a fifty-pound bag of Dog Chow when the door opened, and Nate walked in.

“They’re closed,” Meg huffed out as she set the bag on the floor by the counter.

“So I see.”

"If you see they're closed, what're you doing in here?"

"Funny. That was my question."

"Need stuff." She walked behind the counter, picked out a couple of boxes of ammo to add to her box.

"Figured that, but generally when people who need stuff take it from a closed store it's called stealing."

"I've heard that." From under the counter she took a large record book, flipped through. "I bet they arrest people for that down the Lower 48."

"They do. Regularly."

"You intend to implement that policy here in Lunacy?"

"I do. Regularly."

She gave a quick laugh—the fog to Hopp's foghorn—found a pen and began writing in the book. "Well, just let me finish up here, then you can take me in. That'll be three arrests for you today. Gotta be a record."

He leaned on the counter, noted that she was neatly listing all the items in her two boxes. "Be wasting my time."

"Yeah, but we got plenty of that around here. Damn, forgot the Murphy's. You mind? Murphy's Oil Soap, right over there."

"Sure." He walked over, scanned the contents on the shelves and picked up a bottle. "I saw you last night, out my window."

She wrote down the Murphy's. "I saw you back."

"You're a bush pilot."

"I'm a lot of things." Her gaze lifted to his. "That's one of them."

"What else are you?"

"Big city cop like you should be able to find that out quick enough."

"Got some of it. You cook. Got a dog. Probably a couple good-sized dogs. You like your own space. You're honest, at least when it suits you. You like your coffee black and plenty of butter on your popcorn."

“Not much of a scratch on the surface.” She tapped the pen against the book. “You looking to scratch some more, Chief Burke?”

Direct, he thought. He’d left out direct. So he’d be direct back. “Thinking about it.”

She smiled the way she had in the hall, with the right corner of her mouth lifting before the left. “Charlene jumped you yet?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m wondering if you got Charlene’s special welcome to Lunacy last night.”

He wasn’t sure which irritated him more, the question or the cool way she watched him as she asked. “No.”

“Not your type?”

“Not so much, no. And I’m not real comfortable discussing your mother this way.”

“Got sensitivity, do you? Don’t worry about it. Everybody knows Charlene likes to rattle the headboard with every good-looking man comes through here. Thing is, I tend to steer clear of her leftovers. But seeing the way it is, for now, maybe I’ll give you a chance to scratch.”

She closed the book, replaced it. “Want to give me a hand loading this stuff into the truck?”

“Sure. But I thought you flew in.”

“Did. A friend and I switched modes of transportation.”

“Okay.” He hauled the dog food bag over his shoulder.

She had a brawny red pickup outside, with a tarp, camping gear, snowshoes and a couple of cans of gas already in the bed. There was a gun rack in the cab, loaded with a shotgun and a rifle.

“You hunt?” he asked her.

“Depends on the game.” She slapped the gate of the truck bed into

place, then just grinned at him. “What the hell are you doing here, Chief Burke?”

“Nate. And I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

“Fair enough. Maybe I’ll see you New Year’s Eve. We’ll see how we socialize.”

She climbed into the truck, turned the key. Aerosmith blasted out about the same old song and dance, and she pulled into the street. She headed west, where the sun was already sliding behind the peaks, turning them flaming gold while the light went soft with twilight.

It was three-fifteen in the afternoon.



FOUR

JOURNAL ENTRY · *February 14, 1988*

Fucking cold. We're not talking about it, or we'll go crazy, but I'll write about it here. Then I can look back one day—maybe in July, when I'm sitting out with a beer, covered in bug dope and slapping at the sparrow-sized mosquitoes—and staring out at this white bitch.

I'll know I was here, that I did it. And that beer will taste all the sweeter.

But right now it's February, and July's a century away. The bitch rules.

Wind's taking us down to thirty or forty below. Once you're down that far, it doesn't seem like a few degrees one way or another matters. Cold broke one of the lanterns and snapped the zipper on my parka.

With night lasting sixteen hours, we make and break camp in the dark. Taking a piss becomes an exercise in exhaustion and misery. Still our spirits are holding, for the most part.

You can't buy this kind of experience. When the cold is like broken glass lacerating your throat, you know you're alive in a way you can only be alive on a mountain. When you risk a moment outside shelter and

see the northern lights, so brilliant, so electric that you think you could reach up and grab some of that shimmering green and pull it inside yourself for a charge, you know you don't want to be alive anywhere else.

Our progress is slow, but we're not giving up on the goal of reaching the summit. We were slowed by avalanche debris. I wondered how many had camped there, under what is now buried and barren, and how soon the mountain will shift or shimmy and bury the snow cave we fought to hack into her.

We had a short, screaming argument over how to circumvent the debris. I took the lead. We spent what seemed like two lifetimes getting through and around it, but it couldn't have been done any faster, no matter what anyone else thinks. It's a hazardous area, known as Quicksand Pass because the glacier's moving under you. You can't see it, can't feel it, but she's slipping and sliding her way under you. And she can suck you down, because beneath that world of white are crevices just waiting to make themselves your coffin.

We picked our way up Lonely Ridge, ice axes ringing, frost clinging to our eyelashes, and after battling our way around Satan's Chimney, had lunch on a picnic blanket of untouched snow.

The sun was a ball of gold ice.

I risked a few pictures, but was afraid the cold would break the camera.

There was little grace but plenty of passion in the post-lunch climb. Maybe it was the speed we'd popped for dessert, but we kicked and cursed the mountain and each other. We beat steps into the snow for what seemed like hours, while that golden ball began to sink and turn a vicious, violent orange, that set fire to the snow. Then left us in the killing dark.

We used our headlamps to give us enough light to chop a tent ledge

into the ice. We're camped here, listening to the wind blow like a storm surf through the night, easing our exhaustion with some prime weed and the success of the day.

We've taken to calling one another by code names from *Star Wars*. We're now Han, Luke and Darth. I'm Luke. We entertained ourselves pretending we were on the ice planet Hoth, on a mission to destroy an Empire stronghold. Of course, that means Darth's working against us, but that adds to the fun.

Hey, whatever floats your boat.

We made good progress today, but we're getting jumpy. It felt good to carve my ice ax into No Name's belly, inching my way up her. There was a lot of shouting, insults—motivational at first, then turning on an edge as ice chunks rained down. Darth took some in the face, and cursed me for the next hour.

For a minute today I thought he was going to lose it and try to bloody my face as I had his. Even now I can feel him stewing about it, boring the occasional dirty look at the back of my head while Han's snoring starts to compete with the wind.

He'll get over it. We're a team, and each one of us has the others' lives in his hands. So he'll get over it when we start climbing again.

Maybe we should ease off the speed, but a couple of pops gives you a nice rush and helps beat off the cold and fatigue.

There's nothing like this in the world. The blinding sparkle of snow, the sound of axes slapping ice, or squeaking through snow, the scrape of crampon on rock, the free-falling wonder of the rope, and watching the ice fire with sunset.

Even now, huddled in the tent as I write this, my belly roiling from our dinner of freeze-dried stew, my body aching from the abuse, and

fear of frostbite and death gnawing like a rat at the back of my brain, I wouldn't be anywhere else.

BY SEVEN, NATE FIGURED he'd put in a long enough day. He carried a radio phone with him. If anyone called the station after hours, the call would be bounced to his phone.

He'd have preferred eating in his room, alone, in the quiet, so his brain could unclog from all the details jammed into it throughout the day. And because he'd prefer alone.

But he wasn't going to get anywhere in this town by secluding himself, so he slid into an empty booth in The Lodge.

He could hear the crack of pool balls, and the whining country on the juke from the next room. Several men were hoisted on bar stools, downing beers while they watched a hockey game on television. The eating area was more than half full with a waitress he'd yet to meet serving and clearing.

The man Hopp had introduced as The Professor wound his way through tables to Nate's booth.

He wore his tweed jacket with *Ulysses* tucked in the pocket, and carried a mug of beer. "Mind if I join you?"

"Go ahead."

"John Malmont. You're after a drink, you'd get it faster going to the bar. You're after food, Cissy'll work her way around here in a minute."

"Food's what I want, no hurry. Place is busy tonight. Is that usual?"

"Only two places you can get hot food you don't have to cook yourself. Only one you can get hard liquor."

“Well, that answers that.”

“Lunatics are a fairly social lot—with each other, in any case. Add the holidays, you get full tables. Halibut’s good tonight.”

“Yeah?” Nate picked up the menu. “You lived here long?”

“Sixteen years now. Pittsburgh, originally,” he said, anticipating the question. “Taught at Carnegie Mellon.”

“What did you teach?”

“English literature to ambitious young minds. Many of whom enjoyed the smug position of dissecting and critiquing the long-dead white men they’d come to study.”

“And now?”

“Now I teach literature and composition to bored teenagers, many of whom would prefer to be groping one another rather than exploring the wonders of the written word.”

“Hey, Professor.”

“Cissy. Chief Burke, meet Cecilia Fisher.”

“Nice to meet you, Cissy.” She was skinny as a broomstick with short, spiky hair in several shades of red, and a silver ring pierced into her left eyebrow.

She offered him a sunny smile. “You, too. What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have the halibut. I hear it’s good.”

“Sure is.” She started scribbling on her pad. “How do you want it cooked?”

“Grilled?”

“Fine. You get a house salad with that, choice of dressing. House dressing’s real special. Big Mike makes it himself.”

“That’d be fine.”

“Got your choice of baked potato, mashed potato, fries, wild rice.”

"I'll take the rice."

"Get you a drink?"

"Coffee, thanks."

"I'll be right back with that."

"Nice girl," John commented, giving his glasses a quick polish with a snowy white handkerchief. "Came into town a couple years ago, hanging out with a bunch here to do some climbing. Boy she was with slapped her around, dumped her out with nothing but her knapsack. She didn't have the money to get home—said she wasn't going back anyhow. Charlene gave her a room and a job."

He sipped his beer. "Boy came back for her a week later. Charlene ran him off."

"Charlene?"

"Keeps an over-and-under back in the kitchen. The boy decided to leave town without Cissy after looking down those barrels for a minute." John turned his head, and the amusement in his eyes turned to longing—just for an instant.

Nate saw the object of it gliding across the room with a coffee pot.

"Look at this. The two handsomest men in Lunacy at the same table." Charlene poured Nate's coffee, then slid cozily into the booth beside him. "And what would you two be talking about?"

"A beautiful woman, naturally." John picked up his beer. "Enjoy your dinner, chief."

"So . . ." Charlene angled her body so her breast brushed Nate's arm. "What woman would that be?"

"John was telling me how Cissy came to be working for you."

"Oh?" She traced her tongue over her freshly slicked bottom lip. "You got your eye on my waitress, Nate?"

“Only with the hope she brings my dinner out soon.” He couldn’t scoot away without looking, and feeling, like an idiot. He couldn’t move without bumping up against some part of her body. “The Mackie brothers pay you damages yet?”

“They came in about an hour ago, made it good. I want to thank you for taking care of me, Nate. Makes me feel secure knowing you’re just a phone call away.”

“Having an over-and-under in your kitchen ought to make you feel pretty secure.”

“Well.” She dipped her head, smiled. “That’s really just for show.” She angled her body closer, so that the come-get-me perfume seemed to rise out of her cleavage. “It’s hard being a woman alone in a place like this. Long winter nights. They get cold. And they get lonely. I like knowing a man like you’s sleeping under the same roof. Maybe you and I could keep each other company later.”

“Charlene. That’s . . . That’s an offer, all right.” Her hand slid up his thigh. He grabbed her hand, pressed it on top of the table, even as he went hard and hot. “Let’s just take a minute here.”

“I’m hoping it’ll take longer than a minute.”

“Ha ha.” If she kept rubbing that body against him, reminding him how long he’d been celibate, he might not make the full sixty seconds. “Charlene, I like you, and you’re a pleasure to look at, but I don’t think it’d be a good idea for us to . . . keep each other company. I’m just feeling my way around here.”

“Me, too.” She twined a lock of his hair around her finger. “You get restless tonight, you just give me a call. I’ll show you what I mean about this being a full-service establishment.”

She kept her baby blues on him as she wiggled out of the booth—and managed to slide her hand suggestively along his thigh again. Nate

waited until she'd crossed the room in that hip-rolling gait before he let out a hoarse whistle of breath.

HE DIDN'T SLEEP WELL. The mother-daughter tag team kept him churned up and edgy. And the dark was endless and complete. A primitive dark that urged a man to burrow in a warm cave—with a warm woman.

He kept a light burning late—read through town ordinances by it, brooded by it, and ultimately slept by it until the alarm shrilled.

He started off the day as he had the one before, breakfasting with little Jesse.

It was routine he wanted. More than routine, he craved a rut where he wouldn't have to think, one that got deeper and deeper so he didn't have to see what was beyond it. He could go through the motions here, handling minor disputes, easing through the day with the same faces, the same voices, the same tasks repeating like a loop.

He could be the mouse on the wheel. And maybe the ridiculous cold would keep him from decomposing. That way no one would know he was already dead.

He liked sitting in his office, hours on end, juggling among Otto, Peter and himself the scatter of calls that came in. When he went out on one, he took one of the deputies with him to let him fill in background and set the rhythm.

He was getting a handle on his staff, in any case. Peter was twenty-three, had lived in the area all of his life, and appeared to know everyone. He also appeared to be liked by everyone who knew him.

Otto—staff sergeant, USMC, retired—had come to Alaska for the hunting and fishing. Eighteen years before, after his first divorce, he'd

decided to make it his permanent home. He had three grown children in the Lower 48, and four grandchildren.

He'd married again—some blonde with a bustline bigger than her IQ, according to Peach—and had divorced again in under two years.

Both he and Bing had considered themselves qualified for the position Nate now held. But while Bing had gotten pissy about the town council's decision to bring in an Outsider, Otto—perhaps more accustomed to taking orders—had accepted the job as deputy.

As for Peach herself, the source of most of his information, she'd lived more than thirty years in Alaska, ever since she'd eloped with a boy from Macon and hightailed it with him to Sitka. He'd died on her, poor lamb, lost at sea on a fishing trawler less than six months after the elopement.

She'd married again and had lived with husband number two—a strapping, handsome grizzly bear of a man who'd taken her into the bush where they'd lived off the land, with occasional forays into the fledgling town of Lunacy.

When he'd died on her, too—went through the overflow on the lake and froze to death before he could get back to their cabin—she'd packed up and moved to Lunacy.

She'd married again, but that was a mistake, and she kicked his drunk, cheating ass all the way back to North Dakota, where he'd come from.

She'd consider husband number four, should the right candidate come along.

Peach gave him tidbits on others. Ed Woolcott would've liked the job of mayor, but he'd have to cool his heels until Hopp decided she'd had enough. His wife, Arlene, was snooty, but then she came from money, so it wasn't surprising.

Like Peter, Bing had lived here all of his life, the son of a Russian father and a Norwegian mother. His mother had run off with a piano player in '74, when Bing had been about thirteen. His father—and that man could down a pint of vodka at one sitting—had gone back to Russia about twelve years later and taken Bing's younger sister, Nadia, with him.

Rumor was she was pregnant, and there'd been whispers the father had been married.

Rose's husband, David, worked as a guide, a damn good one, and did odd jobs when he had time on his hands.

Harry and Deb had two kids—the boy was giving them some trouble—and Deb ruled the roost.

There was more. Peach always had more. Nate figured in a week, maybe two, he'd know whatever he needed to know about Lunacy and its population. Then the work would be another routine digging itself into a comfortable rut.

But whenever he stood at his window, watched the sun rise over the mountains, sheening it with gold, he felt that spark simmer inside him. The little flare of heat that told him there was still life in him.

Afraid it would spread, he'd turn away to face the blank wall.

On his third day, Nate dealt with a vehicular accident involving a pickup, an SUV and a moose. The moose got the best of the bargain and stood about fifty yards from the tangle of metal as if watching the show.

Since it was the first time Nate had seen an actual moose—bigger and uglier than he'd imagined—he was more interested in it than the two men currently bitching at each other and passing blame.

It was eight-twenty A.M. and black as pitch out on the road the locals called Lake Drive.

He had the deputy mayor and a mountain guide named Hawley go-

ing nose to nose, a Ford Explorer tipped into a ditch with its wheelbase buried in the snow, its hood crinkled like an accordion, and a Chevy pickup lying on its side as if it had decided to take a nap.

Both men had blood on their faces and mayhem in their eyes.

“Settle down.” Deliberately, Nate shined his flashlight into the eyes of each man in turn. Both, he noted, were going to need stitches. “I said settle down! We’ll sort this out in a minute. Otto? Anybody got a tow truck?”

“Bing’s got one. He’s the one handles this sort of thing.”

“Well, give him a call. Get him out here to haul these vehicles into town. I want them off the road ASAP. They’re a hazard. Now . . .”

He turned back to the men. “Which one of you can tell me what happened in a calm, coherent manner?”

They both started to rant at once, but since he smelled the whiskey fumes on Hawley, he held up a hand, then pointed at Ed Woolcott. “You start.”

“I was driving into work, in a reasonable and safe manner—”

“Load of bullshit,” Hawley commented.

“You’ll get your turn. Mr. Woolcott?”

“I saw the headlights coming toward me, entirely too fast for safety.”

Even as Hawley opened his mouth, Nate stabbed a finger at him.

“Then the moose came out of nowhere. I slowed and swerved to avoid collision, and the next thing I know, this, this *heap* is barreling down on me. I tried to cut over to the side of the road, but he, he *aimed* at me. Next thing I know, he ran me off the road, crashed my car. That car’s only six months old! He was driving recklessly, *and* he’s been drinking.”

With a sharp nod, Ed folded his arms and glowered.

“Okay.”

“Bing’s heading out,” Otto announced.

“Good. Mr. Woolcott, why don’t you step over there, give your state-

ment to Otto. Hawley?” Nate jerked his head, wandered over to the pickup. And stood there a moment exchanging baleful glances with the moose. “You been drinking?”

Hawley stood about five-eight and sported a golden brown beard. The blood that had trickled down from the gash on his jaw had frozen.

“Well, sure, I had a couple of belts.”

“It’s shy of nine A.M.”

“Shit. Been ice fishing. I don’t pay attention to what the hell the time of day is. I got some good fish in the cooler in my truck. I was heading home to store them, get something to eat and turn in. Then bankerman sees a damn moose in the road and goes into a tailspin. He’s all over the damn road, doing doughnuts, and the moose is standing there—they’re brainless animals, you ask me—and I have to swerve. Went into a little skid, and Woolcott spun right into me. We smashed, and this is where we ended up.”

It had been a long time since he’d been on Traffic, and he’d never had to do an accident reconstruction in the dark, in the snow, at somewhere under zero degrees. But when he played his light over the road, studied the tracks, Hawley’s version hit closer to home.

“Fact is, you’ve been drinking. We’re going to have to do a sobriety test. You insured?”

“Yeah, but—”

“We’ll sort it out,” Nate repeated. “Let’s get out of the cold.”

Nate drove back to town with Hawley and Ed sitting, stonily silent, in the back. He pulled off at the clinic, left Otto with them while they got patched up and went back to the station for a Breathalyzer.

While he was there, he called up the driving records of both parties. Working out the solution in his head, he carted the Breathalyzer back to the clinic.

There were a couple people in the waiting room. A young woman with a sleeping baby, an old man wearing dirt brown coveralls and gnawing on a pipe.

There was a woman sitting at a chair behind a low counter. She was reading a paperback novel with a mostly naked couple in passionate embrace on the cover. But she looked up when he entered.

“Chief Burke?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Joanna. Doc said you could come on back when you got here, if you want. He’s in exam room one doing Hawley. Nita’s in two, stitching Ed.”

“Otto?”

“He’s using the office. Checking on Bing and the tow.”

“I’ll take Hawley. Which way’s that?”

“I’ll show you.” She marked her book with a shiny foil tab, then got up to lead him to the door directly to her right. “Right in there.” She gestured, then gave a quick knock. “Doc? Chief Burke’s here.”

“Come on in.”

It was a standard exam room—table, little sink, rolling chair. The doctor wore an open flannel shirt over a thermal, and glanced over from his work on the cut over Hawley’s eye.

He was young, mid-thirties, trim and fit-looking, with a sandy beard to go with the thatch of curly hair. He wore little round metal glasses over green eyes.

“Ken Darby,” he said. “I’d shake hands, but they’re busy.”

“Nice to meet you. How’s the patient?”

“Few cuts and bruises. You’re a lucky bastard, Hawley.”

“Say that when you see my truck, goddamn it. That damn Ed drives like an eighty-year-old city woman who lost her bifocals.”

“I’m going to need you to blow into this.”

Hawley eyed the Breathalyzer dubiously. "I ain't drunk."

"Then it won't be a problem, will it?"

Hawley grumbled but complied as Ken fixed a butterfly bandage on the cut.

"Well, Hawley, you're right on the edge here. Makes this a judgment call for me as to whether or not I charge you with driving under the influence."

"Ah, crock of shit."

"But the fact is, since you're on the border here, and show no signs of being under the influence, particularly, I'm going to issue you a warning instead. Next time you go ice fishing and have a couple belts, you don't get behind the wheel."

"Ain't got no damn wheel to get behind."

"Since I can't write the moose a citation, your insurance company's going to have to battle it out with Ed's. You've got a couple of speeding tickets on your plate, Hawley."

"Speed traps. Anchorage bastards."

"Maybe. Once you get that wheel back, you keep your speed to the posted limit and get yourself a designated driver when you're drinking. We'll get along fine. Are you going to need a lift home?"

Hawley scratched his neck while Ken treated a scrape on his forehead. "Guess I will. I need to take a look at my truck, talk to Bing."

"Come by the station after you're done. We'll get you home."

"Guess that's fair as it gets."

ED WASN'T AS PLEASED with the decision. He sat on the exam table, the air bag burns scoring his cheeks, and his lip puffy from where he'd bitten into it on impact.

“He’d been *drinking*.”

“He was under the legal limit. The fact is, the culprit here’s a moose, and I can’t give a ticket to the local wildlife. It comes down to bad luck. Two vehicles meeting a moose on a stretch of road. You’re both insured, which is more than the moose is, I’d expect. Neither one of you is seriously injured. Comes down to it, you both got off lucky.”

“I don’t consider having my new car in a ditch and my face smashed by an air bag lucky, Chief Burke.”

“I guess it’s a matter of perspective.”

Ed slid off the table, jerked up his chin. “And is this how we can expect you to handle law enforcement in Lunacy?”

“Pretty much.”

“It seems to me we’re paying you to do little more than warm a seat in your office.”

“I had to warm the seat in my vehicle to come out and look at the wreck.”

“I don’t like your attitude. You can be sure I’m going to discuss this incident and your behavior with the mayor.”

“Okay. Do you need a ride home or to the bank?”

“I can get myself where I’m going.”

“I’ll let you get there, then.”

He met up with Otto outside the exam room. Otto’s only sign of having heard the conversation was a lift of eyebrows. But when they walked out together, he cleared his throat.

“Didn’t make a friend there.”

“And I thought I was being so friendly.” Nate shrugged. “You can’t expect a man to be in a cheery mood when his car’s smashed and he’s getting his face sewn up.”

“Guess not. Ed’s a bit of a blowhard, and he likes to throw his weight

around. Got more money than anybody else in the borough and doesn't like you to forget it."

"Good to know."

"Hawley's all right. He's a good man in the bush, and he knows how to climb. Colorful enough to please the tourists who want to take on a mountain and keeps to himself most of the time. He drinks, but he doesn't drink himself drunk. My opinion? You handled that fair."

"That matters. Appreciate it. You write this up, Otto? I think I'll ride out, check on the tow."

Checking on the accident scene was an excuse, but nobody had to know but himself.

He found Bing with a gnarled plug of a man working on digging the SUV out of the ditch. Duty meant he had to stop, get out and walk over to ask if they needed any more help.

"We know what we're doing." Bing tossed a shovelful of snow on Nate's boots.

"Then I'll let you keep doing it."

"Asshole," Bing muttered under his breath as Nate walked back to his car.

Nate turned, considered briefly. "Is asshole a step up or step down from cheechako?"

The little man snorted out a laugh but only shoved the blade of his shovel into the snow, leaned on it as Bing measured Nate. "Same damn thing."

"Just checking."

Nate got back in the car and left Bing sneering after him.

He kept driving, away from town, around the sharp curve of the lake.

Meg lived out this way, he'd checked, and since he could see her plane resting on the frozen surface, he was in the right place.

He turned into what looked like it might be a road hacked out of the trees and bumped his way along it to a house.

He didn't know what he'd expected, but it wasn't this. The seclusion wasn't a surprise, nor were the heart-stopping views in all directions. Those went with the territory.

But the house was pretty, a kind of sophisticated cabin, he supposed. Wood and glass, covered porches, bright red shutters framing the windows.

A walkway had been dug through the snow from drive to front porch. He could see where other paths had been tramped down from the house to outbuildings. One of those buildings, midway from the house to the edge of the forest, rose on stilts.

On the porch was a neatly stacked mountain of split wood.

The sun was coming up now, gloriously, bathing the scene with that eerie dawn. Smoke pumped out of three stone chimneys into the lightning sky.

Fascinated, he shut off the engine.

And heard the music.

It filled the world. A strong, sweet female voice, twined around strings and pipes lifted with sunrise over the endless white.

It soared over him when he stepped out of the truck and seemed to come from the air or the earth or the sky.

Then he saw her—the sharp red of her parka, walking over the white, away from the frozen lake with two dogs trotting beside her.

He didn't call out to her, wasn't sure he could have. There was a picture here, and his mind clicked the shutter. The dark-haired woman in red, wading through the pristine white with two beautiful dogs flanking her, and the glory of the morning mountains at her back.

The dogs saw, or scented, him first. Barking cut the air, sliced through the soaring music. They shot toward him like two blurry gray bullets.

He considered leaping back into his truck and wondered if that would cement his status as cheechako asshole.

There was always the possibility that his outer gear was thick enough to protect his skin from canine teeth should it become an issue.

He stayed where he was, saying, good dogs, nice dogs, over and over in his head like a mantra.

He braced for a leap, hoped it wouldn't be at his throat. Both dogs spewed snow into the air, then stopped a foot in front of him, bodies quivering, teeth showing. Full alert.

Both pair of eyes were blue, ice crystal blue, like their mistress's.

Nate's breath streamed out, a cloud on the air. "Well, God," he murmured. "You're a couple of beauties."

"Rock! Bull!" Meg shouted out. "Friend."

The dogs relaxed immediately and moved forward to sniff at him.

"Will they take my hand off if I touch them?" he called.

"Not now."

Taking it on faith, he stroked a gloved hand over each head. Since they seemed to enjoy it, he crouched down and gave them both a good rub while they pressed against him.

"You got balls, Burke."

"I was hoping that wouldn't be the part they'd chomp on. Are they sled dogs?"

"No." Her cheeks were pink with cold when she reached him. "I'm not a musher, but they come from a good line of them. They just live the high life out here with me."

"They have your eyes."

"Maybe I was a husky in a former life. What're you doing out here?"

"I was just . . . what's that music?"

"Loreena McKennit. Like it?"

"It's amazing. It's like . . . God."

She laughed. "You're the first man I've met who'll admit She's a woman. Out for a holiday drive?"

He straightened. "Holiday?"

"New Year's Eve."

"Oh. No. Had a little vehicular out on Lake Drive. I'm looking for the primary witness. Maybe you've seen him. Big guy, four legs, funny hat." He made antlers out of his fingers.

Cutie, she wondered, why do your eyes look so sad even when you smile? "As it happens, I've seen a couple of guys like that in the vicinity."

"In that case, I should come in, take your statement."

"I might enjoy having you take my statement, but it'll have to wait. I've got to fly. I was just bringing the dogs back, about to shut off my music."

"Where you going?"

"I'm taking some supplies into a village in the bush. I've got to move if I want to get there and back before party time." She cocked her head. "Want to ride along?"

Nate glanced toward the plane and thought: In that? Not even for a chance to sniff at your neck. "I'm on duty. Maybe another time."

"Sure. Rock, Bull, home! Be right back," she told Nate.

The dogs raced off, and Nate realized one of the outbuildings was an elaborate doghouse, decorated with totem figures painted in a primitive-art folksy style.

High life, all right.

Meg disappeared into the cabin. A moment later, the music shut off.

She came out again with a pack slung over her shoulder.

“See you, chief. We’ll see about you taking my statement sometime.”

“Looking forward to that. Fly safe.”

She tossed her hair back, hiked down to the plane.

He stayed, watching her.

She tossed the pack inside, climbed up.

He heard the engine catch, the stunning roar of it bursting through the stillness. The prop whirled, and the plane began to skate over the ice, circling it, circling, tipping onto one ski and circling until it lifted off, nosed up and climbed.

He could see the red of her parka, the black of her hair, through the cockpit window, then she was just a blur.

He tipped his head back as she circled, in the air now, and dipped a wing in what he assumed was a salute.

Then she was spearing off, over the white, into the blue.



FIVE

NATE COULD HEAR the celebration getting underway. Music—a kind of jivey honky-tonk—piped up the stairs, even through the floor vents of his room. Voices hummed, seemed to press against the walls and floorboards. Laughter slapped out, as did the occasional thud he took as dancing feet.

He sat alone, in the dark.

The depression had crashed down over him, without warning, without a snicker. One minute he'd been sitting at his desk reading through files, and the next the smothering black weight had dropped down on him.

It had happened that way before, with no vague sense of unease, no creeping sadness. Just that swamping wave of black rolling him under. Just that harsh switch from light to dark.

It wasn't hopelessness. The concept of hope had to be a factor before you could embrace its absence. It wasn't grief or despair or anger. He could have handled or battled any of those emotions.

It was a void. Immeasurable, black, airless, and it sucked him in.

He could function through it; he'd learned how. If you didn't function, people wouldn't leave you alone and their concern and worry only drove you deeper into the pit.

He could walk, talk, exist. But he couldn't live. That's how it felt to him, when he was in the silky clutches of it. He felt like walking death.

The way he'd felt in the hospital after Jack, with the pain bubbling up under the drugs, and the awareness of what had happened smearing the path to oblivion.

But he could function.

He'd finished the day, locked up. He'd driven back to The Lodge, walked up to his room. He'd spoken to people. He couldn't remember what or who, but he knew his mouth had moved, words had come out.

He'd gone up to his room, locked the door. And sat in the winter black.

What the hell was he doing here, in this place? This cold, dark, empty place? Was he so obvious, so pathetic, that he'd chosen this town of perpetual winter because it so perfectly mirrored what was inside him?

What did he possibly expect to prove by coming here, pinning on a badge and pretending he still cared enough to do a job? Hiding, that was all he was doing. Hiding from what he was, what he'd been, what he'd lost. But you couldn't hide from what was with you, every minute of every day, just waiting to leap out and laugh in your face.

He had the pills, of course. He'd brought them with him. Pills for depression, pills for anxiety. Pills to help him sleep, down deep where the nightmares couldn't follow.

Pills he'd stopped taking because they made him feel less of who he was than the depression or anxiety or insomnia.

He couldn't go back, couldn't go forward, so why not sink here? Deeper and deeper, until eventually he couldn't, wouldn't, crawl out of the void anymore. He knew, a part of him knew, he was comfortable there, all settled into the dark and the empty, wallowing in his own misery.

Hell, he could set up housekeeping there, like one of the crazies liv-

ing in an empty refrigerator box under a bridge. Life was pretty simple in a cardboard box, and nobody expected you to do anything.

He thought of the old saw about a tree falling in the woods and twisted it around to suit himself. If he lost his mind in Lunacy, would he ever have had it to lose?

He hated the part of him that thought that way, the part of him that wanted to live there.

If he didn't go down, someone would come up. That would be worse. He cursed at the effort it took just to get to his feet. Had those little stirrings inside him, those quick sparks of life been a kind of mocking? Fate's way of showing him what it was to be alive, before it kicked him into the hole again?

Well, he still had enough anger to crawl out this time, this one more time. He'd get through this night, this last night of the year. And if there was nothing in the next, he sure as hell wasn't any worse off.

But tonight he was on duty. He closed a hand over the badge he'd yet to take off and knew it was ridiculous that a cheap piece of metal should steady him. But he'd taken even that, and he'd go through the motions.

The light burned his eyes when he switched it on, and he had to deliberately step away before he gave into the temptation to just turn it off again. Just settle down in the dark again.

He went into the bath, ran the water cold. Then splashed it on his face to fool himself into believing it washed away the fatigue that snaked around the depression.

He studied himself in the mirror for a long time, searching for any tells. But he saw an average guy, no worries. A little tired around the eyes, maybe, a little hollow in the cheeks, but nothing major.

As long as everybody saw the same, that would be enough.

The noise washed over him when he opened his door. As with the light, he had to force himself to move forward instead of retreating back into his cave.

He'd given both Otto and Peter the night off. Eat, drink and be merry. They both had friends and family, people to sweep out the old with. Since Nate had been struggling to sweep out the old on his own for months, he didn't see why that should change tonight.

He carried the lead in his belly down the stairs.

The music was bright and better than he'd expected. And the place was packed. Tables were rearranged to make dancing room, and the patrons were taking advantage of it. Streamers and balloons festooned the ceiling, and the dress of the people was just as celebratory.

He saw some of the old-timers in what Peach had described for him as an Alaska tuxedo. They were sturdy work suits, cleaned up for the occasion. Some were worn with bolo ties and, oddly, paper party hats.

Many of the women had fancied things up with sparkly dresses or skirts, upswept hair, high heels. He saw Hopp, spruced up in a purple cocktail dress dancing—fox-trot, two-step? Nate hadn't a clue—with a slicked-up Harry Miner. Rose sat on a high-backed stool behind the bar, with the man he concluded was her husband, David, standing beside her, gently rubbing the small of her back.

He saw her laugh at something the receptionist from the clinic said to her. And he saw the way she looked up, met her husband's eyes. He saw the warmth of love beat between them, and he felt cold, felt alone.

He'd never had a woman look at him like that. Even when he'd been married, the woman he'd thought was his had never looked at him with that open, unrestricted love.

He looked away from them.

His eyes scanned the crowd as cop's eyes do—measuring, detailing, filing. It was the sort of thing that kept him apart, and he knew it. It was the sort of thing he couldn't stop doing.

He saw Ed, and the allegedly snooty Arlene. Mitch of KLUN, with his streaky blond hair in a ponytail, and his arm around a girl who wasn't as pretty as he was. Ken was wearing a Hawaiian lei and having a lively discussion with The Professor, who wore his usual tweed.

Fellowship, Nate thought. Some of it drunken at this point, but it was still fellowship. And he was Outside.

He caught a hit of Charlene's perfume, but she followed up on it too fast for him to brace or evade. Curvy female was wrapped around him, warm, glossy lips were sliding silky over his, with a sly hint of tongue. His ass was stroked and squeezed, his bottom lip gently nipped.

Then Charlene slithered off, smiled sleepily at him. "Happy New Year, Nate. That was just in case I can't get my hands on you at midnight."

He couldn't quite form a word and was half afraid he might be blushing. He wondered if her obvious, and inappropriate, come-on had pushed embarrassment through the black.

"Just where have you been hiding?" She laced her arms around his neck. "Party's been in gear more than an hour, and you haven't danced with me."

"I had . . . things."

"Work, work, work. Why don't you come play with me?"

"I need to speak with the mayor." Please, God, help me.

"Oh, this isn't the time for town politics. It's a *party*. Come on, dance with me. Then we'll have some champagne."

"I really need to deal with this." He put his hands on her hips, hoping to nudge her back out of intimacy range, and searched the crowd for Hopp—his savior. His gaze struck, and locked onto Meg's.

She gave him that slow, two-step smile, and lifted the glass she held in a mock toast.

Then dancing couples whirled in front of her, and she was gone.

"I'll take a rain check. I—" He spotted a familiar face, and latched on like a drowning man. "Otto. Charlene wants to dance."

Before either of them could speak, Nate was beating a fast retreat. He made it to the other side of the room before he risked taking a breath.

"Funny, you don't look like a coward."

Meg stepped up beside him. She held two glasses now.

"Then looks are deceiving. She scares me to death."

"I won't say Charlene's harmless, because she's anything but. Still, if you don't want her tongue down your throat, you're going to need to say so. Loud, clear, in words of one syllable. Here. Got you a drink."

"I'm on duty."

She snorted. "I don't think a glass of cheap champagne's going to change that. Hell, Burke. Just about every soul in Lunacy's right here."

"Got a point." He took the glass, but he didn't drink. He did, however, manage to focus on her. She was wearing a dress. He supposed the technical term was dress for the skin of hot red painted on her. It showed off that tight, athletic body he'd imagined in ways that might have been illegal in several jurisdictions. She'd left her hair down. Black rain to milk-white shoulders. Sky-high heels the same color as the dress showcased slim, muscular legs.

She smelled like cool, secret shadows.

"You look amazing."

"I clean up good if the occasion warrants it. You, on the other hand, look tired." And wounded, she thought. That's how he'd struck her when she'd seen him come down the stairs. Like a man who knew there

was a huge, gaping wound somewhere on his body, but didn't have the energy to find it.

"Haven't got the sleep pattern down yet." He sipped the champagne. It tasted like flavored soda water.

"Did you come down to relax and party or to stand around looking dour and official?"

"Mostly door two."

Meg shook her head. "Try the first for a while. See what happens." She reached out, unpinned his badge.

"Hey."

"You need a shield, you can pull it out," she said as she tucked it into his front pocket. "Right now, let's dance."

"I don't know how to do what they're doing out there."

"That's okay. I'll lead."

She did just that and made him laugh. It felt rusty in his throat, but lightened some of the weight. "Is the band local?"

"Everybody's local. That's Mindy on the piano. She teaches in the elementary school. Pargo on the guitar. Works in the bank. Chuck's on fiddle. He's a ranger in Denali. A Fed, but Chuck's so affable we pretend he's got a real job. And Big Mike's on drums. He's the cook here. Are you committing all that to memory?"

"Sorry?"

"I can see you tucking those names and faces into a file in your head."

"Pays to remember."

"Sometimes it pays to forget." Her gaze flickered to the right. "I'm being signalled. Max and Carrie Hawbaker. They run *The Lunatic*, our weekly paper. They've been out of town most of the week. They want an interview with the new chief of police."

"I thought this was a party."

"They'll just hunt you down the minute the music stops anyway."

"Not if you sneak out with me, and we have our own party elsewhere."

She shifted, looked straight into his eyes. "I might be interested, if you meant that."

"Why wouldn't I mean it?"

"There's the question. I'll ask you sometime."

She didn't give him much choice as she angled around, waved. She was pulling him along with her, to the edge of the impromptu dance floor. Introductions were made, then she slipped away, leaving him trapped.

"Really good to meet you." Max gave Nate's hand an enthusiastic shake. "Carrie and I just got back into town, so we haven't had a chance to welcome you. I'm going to want a piece of your time for an interview for *The Lunatic*."

"We'll have to work that out."

"We could sit out in the lobby now, and—"

"Not now, Max." Carrie beamed a smile. "No work tonight. But before we get back to the party, I'd like to ask you, Chief Burke, if you'd have any problem with us running a police log in the paper. I think it would show the community what you do, how we handle things here. Now that we've got an official police department, we want *The Lunatic* to document it."

"You can get that information from Peach."

Meg wound her way back to the bar, got another glass of champagne before sliding onto a stool where she could watch the dancing while she drank.

Charlene slid onto the one beside her. "I saw him first."

Meg kept watching the dancers. "More who he sees, isn't it?"

"You're only looking at him because I want him."

"Charlene, if it's got a dick, you want it." Meg tossed back champagne. "And I'm not looking at him, particularly." She smiled into her glass. "Go ahead, make your play. It's no skin off mine."

"First *interesting* man who's come along in months." Feeling chatty now, Charlene leaned closer. "Do you know, he has breakfast with little Jesse every morning? Isn't that the sweetest thing? And you should've seen the way he handled the Mackies. Plus, he's got *mystery*." She sighed. "I'm a sucker for a man with mystery."

"You're a sucker for a man as long as he can still get it up."

Charlene's mouth twisted in disgust. "Why do you have to be so crude?"

"You sat down here to let me know you're hoping to fuck the new chief of police. You can put ribbons on it, Charlene, it's still crude. I just leave off the ribbons."

"You're just like your father."

"So you always say," Meg murmured as Charlene flounced away.

Hopp took Charlene's stool. "The two of you would fight about how much rain came down in the last shower."

"That's a little philosophical for us. What're you drinking?"

"I was going to get another glass of that lousy champagne."

"I'll get it." Meg walked around the bar, poured another glass and topped off her own. "She wants to take a nice, greedy bite out of Burke."

Hopp looked over at Nate, saw he'd managed to escape from the Hawbakkers only to be caught by Joe and Lara Wise.

"Their business."

"Their business," Meg agreed, and clinked her glass to Hopp's.

"The fact that he looks to be more interested in taking one out of you isn't going to improve your relationship with your mother."

"Nope." Meg sipped, considering. "But it should make things exciting for a while." She saw Hopp cast her eyes to heaven and laughed. "I can't help it. I like trouble."

"He would be." Hopp turned on the stool when she saw Nate being pulled onto the floor again by Charlene. "All that business about still waters, blah blah. Those broody types can be hard to handle."

"He's about the saddest man I've ever seen. Sadder than that drifter stopped in here a couple of years ago. What was his name? McKinnon. Blew his brains out up in Hawley's cache."

"And wasn't that a mess? Ignatious might be sad enough to put the barrel of a .45 in his mouth, but he's got too much spine to pull the trigger. Think he's too polite, too."

"That's what you're banking on?"

"Yeah. That's what I'm banking on. Well, hell. I'm going to do my last good deed of the year and go save him from Charlene."

Sad, polite men were anything but her type, Meg told herself. She liked reckless men, careless men. Men who didn't expect to stay the night after. You could have a couple drinks with a man like that, tangle up the sheets if the mood struck, then move on.

No bumps, no bruises.

A man like Ignatious Burke? A roll with him was bound to be bumpy, and it was bound to leave bruises. Still, it might be worth it.

In any case, she liked conversations with him, and that couldn't be overvalued in her opinion. She could happily go days, weeks without talking to another human being. So she appreciated interesting conversation. And she liked watching the sorrow that haunted his eyes come

and go. She'd seen it lift a few times now. When he'd stood in front of her house that morning, listening to Loreena McKennit, and again for a few moments when they'd danced.

Sitting there now, with the music and the heat of humanity all around her, she realized she wanted to see it lift again. And that she had a good idea how to make it happen.

She went behind the bar, found an open bottle and two glasses. Holding them down at her side, she slipped out of the room.

Hopp tapped Charlene briskly on the shoulder. "Sorry, Charlene, I need an official moment with Chief Burke."

Charlene only pressed closer to Nate. He wondered if she'd just pop out the back of him. "Town Hall's closed, Hopp."

"Town Hall's never closed. Come on now, let the boy out of that stranglehold."

"Oh, all right. I expect you to finish this dance, handsome."

"Let's find ourselves a corner, Ignatious." Hopp waved people aside, cut a swatch through the crowd. She hunkered down at a table someone had pushed into the pool area. "Want a drink?"

"No, I think I want the back door."

"You can run, but you can't hide in a town this size. You're going to have to deal with her sooner or later."

"Let's go with later." He wanted to go upstairs, back to the dark. His head was pounding, his stomach queasy with the stress and effort of just being.

"I didn't just pull you away to break Charlene's headlock. You've got my deputy mayor well and truly pissed."

"I know it. I handled that situation as seemed most prudent and within the confines of the law."

"I'm not questioning how you do your job, Ignatious." She waved

that off as she'd waved off people. "I'm just giving you the facts. Ed's pompous, self-important and a pain in the ass more than half the time. Still, he's a good man and works hard for this town."

"Doesn't mean he can drive worth a damn."

She grinned at that. "He's always been a lousy driver. He's also powerful, rich and a grudge-holder. He won't forget you crossed him on this business. It might seem small potatoes to the type of thing you're used to dealing with, but in Lunacy, this was major."

"I can't be the first to cross him."

"You're not. Ed and I butt heads all the time. But the way he'd see that, he and I are on equal footing. I might even have a leg up. You're Outside, and he expects you to kowtow some. On the other hand, if you'd kowtowed, I'd have been very disappointed. Puts you between a rock and a hard place."

"I've been there before. Does kowtow really have anything to do with cows?"

She stared for a moment, then barked out a laugh. "A polite and sneaky way to tell me to mind my own. Before I do, let me add something. Getting yourself caught between Charlene and Meg means that rock and hard place are both going to be very hot, very sticky, and mean as a demon from hell."

"Then I'd better not get caught."

"Good thinking." Her eyebrows lifted when his cell phone beeped.

"Calls to the station get transferred to my personal," he said as he pulled it out of his pocket. "Burke."

"Get your coat," Meg said. "Meet me out front in five minutes. I've got something I want to show you."

"Sure. Okay." He stuck the phone back in his pocket as Hopp watched him. "It's nothing. I think I'm going to duck out."

“Mmm-hmm. Use the door there, go through the kitchen.”

“Thanks. And Happy New Year.”

“Same to you.” Hopp shook her head as he walked away. “Going to be trouble.”

IT TOOK HIM more than five minutes to get to his room, pile on his gear, slip out, then walk around to the front of The Lodge. He was halfway there when he realized he hadn't been tempted to just lock the door behind him and burrow back in the dark.

Maybe it was progress. Or maybe lust was stronger than situational depression.

She was waiting, sitting on one of two folding chairs she'd set dead center of the street.

The bottle of champagne was screwed into the snowpack. She sipped from her glass, and a thick blanket covered her lap.

“You can't sit out here in that dress even with your coat and the blanket—”

“I changed. I always carry extra clothes in my pack.”

“Too bad. I was looking forward to seeing you in that dress again.”

“Another time, another place. Have a seat.”

“Okay. Why are we sitting outside in the street at . . . ten minutes to midnight?”

“Not much for crowds. You?”

“Not really.”

“They can be fun for a while, on a special occasion. But it wears thin for me after a few hours. Besides.” She handed him a glass. “This is better.”

It amazed him the champagne wasn't frozen solid. "I think it would be better if we were inside, where frostbite isn't a factor."

"Not that cold out. No wind. Hovering around zero. Besides, you can't really see this from inside."

"See what?"

"Look up, Lower 48."

He looked where she pointed and lost his breath. "Holy God."

"Yeah, I always thought it was holy. A natural phenom caused by latitude, sunspots and so on. Scientific explanations don't make it less beautiful, or magical."

The lights in the sky were green with shimmers of gold, hints of red. The long, eerie streaks seemed to pulse and breathe, bathing the dark with life.

"The northern lights show best in the winter, but it's usually too damn cold to appreciate them. Figured this was a good night for the exception."

"I've heard of them. Seen pictures. It's not like the pictures."

"The best things never are. They show better out of town. Even better when you're camped up on one of the glaciers. One night when I was about seven, my father and I hiked up into the mountains and camped just so we could be up there to see. We lay on our backs for hours, damn near freezing, and just watched the sky."

The otherworldly green continued to shift, glow, expand, shimmer. It was raining liquid jewels of color. "What happened to him?"

"You could say one day he took another hike and decided to keep going. You got family?"

"Sort of."

"Well, we won't spoil this by telling our sad stories. We'll just enjoy the show."

They sat in silence in the middle of the street, spindly chairs balanced on the snowpack while the heavens flamed.

The flames sparked something inside him, stroked away the tension headache, settled him on the ridge of wonder where he could breathe.

She glanced toward The Lodge as the noise level grew. The shouts of countdown to midnight began. "Looks like it's just you and me, Burke."

"A better end to the year than I expected. You want me to pretend I'm kissing you because it's tradition?"

"Screw tradition." She grabbed his hair in two gloved hands, yanked him toward her.

Her lips were cold, and there was a strange, powerful thrill in feeling them warm against his. The full-throttle punch of the kiss jolted his sluggish system into drive, churned in his belly, snapped through his blood.

He heard the roar—but it was muffled, dim and distant—when midnight struck. Bells clanged, horns tooted, cheers sounded. And through them he heard, clear as a wish, his own heartbeat.

He dropped the glass in his hand, shoved the blanket away so he could reach her. The hum of frustration in his throat came from the barrier of thick layers of clothing. He wanted that strong, curvy body, the shape of it, the taste and scent of it.

Then the sound of gunshots had him jerking back.

"Celebration fire, that's all." Her breath streamed out in clouds as she tried to draw him back. This man could *kiss*, and she wanted to hold onto the punch-drunk sensation of having his lips, his tongue, his teeth ravish her.

Who needed cheap champagne?

"Maybe, but . . . I have to check."

She gave a half-laugh, then reached down to pick up their glasses. “Yeah, you would.”

“Meg—”

“Go ahead, chief.” She gave his knee a friendly pat, smiled into those fascinating, and troubled, gray eyes. “A job’s a job.”

“It won’t take long.”

She was sure it wouldn’t. A few shots in the air were usual on holidays, at weddings, births—even at funerals, depending on the sentiments toward the dead.

But it didn’t seem wise to wait. Instead, she left the chairs, the bottle, the glasses on the front porch. She carried the blanket back to her truck, tossed it in the cab.

Then she drove toward home while the green lights played across the sky. And she knew Hopp was right. Nate Burke was going to be trouble.



SIX

THE LUNATIC

Police Log

Monday, January 3

8:03 A.M. Report of snowshoes missing from porch, residence of Hans Finkle. Deputy Peter Notti responded. Finkle's statement "That [numerous colorful expletives deleted] Trilby's up to his old tricks" could not be verified. Snowshoes subsequently located in Finkle's truck.

9:22 A.M. Advised of vehicular accident Rancor Road. Chief of Police Burke and Deputy Otto Gruber responded. Brett Trooper and Virginia Mann involved. No injuries, other than the stubbed toe Trooper suffered as a result of repeatedly kicking his own mangled bumper. No charges filed.

11:56 A.M. Confrontation between Dexter Trilby and Hans Finkle reported at The Lodge. The argument, which included other various and colorful expletives, was apparently rooted in the earlier snowshoe incident. Chief Burke responded, and after some debate, it was suggested the altercation be settled through a checkers tournament. At press time, it was twelve games to ten, in favor of Trilby. No charges filed.

1:45 P.M. Report of loud music and speeding vehicles on Caribou. Chief Burke and Deputy Notti responded. James and William Mackie found to be racing snowmobiles and playing a recording of “Born to Be Wild” at a loud volume. After a brief, and according to witness reports, entertaining chase, a heated confrontation with the officers ensued, during which the CD containing the offending track was confiscated, and which included James Mackie’s claim that “Lunacy’s just no damn fun anymore.” Both Mackies were ticketed for excessive speed.

3:12 P.M. Report of screaming in the vicinity of Rancor Wood, 2.1 miles from town post. Chief Burke and Deputy Gruber responded. Turned out to be a group of boys playing war, armed with popguns and a squirt bottle of ketchup. Chief Burke declared an immediate truce and escorted the soldiers—alive, dead and wounded—home.

4:58 P.M. Report of disturbance on Moose. Chief Burke and Deputy Notti responded. An argument between a sixteen-year-old female and a sixteen-year-old male involving an alleged flirtation with another sixteen-year-old male was settled. No charges filed.

5:18 P.M. Sixteen-year-old male ticketed for reckless driving and excessive horn blowing up and down Moose.

7:12 P.M. Responding to various requests, Chief Burke removed Michael Sullivan from the curb at the corner of Lunacy and Moose where he was singing a loud and reportedly off-key rendition of “Whiskey in the Jar.” Sullivan spent the night in jail for his own safety. No charges filed.

Nate read over the single day, then the rest of his second week in *The Lunatic*. He’d waited for the complaints when the first issue that included the police log had come out. But there’d been none. Apparently

people didn't mind having their names printed, even if it was in conjunction with their indiscretions.

He slipped the newspaper into a desk drawer, with the first issue. Two weeks down, he thought.

Still here.

SARRIE PARKER LEANED on the counter in The Corner Store. She'd shed her bunny boots and parka at the door, then plucked a pack of Black Jack gum from the point-of-purchase display.

She was there to gossip, not to shop, and the gum was the cheapest excuse at hand. She gave Cecil, Deb's King Charles spaniel, a little pat on the head. He lounged, as he did every day, in his cushioned basket on the counter. "Don't see much of Chief Burke down at The Lodge."

Deb continued to shelve packs of smokes and chewing tobacco. Her store was a clearinghouse for town news. If she didn't know about it, it hadn't happened yet.

"Doesn't come around here much, either. Keeps to himself."

"Has breakfast there every day with Rose's boy and takes his dinner there most nights. Not much of an appetite, you ask me."

Since she had the pack of gum in her hand anyway, Sarrie opened it. "I pick up his room every morning, not that there's much to pick up. Man doesn't have anything but his clothes and shaving gear. Not a picture, not a book."

Since she did the majority of the housekeeping at The Lodge, Sarrie considered herself an expert on human behavior.

"Maybe he's having stuff sent."

"Don't think I didn't ask." Sarrie wagged a stick of gum before fold-

ing it into her mouth. "Made it a point to. I said to him, 'So, Chief Burke, you got the rest of your things coming up from the Lower 48?' And he says to me, 'I brought everything with me.' Doesn't make any phone calls either, at least not from his room. Or get any. Far as I can see, the only thing he does up there is sleep."

Though there was no one else in the store at the moment, Sarrie dropped her voice, leaned in. "And despite Charlene's throwing herself at him, he's sleeping alone." She gave a sharp nod. "You change a man's sheets, you know what he's up to in the night."

"Maybe they do it in the shower or on the floor." Deb had the pleasure of seeing Sarrie's chipmunk-cheeked face register shock. "No law says you've got to do your screwing in bed."

Being a professional on the gossip circuit, Sarrie recovered quickly. "Charlene was getting any, she wouldn't still be chasing after him like a hound after a rabbit, would she?"

Pausing to scratch Cecil behind his silky ears, Deb had to concede the point. "Probably not."

"Man comes up here, hardly more than the clothes on his back, holes up hours on end in his room, steps around a willing woman *and* barely says more than boo unless you corner him, well, there's something strange about that man. If you ask me."

"He'd hardly be the first of that type to show up here."

"Maybe. But he's the first we made chief of police." She was still a little steamed he'd given her son a ticket the week before. Like twenty-five dollars grew on trees. "Man's hiding something."

"God's sake, Sarrie. Do you know anybody around here who isn't?"

"I don't care who's hiding what, unless he's got the authority to put me and mine in jail."

Impatient now, Deb jabbed keys on her cash register. “Unless you’re planning on walking out of here without paying for that gum, you’re not breaking any laws. So I wouldn’t worry about it.”

THE MAN UNDER DISCUSSION was still sitting at his desk. But now he’d been cornered. For two weeks, he’d managed to evade, sidestep or outrun Max Hawbaker. He didn’t want to be interviewed. As far as Nate was concerned, the press was the press, whether it was a small-town weekly or *The Baltimore Sun*.

Maybe the citizens of Lunacy didn’t mind their names in the paper, whatever the reason, but he’d yet to wash the bad taste out of his mouth that had coated it during his experience with reporters after the shootings.

And he’d known he’d have to swallow more when Hopp had marched into his office with Max at her side.

“Max needs an interview. The town needs to know something about the man we’ve got heading up our law and order. *The Lunatic* goes to press this time, I want this story in there. So . . . get to it.”

She marched right out again, closing the door smartly behind her.

Max smiled gamely. “Ran into the mayor on my way over to see if you had a few minutes now to talk to me.”

“Uh-huh.” Since he’d been debating whiling away some time with computer solitaire or taking Peter up on his offer to give him another snowshoeing lesson, Nate couldn’t claim not to have the time.

He’d pegged Max as an eager nerd, the sort that had spent most of his high school days being given wedgies. He had a round, pleasant face with light brown hair receding over it. He was carrying about ten extra pounds on a five-ten frame, most of it in the belly.

"Coffee?"

"Don't mind if I do."

Nate got up, poured two cups. "What do you take in it?"

"Couple of those creamers, couple of those sugars. Um, what do you think of our new feature? The police log?"

"It's all new to me. You've got the facts down. Seems thorough."

"Carrie really wanted to include it. I'm going to record this, if that's okay. I'll be taking notes, but I like to have a record."

"Fine." He doctored Max's coffee, brought it over. "What do you want to know?"

Settling in, Max took a small tape recorder out of his canvas sack. He set it on the desk, noted the time, turned it on. Then drew a pad and pencil out of his pocket. "I think our readers would like to know something about the man behind the badge."

"Sounds like a movie title. Sorry," he said when Max's brow creased. "There's not that much to know."

"Let's start with the basics. You mind giving me your age?"

"Thirty-two."

"And you were a detective with the Baltimore PD?"

"That's right."

"Married?"

"Divorced."

"Happens to the best of us. Kids?"

"No."

"Baltimore your hometown?"

"All my life, except these past couple weeks."

"So, how does a detective from Baltimore end up chief of police in Lunacy, Alaska?"

“I got hired.”

Max’s face stayed affable, his tone conversational. “Had to throw your hat into the ring to get hired.”

“I wanted a change.” A fresh start. A last chance.

“Some might consider this a pretty dramatic change.”

“If you’re going for something other than your usual, why not make it big? I liked the sound of the job, the place. Now I’ve got the opportunity to do the job I know, but in a different setting, with a different rhythm.”

“We just talked about the police log. This can’t be anything like what you used to deal with. You’re not concerned about being bored? Coming from the pace and action of a big city and into a community of less than seven hundred?”

Careful, Nate thought. Hadn’t he just been sitting here, bored? Or depressed? It was hard to tell the difference. There were times he wasn’t sure there was a difference since both left him with a heavy, useless feeling.

“Baltimore thinks of itself as a big small town. But the fact is, a lot of the time you’re doing the job with a certain amount of anonymity. One cop’s the same as another, one case piled on top of the next.”

And you can never close them all, Nate thought. No matter how many hours you put in, you can’t close them all and you end up with the Open and Actives haunting you.

“If someone calls here,” he continued, “they know that either I or one of two deputies is going to come out and talk to them, to help resolve the situation. And I’m going to know, after some more time on the job, who needs assistance when the calls come in. It won’t just be a name on a file, it’ll be a person I know. I think this will add another level of satisfaction to the work I do.”

It surprised him to realize he'd spoken the pure truth, without fully realizing it had been there.

"You hunt?"

"No."

"Fish?"

"Not so far."

Max pursed his lips. "Hockey? Skiing? Mountain climbing?"

"No. Peter's teaching me how to snowshoe. He says it'll come in handy."

"He's right about that. What about hobbies, leisure-time activities, interests?"

The job hadn't left him much room. Or, he corrected, he'd allowed the job to consume all his time. Isn't that why Rachel had looked elsewhere? "I'm keeping my options open there. We'll start with the snowshoeing, see what happens next. How'd you end up out here?"

"Me?"

"I'd like to know something about the guy asking the questions."

"That's fair," Max said after a moment. "Went to Berkeley in the sixties. Sex, drugs and rock and roll. There was a woman—as there should be—and we migrated north. Spent some time in Seattle. I hooked up with this guy there who was into climbing. I caught the bug. We kept migrating north, the woman and I. Antiestablishment, vegetarians, intellectuals."

He smiled, an overweight, balding, middle-aged man, who seemed amused by who he'd been, and who he was now. "She was going to paint; I was going to write novels that exposed man's underbelly, while we lived off the land. We got married, which screwed up everything. She ended up back in Seattle. I ended up here."

"Publishing a newspaper instead of writing novels."

“Oh, I’m still working on those novels.” He didn’t smile now, but looked distant and a little disturbed. “Once in a while I pull them out. They’re crap, but I’m still working on them. Still don’t eat meat, and I’m still a greenie—environmentalist type—which irritates a lot of people. Met Carrie about fifteen years ago. We got married.” His smile came back. “This one seems to be working out.”

“Kids?”

“Girl and a boy. Twelve and ten. Now, let’s get back to you. You were with the Baltimore PD for eleven years. When I spoke with Lieutenant Foster—”

“You spoke to my lieutenant?”

“Your former lieutenant. Getting some background. He described you as thorough and dogged, the kind of cop who closed cases and worked well under pressure. Not that any of us should mind having those qualities in our chief of police, but you seem overqualified for this job.”

“That would be my problem,” Nate said flatly. “That’s about all the time I can give you.”

“Just a couple more. You were on medical leave for two months after the incident last April during which your partner, Jack Behan, and a suspect were killed and yourself wounded. You returned to duty for another four months, then resigned. I have to assume the incident weighed heavily in your decision to take this position. Is that accurate?”

“I gave you my reasons for taking this position. My partner’s death doesn’t have anything to do with anyone in Lunacy.”

Max’s face was set, and Nate saw he’d underestimated the man. A reporter was a reporter, he reminded himself, whatever the venue. And this one smelled a story.

“It has to do with you, chief. Your experiences and motivations, your professional history.”

“History would be the operative word.”

“*The Lunatic* may be small-time, but as publisher I still have to do my homework, present an accurate story and a complete one. I know the shooting incident was investigated and it was found you fired your weapon justifiably. Still, you killed a man that night, and that has to weigh heavy.”

“Do you think you pick up a badge and a gun for sport, Hawbaker? Do you think they’re just for show? A cop knows, every day, when he picks up his weapon that it might be the day he has to use it. Yeah, it weighs heavy.”

Temper licked at him, turned his voice as cold as the January wind that rattled against the windows. “It’s supposed to weigh heavy—the weapon and what you might have to do with it. Do I regret deploying my weapon? I do not. I regret not being faster. If I’d been faster, a good man would still be alive. A woman wouldn’t be a widow, and two children would still have their father.”

Max had edged back in his seat, and he’d moistened his lips several times. But he stuck. “You blame yourself?”

“I’m the only one who came out of that alley alive.” Temper died and left his eyes dull and tired. “Who else is there to blame? Turn off your recorder. We’re done here.”

Max leaned forward, shut off the machine. “I’m sorry to have hit a sore spot. There’s not much public around here, but what there is has a right to know.”

“So you guys always say. I need to get back to work.”

Max picked up the recorder, tucked it away, then rose. “I, ah, need a picture to run with the story.” Nate’s silent stare had Max clearing his throat. “Carrie can come find you a little later. She’s the photographer. Thanks for your time. And . . . good luck with the snowshoeing.”

When he was alone, Nate sat very still. He waited for the rage, but it wouldn't come back. He'd have welcomed it, the wild, blinding heat of fury. But he stayed cold.

He knew what would happen if he stayed frozen. He got up, his movements slow and controlled. He stepped out, picked up a two-way.

"I've got to be out awhile," he told Peach. "Something comes up, you can reach me on the two-way or my cell."

"Weather's coming in," she told him. "Looks to be a bad one. You don't want to stray so far you're not tucked back in by dinnertime."

"I'll be back." He walked out into the entry, piled on his gear. He kept his mind a blank as he got into his car and drove. He pulled over again in front of Hopp's house, walked to her door and knocked.

She answered, wearing a pair of reading glasses on a chain over her thick corduroy shirt. "Ignatious. Come on in."

"No, thanks. Don't ever ambush me like that again."

Her fingers ran up and down her eyeglass chain as she studied his face. "Come in, we'll talk."

"That's all I have to say. All I'm going to say."

He turned, left her standing in the doorway.

He drove out of town, pulling over when he was clear of houses. There were some people skating on the lake. He imagined they'd be coming in soon, as the light was already going. Farther out on the plate of ice was somebody's ramshackle ice-fishing house.

He didn't see Meg's plane. He hadn't seen her since they'd watched the northern lights.

He should go back, do what he was paid to do. Even if what he was paid to do wasn't a hell of a lot. Instead, he found himself driving on.

When he reached Meg's, her dogs were standing at alert, guarding

the house. He climbed out, waited to see what their policy on unexpected company might be.

Their heads cocked, almost in unison, then they loped forward with a friendly edge to their barks. After some leaping and circling, one of them raced off toward the doghouse, bounded up the steps and through the doorway. And came back carrying a huge bone in its mouth.

“What’s that from? A mastodon?”

It was gnarled and chewed and slobbered on, but Nate took it, deducing the game, and hurled it like a javelin.

They took off, bumping and bashing each other like a couple of football players racing for the pass. They dived into the snow, came up covered with it. The bone was clamped in both of their jaws now. After a quick and spirited tug-of-war, they pranced back as if they were harnessed together.

“Teamwork, huh?” He took the bone again, hurled it again and watched the replay.

He was on his fourth pass when the dogs raced away from him, making beelines for the lake. Seconds later, he heard what they had. As the rumble of engine grew, Nate followed the path of the dogs down to the lake.

He saw the red flash and the dull glint of the lowering sun on the glass. To Nate’s eye she seemed to be coming in too fast, too low. He expected her skis to catch on the treetops at best, for her nose to crash into the ice at worst.

The noise swallowed everything. With nerves dancing over his skin, he watched her circle, angle, and slide down on the ice. Then there was silence so complete he thought he could hear the air she’d displaced sighing down again.

Beside him the dogs quivered, then bunched, then leaped from snow to ice. They sprawled and slid and barked in utter and obvious joy when the door opened. Meg jumped down, her boots ringing. She squatted, allowed herself to be licked while she energetically rubbed fur. When she straightened, she grabbed a pack out of the plane. And only then did she look at Nate.

"Somebody else crash fenders?" she called out.

"Not that I know of."

With the dogs dancing around her, she crossed the short span of ice, climbed up the slight slope of snow. "Been here long?"

"Few minutes."

"Your blood's still too thin to handle this cold. Let's go inside."

"Where were you?"

"Oh, here and there. Picked up a party a few days ago. They've been shooting caribou—photographically. Took them back to Anchorage today. Just in time," she added with a glance toward the sky. "Got a storm coming in. Air was getting very interesting."

"Do you get scared up there?"

"No. But I've gotten pretty interested from time to time." Inside the entry, she pulled off her parka.

"Ever crash?"

"I've had to, we'll say, put down abruptly." She yanked off her boots, then taking a towel out of a box, squatted down again to wipe off her dogs' feet. "Go on in. This'll take a minute, and it's crowded with the four of us in here."

He stepped inside, closing the inner door as he'd been taught to keep the heat in.

The windows were pulling in the last hints of sun of the short day, so the room was mixed with light and shadows. He could smell flowers—

not roses, but something more primitive and earthy. It was mixed with dog and a hint of wood smoke in a strange and appealing combination.

He'd expected rustic and saw even in the half-light he'd been well off the mark.

In the spacious living area, the walls were a pale yellow. To mimic the sun, he supposed, and keep the dark at bay. The fireplace was built of polished stone in golden hues so that simmering logs glowed inside its frame. She had squat candles on the mantel in deeper yellows and dark blues. The long sofa picked up the blues and was decked with the toss pillows women insisted on having everywhere. A thick throw, with her key colors bleeding into each other, was draped over the back.

There were lamps with painted shades, gleaming tables, a patterned rug and two big chairs.

Watercolors, oil paintings, pastels, all of Alaskan scenes, decorated the walls.

To his left, stairs led up, and he found himself grinning at the newel post carved into a totem.

The door opened. The dogs led the way, each prancing over to the chairs and jumping up on one.

"Not what I expected," he commented.

"Too much expected leads to boredom." She crossed the room, opened a big carved box and hauled out split logs.

"Let me get that."

"Already got it." She bent, set the logs, then turned to him, keeping the fireplace at her back. "You want food?"

"No. No, thanks."

"Drink?"

"Not especially, no."

She crossed over, switched on one of the lamps. "Sex, then."

“I—”

“Why don’t you go ahead up? Second door on the left. I just want to put out food and water for my dogs.”

She strolled out, leaving him standing there with the dogs staring at him out of crystal eyes. He’d have sworn they were smirking.

When she came back, he was standing in exactly the same spot.

“Can’t find the steps? Some detective you are.”

“Listen, Meg . . . I just drove out to . . .” He dragged a hand through his hair, realizing he didn’t have a clue. He’d left town feeling that black hole gaping in front of him, and sometime during his game with the dogs, it had closed up again.

“You don’t want sex?”

“I know a trick question when I hear one.”

“Well, while you’re thinking about how you’re going to answer it, I’m going upstairs and getting naked.” She shook her hair off her shoulders and behind her back. “I look really good naked, if you’re wondering.”

“I figured that.”

“You’re a little on the thin side, but I don’t mind that.” She walked to the steps, angled her head. Smiled and crooked her finger. “Come on, cutie.”

“Just like that?”

“Why not? No law against it, yet anyway. Sex is simple, Nate. It’s everything else that’s complicated. So let’s be simple for now.”

She headed up the steps. Nate glanced back at the dogs, blew out a breath. “Let’s see if I remember how to be simple.”

He walked up, paused by the first door. The walls were a sizzling red, except the one that was mirrored. On the wall opposite the mirrors was a shelf unit holding a TV, DVD player, stereo components. Between them was what he recognized as state-of-the-art exercise equipment.

An elliptical cross-trainer faced the TV, the Bowflex and rack of free weights lined up with the mirror.

He imagined the mini-fridge held bottles of water, maybe some sports drinks.

The room told him the body he was about to see naked got plenty of serious workouts.

She'd left the bedroom door open and was crouched in front of another fireplace, lighting the kindling. There was a big, whopping sleigh bed, all curves and dark wood. More art, more lamps accented the shades of green and ivory.

"I saw your equipment."

She sent a slow smile over her shoulder. "Not yet."

"Ha. I meant your personal fitness center next door."

"You work out, chief?"

"Used to." Before Jack. "Not so much lately."

"I like the sweat, and the endorphin rush."

"So did I."

"Well, you'll have to get back to it."

"Yeah. This is some place you've got here."

"Took me four years to get it done. I need space, or I get twitchy. Lights on, lights off?" When he didn't answer, she straightened, glanced over her shoulder again. "Relax, chief. I'm not going to hurt you—unless you ask for it."

She walked to the nightstand, pulled open a drawer. "Safety first," she announced and tossed him a condom in a foil pack.

"You're thinking too much," she decided when he stood, looking a bit bewildered. And, she thought, adorable with all that messy roasted-chestnut hair, those wounded-hero eyes. "I bet we can fix that. Maybe you need a little atmosphere. I don't mind that either."

She lit a candle, wandered the room, lighting others. "A little music." Opening a cabinet, she switched on the CD player inside, adjusted the volume to low. It was Alanis Morissette this time, with her strangely appealing voice singing about the fear of bliss.

"Maybe I should've gotten you a little drunk first, but it's too late for that now."

"You're an original," Nate murmured.

"You bet your fine ass on that." She tugged her sweater over her head, tossed it into a chair. "Thermal underwear makes the striptease a little less than erotic, but the payoff should make up for it."

He was already brick hard.

"You plan to shed any of those clothes, or do you want me to take care of that for you?"

"I'm nervous. Saying that makes me feel like an idiot."

Oh, yeah, she thought again. Seriously adorable. Honesty in a man always was.

"You're only nervous because you're thinking." She dropped her trousers, stepped out of them. Sitting on the bed, she pulled off her socks. "If it hadn't been for the call of duty New Year's Eve, we'd have ended up in bed."

"You were gone when I came back."

"Because I started thinking. See, it's deadly." She pulled back the comforter and sheets.

He laid his shirt over her sweater. When he took his cell phone out of his pocket, set it down, he shrugged. "I'm on duty."

"Well, let's hope everyone behaves themselves." She pulled off her thermal top. Every muscle in his body bunched into a fist.

She was porcelain—delicate white skin carved into curves. But there

was nothing fragile. Instead it was all drama and confidence, a photograph in black and white with light playing gold over it.

And he saw, with a surprised jolt of lust when she turned to switch off the light, to leave only the candles and fire burning, the little tattoo of spreading red wings at the small of her back.

“Half the thoughts in my head just evaporated.”

She laughed. “Let’s take care of the other half. Lose the pants, Burke.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He unbuckled his belt, then his fingers went numb as she peeled off the rest of the thermal. His mouth was dry as dust. “You were right. You look really good naked.”

“I’d like to say the same, if you ever get those clothes off.” She slid onto the bed, stretched out. “Come on, cutie. Come get me.”

She trailed a fingertip down her breast as he undressed. “Mmm, not bad, upper body wise. Nice muscle tone for somebody who hasn’t been getting regular workouts. And . . .” She grinned, propped up on her elbows when he stripped off his pants. “Well, well, you really did stop thinking. Dress that soldier, and let’s go to war.”

He complied, but when he sat on the bed, he simply brushed his finger over her shoulder. “Give me a minute to plan my battle strategy first. I’ve never seen skin like yours. It’s so pure.”

“Can’t judge a book by its cover.”

Balancing herself, she reached up, grabbed a hank of his hair and dragged him down to her. “Give me that mouth. I didn’t have nearly enough of it before.”

It swept through him in a rush, all the needs, the desperation, the frantic urges that coalesced into blind lust. The taste of her exploded in-

side him, the ripe, greedy heat of her fired in his blood. His mouth bore down on hers, fed from hers until hungers he'd forgotten burst to life again.

He couldn't get enough, her mouth, her throat, her breasts. Her gasps and moans and cries were like lashes against his naked need, driving him to take more.

He clamped a hand between her thighs, crazed to feel the wet, the warmth, and pushed her so quickly, so violently to peak, they both shuddered.

It was like climbing a quiet, green hill and having it turn into a volcano. That was inside of him, she realized. The dangerous surprise under the injured calm. She'd wanted him, those sad eyes, that quiet manner. But she hadn't known what he would give her when the mask was yanked away.

She arched up, stunned, as he raked heat through her body. And when she cried out, it was with mindless pleasure. She rolled with him, digging with her nails, nipping with her teeth, her hands eager and possessive as they raced over slickened skin.

Her lungs burned with every panting breath.

He wanted to devour, to ravish and rule. He drove into her, would have buried his face in her hair, but her hands came up to his face. And she watched him, her eyes wild and blue as he thrust inside her, as he lost himself inside her. Watched him until he'd emptied himself inside her.

HE'D BEEN HULLED OUT until his skin was nothing but a husk with air inside it. He couldn't remember what it was to feel that dragging, drawing weight that closed down over his mind and so bloated his body

it made just getting out of bed in the morning an exercise in will and control.

He was blind and deaf and replete. If he could have floated the rest of the way to oblivion, just as he was, he wouldn't have uttered a murmur of complaint.

"No falling asleep while still engaged."

"Huh? What?"

"Reverse thrusters, cutie."

He wasn't blind after all. He could see light, shadow, shape. None of it made any sense, but he could see it. Obviously he could hear, because the voice—her voice—was there drifting through the mild buzzing in his head.

And he could feel her, yielding under him—that soft, tight, curvy body, damp with the sweat they'd worked up, and smelling of soap and sex and female.

"Better give me a shove," he said after a moment. "I may be paralyzed."

"Not from where I'm sitting." But she planted her hand on his shoulder, and put some effort into pushing him over. Then took a long, whistling breath—in and out—and said, "*God!*"

"I think I saw Him, just a faint outline for a second. He was smiling."

"That was me."

"Oh."

She couldn't work up the energy to stretch, so yawned instead. "Somebody was *very* pent up. Mmmm. Lucky me."

The circuits in his brain were starting to connect again. He could almost hear them sizzle as contact was reestablished. "It's been a while for me."

Curious, she tipped onto her side. She saw the scars her fingers had played against. Puckers of wounds, bullet wounds, she knew, on his side, on his thigh.

“Define ‘a while.’ Like a month?” His eyes stayed closed, but his mouth curved. “Two months? Jesus, more? Three?”

“We’d be closing in on a year, I guess.”

“Holy crap! No wonder I saw stars.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“Maybe not, but I sure as hell used you.”

Deliberately, she traced a finger on the scar snaking down his side. He didn’t flinch, but she felt him tighten and decided to keep it light for now.

“I’d say we used each other, and so well, so thoroughly, everyone in a hundred-mile radius of this bed is lying back right now, smoking a cigarette.”

“You’re okay with it?”

“You got short-term-memory syndrome, Burke?” Now, she stretched and gave him a quick jab with her elbow on the back end of the move. “Whose idea was this?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I was married for five years. I was faithful. The last two years of the marriage were rocky. Actually, the last year of it sucked completely. Sex became an issue. A battleground. A weapon. Anything but a natural pleasure. So I’m rusty, and I’m not altogether sure what women are looking for in this area.”

Not so light then, she mused. “I’m not women. I’m me. Sorry your ex jerked you around by the dick, but as I can attest that appendage is still in good working order, maybe it’s time to get over it.”

“Long past.” He shifted, working his arm under her. He felt her stiffen a little, and the hesitation in her body before she relaxed again

and let him settle her head on his shoulder. "I don't want this to be the end of it. Between us."

"We'll see what we think about that next time."

"I wish I could stay, but I have to get back. Sorry."

"I didn't ask you to stay."

He turned his head so he could see her face. Her cheeks were still flushed, her eyes still sleepy. But he was too good a cop to miss the wariness just under the ease. "I wish you'd ask me to stay, but since I'd have to say no, that's a waste of a wish. But I'd like to come back."

"You can't come back tonight. This storm hits and you make it out here—which you wouldn't—you'd be stuck. Could be days. That wouldn't suit me."

"If it's going to be that bad, come back into town with me."

"No. That *really* wouldn't suit me." Relaxed again, she walked her fingers up his chest, along his jawline and into his hair. "I'm fine here. Plenty of supplies, plenty of wood, my dogs. I like a good storm, the solitariness of it."

"And when it clears?"

She moved her shoulder, then rolled away. Rising, she walked naked to the closet, the firelight playing over her white skin and that flashy spread of red wings, before she pulled out a thick flannel robe. "Maybe you'll give me a call, and if I'm around, you could bring me out a pizza."

She pulled on the robe, smiled as she belted it. "I'll give you a really good tip."



SEVEN

THE FIRST FLAKES FELL as he drove back to town. Fat and soft, they didn't look particularly threatening. In fact, he found them picturesque. They reminded him of the snows of his childhood, the ones that fell during the night and kept falling in the morning, so when you looked out your bedroom window, excitement sizzled in your blood.

No school!

It made him smile to think of it, to remember the days when snow was a thrill instead of a burden or a hazard. Maybe it would pay him to bring some of that childhood awe back inside himself.

To look around, see those oceans and rivers of white and consider the possibilities. He was learning to snowshoe, so maybe he'd learn to ski. Cross-country skiing might be interesting. Besides, he'd lost too much weight over the last few months. That sort of exercise, added to the regular meals that were always being put in front of him, would help build him back up again.

Maybe he'd buy one of those Ski-doo things and race around in the snow for the hell of it. Have some fun, for Christ's sake. And he'd see some of the countryside from something other than a car.

He paused to watch a small herd of deer wind their way through the

trees to his left. Their coats were shaggy and dark against snow that came to their knees. If deer had knees.

It was a whole new world for the city boy, he decided, whose rural adventures until now had consisted of a couple of summer camping trips to western Maryland.

He parked in front of the station, remembered to plug his engine block heater into the outlet, then watched Otto and Pete string a knotted rope line along the sidewalk about waist high. Pulling his thick gloves back on, he walked over to join them.

"What's going on here?"

"Rope guide," Otto said, and wound it around a lamppost.

"For?"

"Man can lose himself a foot out the door in a whiteout."

"Doesn't look that bad." Nate glanced out at the street and missed the look Otto and Pete exchanged. "How much are they calling for?"

"Could get four feet."

Nate turned back sharply. "You're shitting me."

"Wind's coming with, so drifts could be two, three times that." There was obvious pleasure in Otto's tone as he worked the rope. "This ain't Lower 48 snow."

He thought of Baltimore, and how six inches of the white stuff could slow the city to a crawl. "I want these parked vehicles off the street and the snow removal equipment checked."

"People mostly leave their cars where they sit," Pete told him. "Dig them out after."

Nate considered following the when-in-Rome theory, then shook his head. They were paying him to establish order, so by God, he'd establish some order.

"Get them off the street. Anything still parked on this route in an

hour gets towed. Alaska or Lower 48, it's still four feet of snow on the street. Until we're clear, we're on call twenty-four/seven. None of us leave the station without a two-way. What's the policy on out-of-towners?"

Otto scratched his chin. "Isn't any."

"We'll have Peach go down the list, contact all of them. We make arrangements for shelter for anyone who wants to come in."

This time, he caught the exchanged glance. Peter smiled gently. "Nobody's going to."

"Maybe not, but they'll have a choice." He thought of Meg, six miles out and essentially cut off. She wouldn't budge, that much he already knew of her. "How much of this rope do we have?"

"Plenty. People generally string their own guides."

"We'll make sure of it." He went inside to put Peach to work.

It took him an hour to organize procedure, and another ten minutes to deal with Carrie Hawbaker when she blew in with her digital camera. Unlike her husband, she seemed sharp and brisk, merely waving at him to go on about what he was doing so she could get candid.

He let her snap her pictures and talked to Peach about the in-progress snow emergency plans. He didn't have time to worry about it or to think about how his interview with Max had gone.

"Did you contact everyone outside of town?" he asked Peach.

"Twelve more to go."

"Anyone heading in?"

"Not so far." She ticked off her list. "People live out, Nate, because they like it out."

He nodded. "Contact them anyway. Then I want you to go on home and call me when you get there."

Her pudgy cheeks popped out with her smile. "Aren't you the mother hen."

"Public safety is my life."

"And chirpier than you've been." She took the pencil out of her bun, wagged it at him. "It's good to see."

"I guess a blizzard brings out my inner songbird."

He glanced toward the door, amazed when it opened again. Didn't anyone in Lunacy stay home in a snowstorm?

Hopp fluffed at her hair. "Pouring in now," she announced. "Heard you're clearing cars off the street, chief."

"Snow plow'll be doing the first sweep of the mains shortly."

"It's going to take a lot of sweeps."

"I guess it will."

She nodded. "You got a minute?"

"Just about." He gestured toward his office. "You should be home, mayor. If we get that four feet, you'll be wading in it up to your armpits."

"I'm short, but I'm hardy, and if I don't get out and about a bit during a storm, I get cabin fever. It's January, Ignatious. We expect to get hammered."

"Regardless, it's five above, dark as the inside of a dead dog, and we're already heading toward the first foot, with winds gusting at thirty-five."

"Keeping your finger on the pulse."

"Lunacy Radio." He gestured toward the portable on his counter. "They promise to broadcast twenty-four hours a day while it blows."

"Always do. Speaking about media—"

"I gave the interview. Carrie took the pictures."

"And you're still pissed off." She bobbed her head at him. "Town gets its first official police department and brings in a chief from the Outside. It's news, Ignatious."

"No argument there."

"You were tap-dancing around Max."

"It was actually more of a two-step. I just learned how."

"Whatever the choreography, I stopped the dancing. And my method of doing so crossed a line. I apologize for it."

"Accepted."

When she held out her hand to shake on it, he surprised her by giving it a friendly squeeze. "Go home, Hopp."

"I'll say the same."

"Can't do it. First I get to live out a childhood dream. I'm going riding on a snowplow."

EVERY BREATH WAS LIKE inhaling splinters of ice. Those same splinters managed to spear around his goggles and into his eyes. Every inch of his body was double or triple wrapped, and he was still breathlessly cold.

It didn't seem real, any of it. The outrageous wind, the ear-pounding engine of the snowplow, the white wall the headlights could barely penetrate. Now and then he could see the glow of a lamp against a window, but most of the world had fined down to the half a foot of light jittering in front of the canary-yellow blade.

He didn't attempt conversation. He didn't think Bing wanted to talk to him anyway, but the noise made the subject moot.

He had to admit, Bing handled the machine with the precision and delicacy of a surgeon. It wasn't the swipe and dump Nate had expected. There were routes and disposal sites, curbside excavations, driveway detours, all executed in near whiteout conditions and at a speed that had Nate, continually, swallowing a protesting yelp.

He had no doubt Bing would love to hear him shriek like a girl, and so he gritted his teeth against any sound that could be mistaken as such.

After dumping another load, Bing took the brown bottle he'd wedged under the seat, unscrewed the cap and took a long pull. The smell that blew into Nate's face was potent enough to make his eyes water.

Since they were sitting, contemplating the growing mountain of snow, Nate decided to risk a comment. "I heard alcohol lowers body temperature," he shouted.

"Fucking propaganda." To prove it, Bing took another pull from the bottle.

Considering they were alone in the dark, in a blizzard, and that Bing outweighed him by around seventy pounds and would, Nate was sure, like nothing better than to bury him in the mountain of removed snow until his cold, dead body was found in the spring thaw, he decided not to argue the point. Or mention the law against carrying open containers of alcohol in a vehicle or the dangers of drinking while operating heavy machinery.

Bing turned his massive shoulders. Nate could see nothing but his eyes, squinting between watch cap and scarf. "See for yourself." He shoved the bottle into Nate's hand.

It didn't seem like the moment to mention he wasn't much of a drinker. More politic, he decided, and companionable to take a slug. When he did, his head exploded and his throat and stomach lining burned to cinders.

"Merciful Mother of God."

He choked and, when he inhaled, swallowed shards of flame rather than ice. Through the ringing in his ears he could hear laughing. Unless the sound was the howl of some giant, maniacal wolf.

"What the fucking fuck is that?" He continued to wheeze while tears streamed out of his eyes and froze on his face. "Battery acid? Plutonium? Liquid fire of hell?"

Bing took the bottle back, took a chug, and capped it. "Horse turd whiskey."

"Oh perfect."

"Man can't handle his whiskey ain't no man."

"If that's the criteria, I'll be a woman."

"I'll take you back, Mary. Done all can be done for now."

"Praise the tiny Baby Jesus."

There was a crinkling of the skin around Bing's eyes that could have indicated a smile. He reversed, turned around. "I got twenty in the pool says you'll be packing your bag before the end of the month."

Nate sat still, his throat burning, eyes stinging, his feet like icebergs despite two pair of thermal socks and boots. "Who holds the pool?"

"Skinny Jim, works the bar at The Lodge."

Nate merely nodded.

He didn't know where Bing got his sense of direction but decided the man could've guided Magellan. He zipped the machine along in the blinding snow and arrowed it straight to the curb at The Lodge.

Nate's knees and ankles wept when he jumped down. The snow on the sidewalk reached those frozen knees, and the wind blew it rudely in his face as he gripped the rope guide and pulled himself toward the door.

The heat inside was almost painful. Clint Black rolled out of the juke and replaced the humming in his ears. There were a dozen people seated at the bar or at tables, drinking, eating, holding conversations as if the wrath of God wasn't blowing on the other side of the door.

Lunatics, he thought. Every one of them.

He wanted coffee—blistering hot—and red meat. He'd cheerfully eat it raw.

He nodded as people called out to him and was fighting with snaps and zippers when Charlene hurried over to him.

“Why you poor thing! You must be frozen solid. Let me help you with that coat.”

“I’ve got it. I—”

“Your fingers will be all stiff.”

It was too weird, too surreal, to have the mother of the woman he’d bedded that afternoon undoing his snow-coated parka.

“I’ve got it, Charlene. Could use some coffee though. Appreciate that.”

“I’ll get it for you myself, right away.” She patted his cold cheek. “You just sit right down.”

But when he’d managed to strip off everything but his shirt and pants, he walked to the bar. He pulled out his wallet, signaled to the man they called Skinny Jim. “Here’s a hundred,” he said in a voice loud enough to carry. “Put it in the pool. It says I’m staying.”

He stuck his wallet back in his pocket, then sat beside John. “Professor.”

“Chief.”

Nate angled his head to read the title of the current book. “*Cannery Row*. Good one. Thanks, Charlene.”

“Don’t you mention it.” She set his coffee down. “We’ve got a nice stew tonight. Warm you right up. Unless you want me to take care of that for you.”

“Stew would be great. Have you got rooms if some of these people need to stay here tonight?”

“We always got room at The Lodge. I’ll dish you up that stew.”

Nate swiveled on his stool, sipping coffee as he checked the room. Someone had plugged an old Springsteen into the juke, and The Boss was singing about his glory days while pool balls thudded into pockets. He recognized all the faces—regulars, people he saw nearly every night.

He couldn't see the pool players from his angle but made out the voices. The Mackie brothers.

"Any of these people going to get drunk, then try to get home?" he asked John.

"Mackies might, but Charlene would talk them out of it. Most will clear out in an hour or so, and the die-hards will still be here in the morning."

"Which camp would you be?"

"That depends on you." John lifted his beer.

"Meaning?"

"If you take Charlene up on her offer, I'll be heading on up to my room alone. If you don't, I'll be heading up to hers."

"I'm just here for the stew."

"Then I'll be staying in her room tonight."

"John. Doesn't it bother you?"

John contemplated his beer. "Having it bother me doesn't change the way things are. The way she is. The romantics like to say you don't have a choice who you love. I disagree. People pick and they choose. This is my choice."

Charlene brought out the stew, a basket with chunks of fresh bread, and a thick wedge of apple pie.

"Man works out in this weather, he needs to eat. You do justice by that now, Nate."

"I will. You hear from Meg?"

Charlene blinked as if translating the name from a foreign language. "No. why?"

"Just thought you two might've gotten in touch with each other." To let the stew cool a little, he started with the bread. "Seeing as she's out there on her own in this."

“Nobody knows how to handle herself better than Meg. She doesn’t need anyone. Not a man or a mother.”

She walked away, letting the kitchen door slap shut behind her.

“Sore spot,” Nate commented.

“Tender as they come. Bigger bruise yet if she thinks you’re more interested in her daughter than in her.”

“I’m sorry to be the cause of that, but I am.” He sampled the stew. It was loaded with potatoes, carrots, beans and onions, and a strong, gamey meat that couldn’t have come from cow.

It slid warm into his belly and made him forget about the cold.

“What’s this meat in here?”

“That’d be moose.”

Nate spooned up more, studied it. “Okay,” he said, and ate.

IT SNOWED ALL NIGHT, and he slept like a stone through it. The view out his window when he woke was like the static on a television screen. He could hear the wind howling, feel it pressing against the windowpane.

The lights didn’t work, so he lit candles, and they made him think of Meg.

He dressed, studying the phone. It was probably out, too. Besides, you didn’t call a woman at six-thirty in the morning just because you’d had sex with her. There was no need to worry about her. She’d lived up here her entire life. She was tucked inside her house with her two dogs and plenty of firewood.

He worried anyway as he used his flashlight to guide himself downstairs.

It was the first time he’d seen the place empty. Tables were cleaned

off, the bar was wiped down. There was no smell of coffee brewing, bacon frying. No morning clatter or conversation. No little boy sitting at a table looking up at him with a quick smile.

There was nothing but dark, the howl of the wind and . . . snoring. He followed the sound and shined his light over the Mackie brothers. They lay, toe to nose, on the pool table, snoring away under layers of blanket.

He worked his way into the kitchen and, after a hunt, found a muffin. Taking it with him, he pulled on his gear. With the muffin stuffed in his pocket, he pulled open the door.

The wind nearly knocked him over. The force of it, the shock of it, the bitter snow that flew into his eyes, his mouth, his nose as he fought his way through the door.

His flashlight was next to useless, but he aimed it out, followed the line of the rope in its beam. Then he stuffed the light in his pocket, gripped the rope with both hands and began to pull himself along.

On the sidewalk, the snow was up to his thighs. He thought a man could drown in it, soundlessly, even before he died of exposure.

He managed to fight his way to the street, where thanks to Bing's plow, and horse-turd whiskey, the snow was no more than ankle deep, unless you ran into a drift.

He'd have to cross the street damn near blind, and without the guide, to get to the station. He closed his eyes, brought the image of the street, the location of the buildings into his head. Then lowering his shoulders to the wind, he let go of the rope, grabbed the flashlight again and started across.

He might as well have been in the wilderness instead of in a town with paved streets and sidewalks, with people sleeping behind board and brick. The wind was like a storm surf in his ears, one that kept trying to shove him back as he bulled his way through it.

People died crossing the street all the time, he reminded himself. Life was full of nasty risks, nastier surprises. A couple of guys could walk out of a bar and grill, and one of them could end up dead in an alley.

An idiot could walk into a blizzard, try to cross the street and end up wandering aimlessly for hours until he dropped dead of exposure three feet from shelter.

He was cursing when his boots bumped something solid. Picturing the curb, Nate waved his arms out like a blind man, and found the guide.

"For our next amazing feat," he muttered, hauling himself onto the buried sidewalk. He dragged himself along until he found the cross rope, then changed angles and plowed his way to the outer door of the station.

Wondering why he'd bothered to lock up, he fished out his keys, used his flashlight to help him find the locks. In the entry, he shook himself off, but kept his gear on. As he'd suspected, the station was frigid. Frigid enough, he noted, that the windows were frosted on the inside.

Someone with more forethought than he had stacked wood by the stove. He fired it up, stood holding his hands, still gloved, to the flame. When he had his breath back, he closed the stove door.

He got candles, a battery-operated lamp, and considered himself in business.

He found the battery radio, tuned in to the local station. As promised, they were on the air, and someone with a twisted sense of humor was spinning the Beach Boys.

Seated at his desk, he kept one ear on KLUN, the other on Peach's call radio and, mourning the lack of coffee, ate his muffin.

By eight-thirty, he was still on his own. A reasonable hour, he decided, and settled down at the ham radio. He'd gotten a basic lesson from Peach on operation and decided to take his first flight.

"This is KLPD calling KUNA. Come in, KUNA. Meg, you there? Pick up or sign on or whatever you call it." He got static, buzzing, a couple of squeals. "This is KLPD calling KUNA. Come on, Galloway."

"This is KUNA responding. You got a license to operate that radio, Burke? Over."

He knew it was ridiculous, but relief simply blew through him at the sound of her voice. Right on its heels was pleasure. "I'm C of P. Comes with the badge."

"Say over."

"Right, over. No, you okay out there? Over."

"That's affirmative. We're nice and cozy. Tucked up here listening to the taku. You? Over."

"I survived a hike across the street. What's taku? A rock group? Over."

"It's a mean bastard wind, Burke. The one shaking your windows right now. What the hell are you doing in the station? Over."

"I'm on duty." He glanced around the room, noted he could see his own breath. "Your power out?"

She waited a beat. "I'll say 'over' for you. In this, sure it's out. Generator's up. We're fine, chief. You don't have to worry. Over."

"Check in once in a while, and I won't. Hey, you know what I had yesterday? Over."

"Besides me? Over."

"Ha." God, this felt good, he thought. He didn't care if it was cold as the ice of hell. "Yeah, besides. I had horse turd whiskey and moose stew. Over."

She laughed, long and loud. "We'll make a sourdough out of you, Burke. Gotta go feed my dogs and my fire. See you around. Over and out."

"Over and out," he murmured.

It was warm enough now to shed the parka, though he kept on his

hat and thermal vest. He was poking through the files, looking for busy work when Peach pushed through the door.

“Wondered if anyone was crazy enough to come in today,” she said.

“Just me. How the hell did you get here?”

“Oh, Bing brought me in on the plow.” She dusted one hand over the baby-blue fleece of her sweater.

“Snowplow as taxicab. Here, let me get that.” He hurried over to take the big sack she carried. “You didn’t have to come in.”

“Job’s a job.”

“Yeah, but . . . coffee? Is this coffee?” He dug the thermos out of the sack.

“Wasn’t sure you’d have the generator up yet.”

“Not only don’t I have it up, I don’t know if I can find it. And since mechanics aren’t my strong point, I wasn’t sure I’d know what to do with it if I did find it. This *is* coffee. Marry me, have many, many children with me.”

She giggled like a girl, slapped at him with her hand. “You be careful, throwing out offers like that. Just because I’ve been married three times already doesn’t mean I won’t go for four. You go ahead and have some coffee and a cinnamon bun.”

“Maybe we could just live together in sin.” He set the sack on the counter, and immediately poured coffee into a mug. The scent hit him like a beautiful fist. “Forever.”

“You smile like that more often, I might just take you up on it. Well, look what the taku blew in,” she added when Peter stumbled in.

“Holy cow. That’s a whopper out there. Talked to Otto. He’s on his way.”

“Bing bring you in, too?”

“No, me and my dad mused it.”

“Mushed.” Another world, Nate thought. But Peach was right, a job was a job. “All right then. Peter, let’s get the generator going. Peach, get ahold of the fire department. Let’s get a crew together and clear off the sidewalks as soon as it’s light enough, so people can get around if they need to. Priorities are around the clinic and the station. When Otto gets here, tell him the Mackies are passed out on the pool table at The Lodge. Let’s make sure they get home in one piece.”

He pulled on his parka as he worked down his mental checklist. “Let’s see if we can get an ETA on when power’s going to be back on. People are going to want to know. Phones, too. When I get back in, we’ll work up an announcement, have the radio run it, about what we know when we know it. I want people to know we’re here if they need help.”

And that, too, Nate discovered, felt good.

“Peter?”

“Right behind you, chief.”

JOURNAL ENTRY · *February 18, 1988*

Nearly lost Han in a crevice today. It happened so fast. We’re climbing, pumped up, a few hours from the summit. Cold, hungry, edgy, but pumped. Only a climber understands the juice of that combination. Darth’s in the lead, the only way to keep him from pitching another shitfit, then Han, and I’m bringing up the flank.

But I forgot yesterday. The days are starting to blur now, one cold, white door opening to the next cold, white door.

I was lost in the rhythm of my own pounding head, in the spell of the climb, in the rise of white. We crawled and grunted our way up a rock pitch, moving well, aiming for heaven.

I heard Darth shout, *Rock!* And the cannonball of the boulder he'd dislodged spat out from that long chimney, whizzing by Han's head. I had an instant to think, no, I don't want to go this way, smashed by some fist of God, sucker punched off the mountain. It missed me, as it had Han, by inches, flying by in a finger snap of time, and crashing, bringing a quick and jagged rain of other rocks with it.

We cursed Darth, but then we curse one another over anything and everything now. Most of it in companionable good humor. It helps surge the adrenaline as we get higher, and the air's so thin that breathing is an exercise in pain and frustration.

I knew Han was flagging, but we pushed on. Pushed on, driven by obsession and Darth's relentless insults.

His eyes look mad behind his goggles. Mad and possessed. While I think of the mountain as a bitch when I'm driving into her belly with ax and frozen fingers, she's a bitch I love. I think for Darth she's a demon, and one he's hell-bent to conquer.

We bedded down that night by tying ourselves into pitons with the black world beneath us and the black sky above.

I watched the lights, a dazzle of liquid jade across that mirror of black.

Again today Darth took the lead. Being first seems to be another obsession, and arguing wastes time. In any case, I was concerned enough about Han to see the value of taking the flank, keeping the weakest of us in the middle.

So it was Darth's need to be first, and my position in the rear, that saved the life of one of our trio.

We'd packed the rope away. I'd said already that it was too cold for rope, didn't I? Again, we were moving well, moving up in the bright sparkle of the short day with even our curses whipped away by the roar of the wind.

Then I see Han stumble and start to slide. It was like the ground disappeared under him.

A moment's carelessness, a patch of windslab snow, and he was tumbling toward me. I don't know, I swear, if I caught him or if he sprouted wings and flew. But our hands locked, and I slapped my ax into the ice, praying it would hold, praying the bitch wouldn't belch us both into the void. For eternity I was on my belly, holding his hands while he dangled over the edge of nothing. We're screaming, both of us, and I'm trying to dig in with my toes, but we're slipping, sliding. Another few seconds and it would've been let him go or both of us are gone.

Then Darth's ice ax cleaved into the ground beside me—an inch from my shoulder, and the pistoning of my heart cranked up to jackhammer. He used it for purchase, and reached down to grab Han's arm. Some of the weight lifted from my screaming muscles, and I was able to dig in, belly back. Bellying back, the two of us, pulling Han up with the blood boiling in our ears and our hearts slamming in our chests.

We rolled back from the edge, lay there on the snow, shaking under that cold, yellow sun. Shaking for what seemed hours, feet away from death and disaster.

We can't laugh about it. Even later none of us have the energy to make that short nightmare into a joke. We're too shaken up to climb, and Han's ankle is messed up. He'll never make the summit, and we all know it.

We have no choice but to chop out a platform and camp, divvy up food from our dwindling supplies while Han pops painkillers. He's weak, but not so weak his eyes don't roll with fear as the wind slams its killing fists at the thin walls of our tent.

We should go back.

We should go back. But when I floated that trial balloon, Darth went

off, berating Han, shrieking at me in a voice shrill as a woman's. He looks half mad—maybe more than half—hulking in the dark, ice clinging to his stubbly beard and eyebrows, bitter lights in his eyes. Han's accident has cost us a day, and he'll be damned if it'll cost him the summit.

He has a point, I can't deny it. We are within striking distance of the goal. Han may be able to make it after a night's rest.

We'll climb tomorrow, and if Han can't manage, we'll leave him, do what we came to do, and pick him up on the way back.

It's insanity of course, and even with the drugs, Han looks wrecked and scared. But I'm caught in it. Past the point of no return.

The wind's howling like a hundred rabid dogs. That alone could drive a man mad.



EIGHT

FOR THIRTY HOURS, the snow fell and the wind howled. The world was a cold, white beast that rampaged day and night, fangs bared, claws extended to bite and rake at anyone brave or foolish enough to go out and face it.

Generators hummed or roared, and communications were reduced to radios. Travel was impossible as that beast stalked its way across the Interior and over southeast Alaska. Cars and trucks were buried, planes grounded. Even the sled dogs waited for it to pass.

The little town of Lunacy was cut off, a frozen island in the midst of a blind, white sea.

Too busy to brood, too astonished to curse, Nate dealt with emergencies—a child who'd toppled onto a table and needed to get to the clinic for stitches, a man who'd had a heart attack while trying to dig out his truck, a chimney fire, a family brawl.

He had Drunk Mike—as opposed to Big Mike the cook—in an unlocked cell sleeping off a bender, and Manny Ozenburger in a locked one, rethinking his position on driving his Tundra pickup over his neighbor's Ski-doo.

He kept crews hacking away at the snow on the main streets and pushed his way through the canyons of it to The Corner Store.

He found Harry and Deb sitting at a card table in front of the canned goods, playing gin while Cecil snuggled in his basket.

"Hell of a blow," Harry called out.

"No, it's just hell."

Nate pushed back the hood of his parka, stopped to give Cecil a quick rub. He was out of breath and vaguely surprised to still be alive. "I need some supplies. I'm going to bunk at the station until this is over."

Deb's eyes gleamed. "Oh? Something wrong at The Lodge?"

"No." Yanking off gloves, Nate began to hunt up basics to keep body and soul together. "Somebody needs to man the radio—and we've got a couple of guests."

"I heard Drunk Mike tied one on. Gin."

"Gin? Damn you, Harry."

"Tied one on," Nate agreed, dumping bread, lunch meat, chips on the counter. "And staggered around singing Bob Seger songs. Snow removal crew spotted him and hauled him up when he fell facedown in the middle of the damn street." Nate picked up a six-pack of Coke. "They hadn't seen him, brought him in, we might've found him by April, dead as Elvis."

"I'll just run a tab for these, chief." Harry got out his book, noted down the purchases. "And I'm not convinced Elvis is dead. This going to be enough for you?"

"It'll have to be. Getting it back's going to be an adventure."

"Why don't you sit a minute, have some of this coffee?" Deb was already getting up. "Let me fix you a sandwich."

Nate stared at her. It wasn't the way people usually treated cops. "Thanks, but I need to get back. If you need anything, hell, send up a flare."

He pulled on his gloves, resecured his hood, then hefted his bag of supplies.

It wasn't any more hospitable out than it had been five minutes before. He felt the teeth and claws slice at him as he used the rope and instinct to drag his way toward the station.

He'd left every light burning, to give himself a beacon.

He could hear the muffled rumble of Bing's plow and hoped to sweet God that Bing didn't head his way, running over him accidentally—or purposely. The beast, as he thought of the storm, was doing its best to mock the efforts of the crews, but they'd made a difference.

Instead of swimming through the snow, he was wading through it.

He heard gunshots. Three quick reports. He paused, strained to make out the direction, then shook his head and kept going. He sincerely hoped no one was lying in the snow with a gunshot wound, because he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

He was about ten feet away from the station, concentrating on the haze of light, cheering himself on with the thought of heat when Bing's plow rolled out of the white.

His heart stopped. He actually heard the thunder of it click off, and the swishing sensation of his blood draining. The plow looked enormous, a mountain of machine avalanching toward him.

It stopped, maybe a breathless foot from the toes of his boots.

Bing leaned out, his snow-caked beard making him resemble an insane Santa. "Out for a stroll?"

"Yeah. Can't get enough of it. You hear those gunshots?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Nothing. You need a break. The heat's on. We've got sandwich makings."

"Why you got Manny locked up? Tim Bower drives that damn pissant snowmobile around like a goddamn crazy teenager every chance he gets. Public fucking nuisance."

Since he was freezing, Nate decided to skip the part about destruction of private property and reckless driving. "Tim Bower was on the damn pissant snowmobile at the time Manny flattened it."

"Got off quick enough, didn't he?"

Despite everything, Nate found himself grinning. "Dived head-first into a snowbank. Skinny Jim saw it. Said it looked like a double gainer."

Bing merely grunted, pulled his head in and backed the plow away.

Inside, Nate made sandwiches, took one to the disgruntled Manny and checked on Drunk Mike.

He decided to take his own meal at the radio. He liked hearing Meg's voice, feeling that strange, sexy connection. It had been a long time since he'd had anyone to talk to about his day, since he'd had anyone he'd wanted to talk to. The conversation added a little spice to his plain meal and some comfort to the solitude.

"Tim's wrecked that snowmobile more times than I can count," she said after he'd told her about its final destruction. "Manny did everyone a favor. Over."

"Maybe. I think I can talk Tim out of pressing charges if Manny pays for it. You planning on coming into town once this is cleared up? Over."

"I'm not big on plans. Over."

"Movie night's coming up. I was hoping to sample your popcorn. Over."

"It's a possibility. I've got some jobs lined up once I'm cleared to fly. But I like movies. Over."

He drank some Coke and pictured her sitting at the radio, the dogs at her feet and the fire glowing behind her. "Why don't we make it a date? Over."

"I don't make dates. Over."

“Ever? Over.”

“Things happen if they happen. Since we both liked the sex, things will probably happen.”

Since she didn’t say “over,” he assumed she was giving it some thought. He certainly was.

“Tell you what, Burke, next time things happen, you can tell me your long, sad story. Over.”

He was imagining the red tattoo at the small of her back. “Why do you think I’ve got one? Over.”

“Cutie, you’re the saddest man I’ve ever seen. You tell me the story, and we’ll see what happens next. Over.”

“If we . . . damn it.”

“What’s that noise? Over.”

“Sounds like Drunk Mike’s awake and puking it up in the cell. Manny’s finding that understandably objectionable,” he added as the sounds of sickness and outrage spiked out of the cells. “I have to go. Over.”

“Boy, a cop’s life is fraught with danger. Over and out.”

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, Nate opted to let both of his prisoners hitch rides home on the plow. Braving the elements, he went out to dump more gas into the generator.

After a short debate, he carted one of the cots out, set it up near the radio. As an afterthought, he routed through Peach’s drawer and found one of her paperback romance novels.

He settled in with the book—setting a mental alarm so he could put it, with its sexy cover, back where it came from with no one the wiser—a Coke, and the sounds of the storm.

The book was better than he'd imagined and took him away to the lush, green fields of Ireland in the days of castles and keeps. There was a hefty dose of magic and fantasy tossed in, so he followed the adventures of Moira the sorceress and Prince Liam with considerable interest.

The first love scene gave him pause as he thought about the maternal Peach reading about sex—between answering calls and handing out sticky buns. But he was caught up.

He fell asleep with the book open on his chest and the lights still blazing.

THE SORCERESS HAD Meg's face. Her hair, ink black, swirled into the air like wings. She stood on a white hill in brilliant sunlight that streamed through the thin red gown she wore.

She lifted her arms, slid the gown from her shoulders so that it slithered down her body. Naked, she walked to him. Her eyes were blue ice as she opened her arms and took him in.

He felt her lips on his, hot. Hungry. He was under her, surrounded by her. When she rose up, wild wind rushed through her hair. When she lowered, the heat of her all but burned him.

"What do you have to be sad about?"

Suddenly, through the pleasure was pain—abrupt, searing. He hissed against it, and his body stiffened. The burning insult of bullets into flesh.

But she smiled, only smiled. "You're alive, aren't you?" She lifted a hand, smeared with his blood. "If you bleed, you're alive."

"I'm shot. Jesus, I'm hit."

"And alive," she said as his blood dripped from her hand onto his face.

He was in the alley, smelling blood and cordite. Smelling garbage and death. Damp air from the rain. Cold, cold for April. Cold and wet

and dark. It was all a blur, the shouts, the shots, the pain when the bullet dug into his leg.

He'd fallen behind, and Jack had gone in first.

Shouldn't be here. What the hell were they doing here?

More shots, flashes of light in the dark. Thuds. Was that steel hitting flesh? That stunning, obscene pain in the side that took him down again. So he'd had to crawl, crawl over the damp concrete to where his partner, his friend, lay dying.

But this time, Jack turned his head, and his eyes were red as the blood that pumped out of his chest. "You killed me. You stupid son of a bitch. Anybody should be dead, it's you. Now see if you can live with it."

HE WOKE IN A COLD SWEAT, his partner's dream voice still echoing in his head. Nate pushed himself up to sit on the side of the cot. He dropped his head in his hands.

So far, he thought, he was doing a lousy job of living with it.

He made himself get up, carry the bunk back to the cell. He thought of the pills he stowed in his desk drawer, but bypassed his office and made himself go out to pour the last of the gas into the generator.

It wasn't until he was heading back inside that he realized it had stopped snowing.

The air was perfectly still, perfectly quiet. There was a faint hint of moonlight sprinkling over the mounds and seas of snow, giving the white a pale blue hue. His breath clouded out as he stood, like a bug, he thought, trapped in crystal instead of amber.

The storm had passed, and he was still alive.

See if you can live with it. Well, he would. He'd keep seeing if he could live with it.

Inside, he brewed coffee, switched on the radio. A sleepy voice—who identified himself as Mitch Dauber, the voice of Lunacy—segued into local news, announcements and weather.

People started coming out, bears crawling out of their caves. They shoveled and plowed. They gathered together for conversation, ate and walked and slept.

They lived.

THE LUNATIC

Police Log

Wednesday, January 12

9:12 A.M. A chimney fire in the residence of Bert Myers was reported. Volunteer firefighter Manny Ozenburger and Chief Ignatious Burke responded. The fire was caused by a buildup of creosote. Myers suffered a minor burn on the hand while attempting to grab burning logs out of the fireplace. Ozenburger termed this action “dumbass.”

12:15 P.M. Jay Finkle, age five, was injured in a fall from his tricycle inside the bedroom of his residence. Chief Burke assisted Paul Finkle, Jay’s father, in transporting the injured boy to the Lunacy clinic. Jay received four stitches and a grape lollipop. The Hot Wheels was undamaged, and Jay states that he will drive more carefully in the future.

2:00 P.M. A complaint was lodged by Timothy Bower against Manny Ozenburger. Witnesses confirm that Ozenburger crashed his truck into Bower’s Ski-doo while Bower was operating same. Though an informal poll indicates that 52 percent believe Bower had it coming, Ozenburger was remanded to jail. Charges are pending. Members of Lunacy’s Vol-

unteer Fire Department are organizing a Free Manny all-you-can-eat buffet.

2:55 P.M. Kate D. Igleberry reported being assaulted by her partner, David Bunch, at their residence on Rancor Road. At the same time, Bunch claims to have been assaulted by Igleberry. Chief Burke and Deputy Otto Gruber responded. Both complainants offered evidence of facial and bodily bruises, and in Bunch's case, a bite mark on the left buttock. No charges filed.

3:40 P.M. James and William Mackie were charged with reckless driving and excessive rates of speed on Ski-doo's. William Mackie contends that "Ski-doo's aren't damn cars." As recreational vehicles, he believes they should be exempt from posted limits and plans to bring this matter up at the next town meeting.

5:25 P.M. Snow removal crews discovered a man walking in a disoriented manner on the roadside near south Rancor Woods. He could be heard singing "A Nation Once Again." Subsequently identified as Michael Sullivan, the man was transported to Lunacy PD and turned over to Chief of Police Ignatious Burke.

ALONE IN THE STATION, Nate scanned the rest of the log. It continued, with reports of drunk and disorderlies, the loss and recovery of a missing dog, the call from one of the out-of-towners with a serious case of cabin fever claiming wolves were playing poker on his porch.

Names were printed on each and every item, no matter how embarrassing it might be for the individual. He wondered what it would've

been like if *The Baltimore Sun*, for instance, had been so thorough and merciless in listing the calls, the names and the actions taken by the police force in Baltimore.

He had to admit, he found it endlessly entertaining.

Max and Carrie must have put the paper together and gone to print the minute the storm was over, he thought. Pictures of the storm and the aftermath were damn good, too. And the story on it, with Max's byline, was almost poetic.

He didn't mind the story on himself as much as he'd thought he would. In fact, he was going to keep his copy, along with his first two issues of *The Lunatic*.

Whenever he could get out to Meg's again, he'd take her one.

A week after the storm blew in, the roads were clear enough. Dropping by her place to take her a paper couldn't be considered a date.

Giving her a call just to make sure she was there and not flying around somewhere couldn't be considered plans.

It was just being practical.

Expecting his staff to come in any moment, Nate tucked the newspaper in a desk drawer and started out to put some fuel in the woodstove.

Hopp pushed through the outside door.

"We've got trouble," she said.

"Is it bigger than four and a half feet of snow?"

She shoved back her hood. Under it her face was bone white. "Three missing boys."

"Give me the details." He backed up. "Who, when and where they were last seen."

"Steven Wise, Joe and Lara's boy, his cousin Scott from Talkeetna

and one of their college friends. Joe and Lara thought Steven and Scott were down in Prince William for winter break. Scott's parents thought the same. Lara and Scott's mother got together on the radio last night to pass the time and catch up, and it came out some of the things each of the boys had told them didn't jibe. They got suspicious, enough that Lara tried calling Steven at college. He's not back—neither is Scott."

"College where, Hopp?"

"Anchorage." She passed a hand over her face.

"Then they need to notify the Anchorage PD."

"No. No. Lara got hold of Steven's girlfriend. Those idiot boys are trying a winter climb up the south face of No Name."

"What's No Name?"

"It's a damn mountain, Ignatious." Fear was jumping in her eyes. "A goddamn big mountain. They've been gone six days. Lara's out of her mind."

Nate strode to his office, yanked out his map. "Show me the mountain."

"Here." She jabbed a finger. "It's a favorite with the locals, and a lot of climbers from Outside use it for entertainment or a kind of training ground for a try at Denali. But trying a climb in January's just bone stupid, especially for three inexperienced boys. We need to call Search and Rescue. Get planes in the air at first light."

"That gives us three hours. I'll contact S and R. Get on one of those two-ways, call Otto, Peter and Peach in here. Then I want to know who all the pilots are, other than Meg, in the area."

He scanned the phone numbers Peach had neatly listed. "What are the chances they're still alive?"

With a two-way in hand, Hopp sat heavily. "They need a miracle."

. . .

FIVE MINUTES AFTER she got the call, Meg was dressed and loading up gear. She was tempted to ignore the radio call from Lunacy PD, but decided it might be an update on the lost climbers.

“This is KUNA responding. Over.”

“I’m going with you. Pick me up by the river on your way. Over.”

Irritation rippled through her as she stuffed extra medical supplies in her bag. “I don’t need a co-pilot, Burke. And I don’t have time to waste showing you the sights. I’ll contact you when I find them. Over.”

“I’m going with you. Those boys deserve another pair of eyes, and mine are good. I’ll be ready when you get here. Over and out.”

“Damn it. I hate heroes.” She hauled up the pack and, with the dogs beside her, went out. She grabbed the rest of the gear and, using the flashlight, trudged down to the lake in snowshoes.

She’d made two runs since the all clear to fly and thanked God she didn’t have to take an hour now to dig out her plane. She didn’t think about the boys, dead or alive, on the mountain. She simply took the steps.

She pulled off the wing covers, stowed them. It was work, but less work than scraping the frost from uncovered wings. After draining the water traps in the bottoms of the wing tanks, she climbed up to check the gas level by eye. Topped off the fuel.

Making a circuit, she checked flaps, tail feathers, every part of the plane that moved to make certain everything was secure.

Lives had been lost, she knew, due to a loose bolt.

Her mind focused only on the safety check, she turned her prop several times to remove any pooled oil.

Swinging into the plane, she stowed the gear, then strapped in.

She hit the starter, switched on the engine. The prop turned, sluggishly at first, then the engine fired with a belch of exhaust. While the engine warmed, she checked gauges.

She was in control here, as much as she considered anyone was in control of anything.

It was still shy of dawn when she released the brakes.

She set the flaps, the trim tab for takeoff, gave the controls a shove and yank as she looked out to be sure the ailerons were moving, if the elevators responded. Satisfied, she straightened in her seat.

She kissed her fingers, touched them to the magnetized photo of Buddy Holly stuck to the control board. And rammed the throttle forward.

She hadn't yet decided whether to head to Lunacy or not. As she circled the lake, building speed for takeoff, she let the decision hang.

Maybe she would, maybe she wouldn't.

She nosed up, rising into the air just as dawn began to break in the east. Then with a shrug, aimed that nose toward Lunacy.

He was where he'd said he'd be. Standing on the edge of the ice with a mountain of snow at his back. He had a pack slung over his shoulder. She could only hope someone had told the cheechako what to bring as emergency gear. She saw that Hopp was with him, and her stomach sank when she recognized the other figures as Joe and Lara.

It forced her to think of what might be. Of the bodies she'd transported before. Of the ones she might transport today.

She set down on the ribbon of ice, waited with the engines running for Nate to cross it.

The prop wash blew at his coat, his hair. Then he was climbing in, stowing his pack, strapping in.

"Hope you know what you're in for," she said.

"I haven't got a clue."

"Maybe that's better." She kissed her fingers, touched them to Buddy. Without looking at the terrified faces to her right, she pushed to take off.

Using the hand mike, she contacted control in Talkeetna and gave them her data. Then they were up, over the trees and veering east, northeast into the pale rising sun.

"You're eyes and ballast, Burke. If Jacob wasn't in Nome visiting his son, I wouldn't have settled for you as either."

"Got it. Who's Jacob?"

"Jacob Itu. Best bush pilot I've ever known. He taught me."

"The man you shared your popcorn with at the town meeting?"

"That's right." They hit a pocket of air, and she saw his hand fist against the bumps. "You get airsick, I'm going to be really unhappy."

"No. I just hate flying."

"Why's that?"

"Gravity."

She grinned as they continued to bump. "Turbulence bothers you, you're going to have a really bad day. There's still time to take you back."

"Tell that to the three kids we're going after."

The grin vanished. She watched the mountains, the fierce rise of them, while the ground below blurred with speed and low-lying clouds.

"Is that why you're a cop? Saving people's your mission?"

"No." He said nothing as they shuddered through another patch of rough air. "Why does a bush pilot have a picture of Buddy Holly in her cockpit?"

"To remind her shit happens." As the sun speared up, she took sunglasses out of her pocket and put them on. Below, she saw the snake of dogsled trails, spirals of chimney smoke, a wedge of trees, a rise of land. She used the landmarks as much as her gauges.

“Binoculars in the compartment there,” she told him. And made a small adjustment in the propeller pitch, eased the throttle forward.

“I brought my own.” He unzipped his parka, pulled them out from where they hung around his neck. “Tell me where to look.”

“If they attempted a climb up the south face, they’d’ve been dumped off on the Sun Glacier.”

“Dumped off? By who?”

“That’s a mystery, isn’t it?” Her jaw set. “Some yahoo too interested in money to blow them off. A lot of people have planes, and a lot of people fly them. It doesn’t make them pilots. Whoever it was didn’t report them when the storm came through and sure as hell didn’t pick them back up.”

“Fucking crazy.”

“It’s all right to be crazy, it’s not all right to be stupid. And that’s the category this falls into. Air’s going to get rougher when we hit the mountains.”

“Don’t say hit and mountain in the same sentence.”

He looked down—a slice of trees, an ocean of snow, a plate of ice that was a lake, a huddle of perhaps six cabins all appearing, disappearing through clouds. It should have seemed barren, stark, and instead it was stunning. The sky was already going that deep, hard blue, with the cruel elegance of the mountains etched over it.

He thought of three boys trapped in that cruelty for six days.

She banked, sharp right, and he had to reach deep inside for the grit just to keep his eyes open. The mountains, blue and white and monstrous, swallowed the view. She dipped through a gap, and all he could see, on either side, was rock and ice and death.

Over the whine of the engines, he heard something like thunder. And saw a tsunami of snow burst from the mountain.

“What the—”

“Avalanche.” Her voice was utterly calm as the plane began to shake. “You’re going to want to hold on.”

It gushed, white over white over white, an iced volcano erupting, charging the air with the roar of a thousand runaway trains while the plane ping-ponged right, left, up, down.

He thought he heard Meg curse, and what sounded like anti-aircraft fire beat against the plane. The storm that vomited out of the mountain spewed bits of debris over the windscreen. But it wasn’t fear that rushed into him. It was awe.

Metal pinged and rang as bullets of ice and rock struck the plane. Wind dragged at it, yanked at it, pelted it until it seemed inevitable they would crash into the cliff face or simply be smashed apart by shrapnel.

Then they were cruising between walls of ice, over a narrow, frozen valley and into the blue.

“Kiss my ass!” She let out a whoop, threw her head back and laughed. “*That* was a ride.”

“Awesome,” Nate agreed, and twisted in his seat, trying to turn enough to see the rest of the show. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Mountains are moody. You never know when they’re going to take a shot.” She slid her gaze toward him. “You’re pretty cool under fire, chief.”

“You, too.” He settled back in his seat. And wondered if his pounding heart had broken any of his ribs. “So . . . come here often?”

“Every chance I get. You can start making use of those binocs. We’ve got a lot of area to cover, and we won’t be the only ones covering it. Keep a sharp eye.” She fixed on headphones. “I’ll be in communication with control.”

“Where do I aim my sharp eye?”

“There.” She lifted her chin. “One o’clock.”

Compared to Denali, it seemed almost tame, and its beauty somewhat ordinary beside The Mountain’s magnificence. There were smaller peaks ranging between what they called No Name and Denali, and there were larger, rolling back, spearing up, all in a jagged, layered wall against the sky.

“How big is it?”

“Twelve thousand and change. A good, challenging climb in April or May, trickier, but not impossible in the winter. Unless you’re a group of college kids on a lark, then it’s next to suicide. We find out who transported three underage kids, dumped them out in January, there’ll be hell to pay.”

He knew that tone of voice—flat, emotionless. “You think they’re dead.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“But you’re here anyway.”

“Won’t be the first time I’ve looked for bodies—or found them.” She thought of the supplies and gear in the plane. Emergency rations, medical supplies, thermal blankets. And prayed there would be cause to use them.

“Look for debris. Tents, equipment—bodies. There are a lot of crevices. I’ll get as close as I can.”

He wanted them to be alive. He’d had enough of death, enough of waste. He hadn’t come to look for bodies, but for boys. Frightened, lost, possibly injured, but boys he could return to their terrified parents.

He scanned through his field glasses. He could see the bowel-loosening drops, the skinny ledges, the sheer walls of ice. There was no point in wondering why anyone would be compelled to risk limb or life, brave hideous conditions, starve and suffer to hack his way to the top. People did crazier things for sport.

He registered the buffeting winds, the uneasy proximity of the little plane to the unforgiving walls, and shut down the fear.

He searched until his eyes burned, then lowered the glasses to blink them clear. "Nothing yet."

"It's a big mountain."

She circled, he searched, while she continued to detail coordinates to control. He spotted another plane, a little yellow bird swooping to the west, and the sturdy bulk of a chopper. The mountain dwarfed everything. It no longer looked small to him, not with everything he had focused on it.

There were shapes that made its shape—plates of rippling ice, fields of snow, fists of black rock that were punched out of cliff walls and were streamed with somehow delicate rivers of more ice, like glossy icing.

He saw shadows he imagined the sun never found and vicious drops to nothing. From one a beam of light shot back at him, like sun bouncing off crystal.

"Something down there," he called out. "Metal or glass. Reflective. In that crevice."

"I'll circle around."

He lowered the binoculars to rub at his eyes, wishing he'd brought his own sunglasses. The glare was murderous.

She climbed, banked, and as she circled, Nate caught a flicker of color against the snow.

"Wait. There. What's that? About four o'clock? Jesus, Meg, four o'clock."

"Son of a bitch. One of them's alive."

He saw it now, the bright blue, the movement, the vaguely human shape, frantically windmilling arms to signal. She dipped the wings, right then left, right then left, as she arrowed back.

"This is Beaver-Niner-Zulu-Niner-Alfa-Tango. I've got one," she said into her headset. "Alive, just above Sun Glacier. I'm going in for him."

"You're going to land?" Burke asked when she'd repeated the call and relayed coordinates. "On that?"

"You're going one better," she told him. "You're going out on it. I can't leave the plane—crosswinds are too risky, and there's no place, and no time to tie down."

He stared down, saw the figure stumble, fall and roll, tumbling, sliding before it lay still, nearly invisible now in the white surf.

"Better give me a lesson and make it quick."

"I put down, you get out, climb up, get him, bring him back. Then we all go home and have a really big beer."

"Short lesson."

"No time for much more. Make him walk. If he can't, drag him. Grab some goggles. You'll need them. There's no fancy work here. It's just like crossing a pond and climbing a few rocks."

"Just doing it several thousand feet above sea level. No big deal."

She showed her teeth in a grin as she fought minor little wars to keep the plane steady. "That's the spirit."

The wind tore at the plane, and she fought back, dragging the nose back up, leveling the wings. She angled toward her approach, dropped the gear, cut back the throttle.

Nate decided not to hold his breath since inhaling and exhaling might not be an option very shortly. But she slid the plane onto the glacier, between the void and the wall.

"Move!" she ordered, but he was already yanking off his safety belt.

"It's probably twenty below out there, so you make it quick. Unless I have to take off again, don't try to give him any medical assistance until we've got him back in the plane. Just get him, haul him, dump him in."

"I've got it."

"One more thing," she shouted as he shoved open the door and the wind roared in. "If I do have to lift off, don't panic. I'll come back for you."

He leaped onto the mountain. It wasn't the time to question, to overthink. Cold cut into him like knives, and the air was so thin that it sliced his throat. There were hills rising up out of hills, rippling seas, acres of shadow, oceans of white.

He pushed himself across the glacier, settling for a lumbering jog instead of the sprint he'd hoped for.

When he hit rock, he went by instinct, pulling his way up, clattering like a goat, then sinking nearly to his knees when the short wall was scaled.

He heard engines, the wind and his own laboring breath.

He dropped down beside the boy and, despite Meg's instructions, felt for a pulse. The kid's face was gray, with rough patches of what looked like dried skin on his cheek, his chin.

But his eyes fluttered open. "Made it." He croaked out the words. "Made it."

"Yeah. Let's get the hell out of here."

"They're in the cave. Couldn't make it, couldn't make it down. Scott's sick, Brad—think his leg might be broken. I came for help. I came—"

"You've got it. You can show us where they are once we're back in the plane. Can you walk?"

"Don't know. Try."

Nate fought the boy up, took his weight. "Come on, Steven. One foot in front of the other. You've come this far."

"Can't feel my feet."

"Just lift your legs, one at a time. They'll follow. You've got to climb down." He could already feel the cold eating through his gloves and wished he'd thought to double up. "I'm not good enough at this to carry

you. Hold on to me, and help me climb down. We've got to get down to help your friends."

"I had to leave them, to get help. Had to leave them with the dead man."

"It's all right. We're going back for them. We're climbing down now. Ready?"

"I can do it."

Nate went first. If the kid fell, fainted, slipped, he'd break the fall. He kept shouting at him as they picked their way down. Shouting to keep the boy steady and conscious, demanding answers to keep him alert.

"How long since you left your friends?"

"I don't know. Two days. Three? Hartborne didn't come back. Or . . . I think I saw, but then I didn't."

"Okay. Nearly there. You're going to show us where your friends are, in just a couple minutes."

"In the ice cave, with the dead man."

"Who's the dead man?" Nate dropped down on the glacier. "Who's the dead man?"

"Don't know." The voice was dreamy now as Steven slithered and slumped into Nate's hold. "Found him in the cave. Ice man, staring. Just staring. Got an ax in his chest. Spooky."

"I bet." He half dragged, half carried Steven toward the shuddering plane.

"He knows where the others are." He pushed, then climbed in to pull Steven into the plane. "He can show us."

"Get him in the back, under the blankets. First-aid kit's in the bag. Hot coffee in the thermos. Don't let him drink too much."

"Am I still alive?" The boy was shivering now, his body quaking from the cold.

"Yeah, you are."

Nate laid him on the floor between the seats, then covered him with blankets while Meg lifted off.

He heard the wind and engines screaming, and he wondered if they'd be ripped to pieces now after all.

"You need to tell us where your friends are."

"I can show you." With his teeth chattering, he tried to take the cup of coffee Nate poured.

"Here, let me do it. Just sip."

As he sipped, tears began to leak out of his eyes. "I didn't think I'd make it. They'd die up there because I couldn't make it down, to the plane."

"You did make it."

"Plane wasn't there. He wasn't there."

"We were. We were there." Doing his best to brace himself against the jolts of the plane, Nate carefully lifted the coffee again.

"We almost got to the top, but Scott was sick, and Brad fell. His leg's hurt. We got to the cave, we found the cave and got in before the storm hit. We stayed in there. There's a dead man."

"So you said."

"I'm not making it up."

Nate nodded. "You'll show us."



NINE

NATE HATED HOSPITALS. It was one of the triggers that shot him back into the dark. He'd spent too much time in one after he'd been wounded. Enough time for the pain and grief and guilt to coalesce into the gaping void of depression.

He hadn't been able to escape it. He'd longed for the emptiness of sleep, but sleep brought dreams, and dreams were worse than the black.

He'd hoped, passively, that he'd die. Just slide soundlessly away. He hadn't considered killing himself. That would have taken too much effort, too much activity.

No one had blamed him for Jack's death. He'd wanted them to, but instead they'd come with their flowers or sympathy, even their admiration. And it had weighed on him like lead.

Talk of therapy, counseling, antidepressants barely penetrated. He'd gone through the motions, just to get doctors and concerned friends off his back.

He'd gone through the motions for months.

Now he was back in a hospital and could feel the soft and sticky fingers of hopelessness plucking at him. Easier, so much easier to give in, to just let go and sink into the dark.

“Chief Burke?”

Nate stared down at the coffee in his hand. Black coffee. He didn’t want it. Couldn’t quite remember how it had gotten there. He was too tired for coffee. Too tired to get up and throw it away.

“Chief Burke?”

He glanced up, focused on a face. Female, mid-fifties, brown eyes behind small, black-framed glasses. He couldn’t quite remember who she was.

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Steven would like to see you. He’s awake and lucid.”

It swam back slowly, like thoughts oozing through mud. The three boys, the mountain. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s young and healthy. He was dehydrated, and he may lose a couple toes, but he may keep them all. So, he’s lucky. The other two are on their way in. I’m hoping the same goes.”

“They got them. Off the mountain.”

“That’s what I’m told. You can have a few minutes with Steven.”

“Thanks.”

As he followed her, the sounds and smells of the ER penetrated. The voices, the pings, the fretful crying of an infant.

He moved into an exam room and saw the boy on a bed. He had some color under the patches on his cheeks. His hair was matted and blond, his eyes clouded with worry.

“You got me off.”

“Nate Burke. New chief of police in Lunacy.” Since Steven held out a hand, Nate took it, careful to avoid pressing on the IV needle. “Your friends are on their way in.”

“I heard. But nobody’ll tell me how they are.”

“We’ll find out when they get here. They wouldn’t be on their way if

you hadn't given us the location, Steven. Nearly makes up for being stupid enough to go up there in the first place."

"Seemed like a good idea at the time." He tried a wan smile. "Everything went wrong. And I think something happened to Hartborne. We only gave him half the money, just to be sure he'd come back."

"We're checking into it. Why don't you give me his full name, any other information on him."

"Well, Brad knew him. Actually, Brad knew a guy who knew him."

"Okay. We'll talk to Brad."

"My parents are going to kill me."

Oh, to be twenty, Nate thought, and be as concerned with parental wrath as with a near-death experience. "Count on it. Tell me about the dead man in the cave, Steven."

"I didn't make it up."

"Not saying you did."

"We all saw him. We couldn't leave the cave, not with Brad's leg. We decided I'd go back down, meet Hartborne, get help. They had to stay in there with him. With The Ice Man. He was just sitting there, staring. The ax in his chest. I took pictures."

His eyes widened as he struggled to sit up straighter. "I took pictures," he repeated. "The camera. It—I think it's in the pocket of my insulated vest. I think it's still there. You can see."

"Hold on a minute." Nate moved over to the pile of clothes, pawed through and came up with the vest. And in the inside zippered pocket was one of those small digital cameras, hardly bigger than a credit card.

"I don't know how to work this."

"I can show you. You have to turn it on, and then—see—the viewer here? You can call up pictures from the memory. The last ones I took were of the dead guy. I took like three, 'cause I wanted— there!"

Nate studied the facial close-up in the little viewer. The hair might've been black or brown, but it was covered with frost and ice that silvered it. Longish, nearly shoulder-length hair, with a dark watch cap pulled low over it. The face was narrow, white, slashed by ice-crusting brows. He'd seen death often enough to recognize it in the eyes. Wide and blue.

He recalled the previous picture.

There was the body of a man, age between—at his rough guess—twenty and forty. He sat with his back to the ice wall, legs splayed out. He wore a black and yellow parka and snow pants, climbing boots, heavy gloves.

What appeared to be a small ax was buried in his chest.

"Did you touch the body?"

"No. Well, I kinda poked at him—it. Frozen solid."

"Okay, Steven, I'm going to need to take your camera. I'll get it back to you."

"Sure. No problem. He could've been up there for years, you know? Decades or something. It creeped us out, let me tell you, but it sort of took our minds out of the shit we were in. Do you think they know anything about Brad and Scott?"

"I'll find out. I'll go get the doctor. I'm going to need to talk to you again."

"Anytime, man. Seriously, thanks for saving my life."

"Take better care of it."

He headed out, slipping the camera into his pocket. He'd have to contact the State Police, he thought. Homicide in the mountains was out of his jurisdiction. But that didn't mean he couldn't make some copies of the pictures for his own files.

Who was he? How had he gotten there? How long had he been

there? Why was he dead? The questions got him through the ER and to the nurse's station just as the rescue team brought in the other two boys.

He decided the best place for him was out of the way, and when he spotted Meg swing in behind the team, he crossed to her.

"It's their lucky day," she said.

Nate caught a glimpse of one of the boy's faces, shook his head. "That's debatable."

"Any day the mountain doesn't kill you is lucky." And bringing them back alive when she'd expected to find bodies, pumped her. "They're probably going to lose a few digits, and the kid with the broken leg is in for some serious pain and physical therapy, but they're not dead. We've lost the light, and I don't see any reason to head out this late. We won't be flying back tonight. I'm going to get us a room at The Wayfarer. Rates are reasonable, and the food's good. You ready?"

"I've got a couple of things to do. I'll find you."

"You're longer than twenty minutes, you'll find me in the bar. I want alcohol, food and sex." She gave him a suggestive smile. "More or less in that order."

"Sounds reasonable. I'll be there."

She zipped up her coat. "Oh, that reflection you caught? Plane wreck. Probably the guy who took those kids up. Mountain got one after all."

HE WAS CLOSER TO NINETY than twenty minutes, and he found Meg, as promised, in the bar.

It was wood-paneled, smoky and decorated with animal heads. She was passing the time at her table with a beer and a bump, and a plate of something that looked like nachos. She had her feet up on the second chair, but shifted them off when Nate stepped up to the table.

"There you are. Hey, Stu? Same for my friend."

"Just the beer," Nate corrected. "These any good?" he asked as he pried up a nacho.

"They fill the hole. When we're suitably buzzed, we'll go have a steak. Did you stay back to keep an eye on those boys?"

"That, and a couple of other things." He dragged off his hat, scooped a hand through his hair. "Rescue team didn't go into the cave?"

"Boys dragged themselves out when they heard the air support." She scooped up cheese, meat, salsa with a chip. "Priority was to get them down for medical assistance. Somebody'll go up, eventually, for the gear they left behind."

"And the dead guy."

She lifted her eyebrows. "You bought that story?"

"Yeah, I did. Added to that, the kid took pictures."

She pursed her lips, then pried up another loaded chip. "No shit?"

"Beer's up," came the call from the bar.

"Hold on," she said to Nate. "I'll get it."

"You want another round, Meg?" Stu asked her.

"We'll let him catch up some first." She snagged the brown bottle, brought it back to the table.

"He took pictures?"

Nate nodded, took a gulp of beer. "Digital camera, which he had in his pocket. I talked this guy at the hospital into printing them out for me." He tapped his fingers on the manila envelope he'd tossed on the table. "I had to turn the camera over to the State boys. Maybe they'll keep me in the loop, maybe not." He shrugged.

"You want to be in the loop?"

"I don't know." He shrugged again, tapped his fingers again. "I don't know."

Oh, he wanted to be in the loop, she thought. She could all but see him making some sort of mental list. Some sort of cop list. If that's what it took to turn those sad, gray eyes sharp, she hoped the State boys let him play.

"He probably hasn't been up there very long."

She lifted her glass. "Why do you say that?"

"Somebody would've found him."

She shook her head, sipped whiskey. "Not necessarily. Cave like that can get buried in a storm, drowned under in an avalanche or overlooked by climbers. Another avalanche, oh look, there's a cave. Then it depends on where he was in the cave. How deep. Could've been up there for a season or for fifty years."

"They'll get forensics either way. They'll be able to date him, hopefully ID him."

"Already working on solving the case." Amused, she gestured toward the envelope. "Let me see. Maybe we'll be like Nick and Nora Charles."

"It's not the movies, and it's not pretty, Meg."

"Neither is gutting a moose." She chomped another nacho, then drew the envelope over to open it. "If he's a local, maybe somebody'll recognize him. Though you get plenty of Outsiders on No Name in any given year. The kind of gear he's wearing should . . ."

He saw her color drain, her eyes glaze—and cursed himself. But when he started to take the printout from her, she jerked back, shoved at his arm with her free hand.

"You don't need to look at that. Let's just put it away."

She needed to look. Maybe the air was trapped in her lungs, and maybe her stomach had pitched down to her feet. But she needed to look. Deliberately she took the rest of the photos out, lined them up on the table. Then she picked up the whiskey, downed it.

"I know who this is."

"You recognize him?" Without thinking, Nate scooted his chair closer to hers so they stared at the photos together. "You're sure?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure. It's my father."

She shoved away from the table. Her face was very pale, but she didn't quiver. "Pay for the drinks, will you, chief? I'm going to have to put a hold on that steak dinner."

He moved fast, scooping the printouts back in the envelope, digging out bills to drop on the table, but she was already through the lobby and at the top of the steps when he caught up.

"Meg."

"Back off a minute."

"You need to talk to me."

"Come up in an hour. Room 232. Go away, Ignatious."

She kept climbing, didn't allow herself to think, didn't allow herself to feel. Not yet, not until she was behind a locked door. There were things she didn't believe in sharing.

He didn't follow. Part of her brain registered that, and gave him points for restraint and maybe sensitivity. She went into the room where she'd already dumped spare gear, locked the door, added the chain.

Then she walked directly into the bathroom and was miserably and violently ill.

When she was done, she sat on the chilly floor, her forehead braced on her knees. She didn't weep. She hoped she would, hoped she could cry at some point. But not now. Now she felt raw and shaken and—thank God—angry.

Someone had killed her father and left him alone. For years. For years when she'd lived without him. When she'd believed he'd walked away from her without a second thought. That she wasn't good enough

or important enough. Smart enough, pretty enough. Whatever enough seemed to fit at any given time when the missing of him was a hole in her belly.

But he hadn't walked away from her. He'd gone to the mountain, something as natural for him as breathing. And died there. The mountain hadn't killed him. She could have accepted that as fate, as destiny. A man had killed him, and that couldn't be accepted. Or forgiven. Or left unpunished.

She rose, stripped, and running the water cold, stepped into the shower. She let it stream over her until the fuzziness in her head cleared. Then she dressed again to lie down on the bed, in the dark, and think about the last time she'd seen her father.

He'd come into her room where she'd been pretending to study for a history test. As long as she was pretending to study, she didn't have to do her chores. She'd been sick of chores.

She remembered, even now, that quick lift in the heart when she saw it was her father rather than her mother coming to check on her. He *never* nagged about chores or studying.

She thought he was the most handsome man in the world, with his long dark hair and his fast grins. He'd taught her everything she believed really important. About the stars and climbing, about survival in the wild. How to build a campfire, how to fish—and clean and cook the catch.

He'd taken her flying with Jacob, and it was their secret that Jacob was teaching her to fly.

He looked at the book open on her bed where she was flopped on her belly. And rolled his eyes. "Boring."

"I *hate* history. I have a test tomorrow."

"Bummer. You'll do okay. You always do." He sat on the bed, gave her ribs a quick tickle. "Hey, kid, I gotta take off for a while."

"How come?"

He lifted a hand, rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

"How come we need money now?"

"Your mom says we do. She's the one who knows."

"I heard you fighting this morning."

"No big deal. We like to fight. I'll pick up a couple of jobs, make some moola. Everybody'll be happy. A couple of weeks, Meg. Maybe three."

"I don't have anything to *do* when you're gone."

"You'll find something."

And she could tell, even as a girl of thirteen she could tell, he was already gone in his head. His pat on the head was absent, like an uncle's. "We'll go ice fishing when I get back."

"Sure." And she was sulking, ready to shrug him off before he could shrug her off.

"See you later, cupcake."

She had to force herself not to spring up, to rush after him, hold tight before he strolled away.

A hundred times since that afternoon, she'd wished she'd given in, given them both that one last contact.

She wished it now, even as she rode that last memory in the dark.

She stayed where she was until she heard the knock on the door. Resigned, she got up, switched on lights, ran her hand through the hair that hadn't quite dried from the shower.

When she opened the door to Nate, he was carrying a tray and had another sitting on the floor outside the door.

"We need to eat." Maybe he'd hated it when people had pushed food or whatever cure or comfort on him during the worst of his own misery. But it worked, and that was the bottom line.

"Fine." She gestured toward the bed, the only surface big enough in the room to double as a dining table. Then she bent and hefted the second tray.

"If you want to be alone after, I can get another room."

"No point." She sat cross-legged on the bed and, ignoring the salad on her tray, cut into the steak.

"That one's mine." He switched trays. "They said you went for bloody. I don't."

"Don't miss a trick, do you? Except you brought up coffee instead of whiskey."

"You need a bottle, I'll get you one."

She sighed, cut into the meat. "Bet you would. How'd I end up sharing a steak dinner in Anchorage with a nice guy?"

"I'm not, particularly. I gave you an hour so you could pull yourself together. I brought you food so you'd keep yourself together while you tell me about your father. I'm sorry, Meg, it's a hard hit. After you talk to me, we're going to have to take this to the detective in charge."

She cut another bite, forked down into one of the soggy steak fries. "Tell me something. Back where you came from, you were a good cop?"

"It's about the only thing I was ever good at."

"You handle murders?"

"Yeah."

"I'll talk to whoever's in charge, but I want you looking into this for me."

"There's not that much I can do."

"There's always something. I'll pay you."

He ate contemplatively. "A hard hit," he repeated. "Which is why I'm not going to slap at you for that insult."

"I don't know that many people who find money insulting. But fine. I want someone I know looking for the son of a bitch who killed my father."

"You barely know me."

"I know you're good in bed." She smiled a little. "Okay, a guy can be an asshole and still be a stallion. But I also know that you keep your head under pressure and are dedicated or stupid enough to climb out on a glacier to save a kid you've never met. And you think ahead enough to remember to ask down in the restaurant how Meg likes her steak. My dogs like you. Help me out here, chief."

He reached out and touched her hair, a little stroke over the damp black. "When's the last time you saw him?"

"February 1988. February sixth."

"Do you know where he was going?"

"He said to pick up some work. Here in Anchorage, I figured, or up in Fairbanks. He and my mother had been fighting about money and a variety of other things. That was typical. He said he'd be gone a couple weeks or so. He never came back."

"Your mother file a missing person's report?"

"No." Then her brow creased. "At least I don't think so. We assumed, everyone assumed, he'd just taken a hike. They'd been fighting," she continued, "maybe more than usual. He was restless. Even I could see it. He wasn't the salt of the earth, Nate. He wasn't a responsible sort, though he was always good to me, and we never went without anything important. It wasn't enough for Charlene, and they argued."

She steadied herself, kept eating because it was there. "He drank, he smoked dope, he gambled when he felt like it, worked when he felt like it and fucked off when he felt like it. I loved him—maybe because of all that. He was thirty-three when he left that afternoon—and using the wisdom of hindsight and maturity, I can see it was freaking him out to be thirty-three. To be the father of a half-grown girl and hooked up with the same woman year after year. Maybe he was at a kind of cross-

roads, you know? Maybe he decided to take that winter climb as a kind of last idiocy of youth—or maybe he was never coming back anyway. But somebody made the decision for him.”

“He have enemies?”

“Probably, but nobody I could say would cause him harm. He’d piss people off, but nothing major.”

“What about your stepfather?”

She gave her salad a couple of pokes with her fork. “What about him?”

“How soon after your father disappeared did Charlene get married? How’d she work the divorce?”

“First, she didn’t need a divorce. She and my father weren’t married. He didn’t believe in the legal boundaries of marriage, and blah blah. She married Old Man Hidel about a year after—a little less. If you’re thinking Karl Hidel climbed up No Name and carved an ice ax in my father’s chest, you can forget it. He was sixty-eight and fifty pounds overweight when Charlene hooked him.”

As an afterthought she picked up the salad bowl and ate. “Smoked like a chimney. He could barely climb the stairs much less a mountain.”

“Who would have climbed with your father?”

“Jesus, Nate, anybody. Anybody who wanted the rush. You know those kids today? Give them a little time, and they’ll talk about what happened up there as if it was one of the most exciting events of their lives. Climbers are crazier than bush pilots.”

When he said nothing, she let out a little breath, ate some more salad. “He was a good climber, had a solid rep there. Maybe he had taken a job guiding a group up on a winter climb. Or he hooked up with a couple of buddies and like-minded morons and decided to fart into the face of death.”

“He ever do anything stronger than pot?”

"Maybe. Probably. Charlene would know." She rubbed her eyes. "Shit. I have to tell her."

"Meg, were either one of them involved with anyone else while they were together?"

"If that's a delicate way of asking if they screwed around, I don't know. Ask her."

He was losing her. Her anger and impatience would make questioning impossible in another minute or two. "You said he gambled. Seriously?"

"No. I don't know. Not that I've ever heard. He'd blow a paycheck if he had one. Or pile up some IOUs, because he didn't win very often. But nothing heavy. At least not locally. I never heard about him being into anything illegal other than recreational drugs. And there are plenty of people who'd be happy to tell me if he had been. Not because they didn't like him. People did. Just because people like to tell you that kind of thing."

"Okay." He rubbed a hand on her thigh. "I'll ask some questions, and I'll make nice with whoever catches the case so they'll keep me updated."

"Well. Let's get out of here." She rolled off the bed, leaving her half-eaten dinner. Her hands rapped a beat against her legs. "I know this place. The music's good. We can have a couple of drinks, then we'll come back and have some chandelier-swinging sex."

Instead of commenting on her change of mood, he merely glanced up at the old and dingy ceiling light. "That doesn't look all that sturdy."

It made her laugh. "We'll live dangerously."



TEN

WHEN HE WOKE, the dream was fading, leaving only a bitter, salty taste in his throat. As if he'd swallowed tears. He could hear Meg breathing beside him, soft and steady. Some part of him, struggling under the weight of despair, wanted to turn to her. For the comfort and oblivion of sex.

She'd be warm, and she'd come to life around him.

Instead, he turned away. And he knew, he *knew* it was indulgent; it was self-defeating to choose to embrace the misery. But he got out of bed alone in the dark, found his clothes. He dressed and left her sleeping.

In the dream, he'd been climbing the mountain. He'd fought his way up ice and rock, thousands of feet above the world. In the airless sky, where every breath was agony. He had to go up, was compelled to claw his way up another inch, another foot, while below him was nothing but a swirling, white sea. If he fell he would drown in it, soundlessly.

So he climbed until his fingers bled and left red smears on the ice-sheathed rock.

Exhausted, exhilarated, he dragged himself onto a ledge. And saw the mouth of the cave. Light pulsed from it and lit hope in him as he crawled inside.

It opened, it towered, like some mythical ice palace. Huge formations speared down from the roof, up from the floor to form pillars and archways of white and ghostly blue where ice glinted like a thousand diamonds. The walls, smooth and polished, gleamed like mirrors, tossing his reflection back at him a hundred times.

He gained his feet, circling the splendor of it, dazzled by the sheen and the space and the sparkle.

He could live here, alone. His own fortress of solitude. He could find his peace here, in the quiet and the beauty and the alone.

Then he saw he was not alone.

The body slumped against the gleaming wall, fused to it by years of relentless cold. The ax handle protruded from its chest, and the frozen blood shone red, red, red, over the black parka.

And his heart tipped when he understood he hadn't come for peace after all, but for duty.

How would he carry the body down? How could he bear the weight of it on that long, vicious journey back to the world? He didn't know the way. He didn't have the skill or the tools or the strength.

As he walked toward the body, the walls and columns of the cave hurled the reflections at him. A hundred of him, a hundred dead. Everywhere he looked, death joined him.

The ice began to crackle. The walls began to shake. A thunderous sound roared as he pitched to his knees at the foot of the body. The dead face of Galloway turned up to his, teeth bared in a bloody grimace.

And it was Jack's face—and Jack's voice that spoke as the ice columns tumbled, and the floor of the cave heaved. "There's no way out, for either of us. We're all dead here."

He'd wakened as the cave swallowed him.

. . .

MEG WASN'T SURPRISED to find Nate gone. It was after eight when she surfaced, so she imagined he'd gotten bored or hungry waiting for her to wake up.

She was grateful to him, for the companionship and the straightforward manner wrapped around compassion. He'd let her deal with shock and grief—and whatever else she was feeling—on her own terms. She considered that a valuable asset in a friend or a lover.

She was pretty sure they were both.

She was going to have to keep dealing—with herself, her mother, with everyone in town. With the cops.

She didn't see the point in dwelling on it now. There'd be enough dwelling when she got back to Lunacy.

She figured she'd find Nate or he'd find her before it was time to head back. Meanwhile, she wanted coffee.

The dining room was set for breakfast, with plenty of takers. Cheap lodgings, good food appealed to a lot of the pilots and guides who used Anchorage as a launch pad. She saw a scatter of familiar faces.

Then she saw Nate.

He sat alone at a rear corner booth. Since that was a prized spot, it told her he'd been there for some time. He had a mug of coffee and a newspaper. But he wasn't drinking; he wasn't reading. He was off somewhere, in his own thoughts. Bleak and sorrowful thoughts.

Looking at him from across the busy room, she knew she'd never seen anyone so alone.

Whatever his long, sad story was, she thought, it was going to be a killer.

As she started toward him, someone called her name. While she an-

swered it with a wave, she saw Nate draw in. She watched him bring himself back, deliberately pick up his coffee and settle himself before he looked over. Smiled at her.

An easy smile, secret eyes.

“You got a good night’s sleep.”

“Good enough.” She slid in across from him. “You eat?”

“Not yet. Did you know people used to commute from Montana to work in the canneries around here?”

She glanced down at the newspaper and the article. “Actually, I did. It’s good pay.”

“Yeah, but not exactly a daily battle with rush hour. I figured you lived in Montana because you wanted to raise horses or cattle. Or maybe start a paramilitary camp. Okay, gross generalization, but still.”

“You’re a real East Coast boy. Hey, Wanda.”

“Meg.” The waitress who looked to be about twenty, and perky, set down another mug of coffee, pulled out her pad. “What can I get you?”

“Couple eggs, over easy, Canadian bacon, hash browns, wheat toast. Jocko?”

“Ditched him.”

“Told you he was a loser. What do you want, Burke?”

“Ah . . .” He searched around for his appetite, then decided the sight and smell of food might help him locate it. “Ham-and-cheese omelette, and the wheat toast.”

“Gotcha. I’m dating this guy named Byron,” she told Meg. “He writes poetry.”

“Can only be an improvement.” Meg turned back to Nate as Wanda walked away. “Wanda’s parents were one of the seasonals when she was a kid. Used to spend her summers here when they worked in the canneries. She liked it, moved up permanently last year. Habitually dates

assholes, but other than that, she's okay. What were you thinking about before I came over?"

"Nothing, really. Just passing the time with the paper."

"No, you weren't. But since you did me a favor last night, I won't push it."

He didn't deny; she didn't press. And she didn't, though the urge scraped at her, reach over and stroke his cheek. When she had a brood going, she didn't want comfort. So she gave him the same courtesy she expected for herself.

"Is there anything else we have to do here before we head back? If we're going to be a while, I want to have someone go out and check on my dogs."

"I called the State cops. A Sergeant Coben's in charge of the case, for now anyway. He'll probably want to talk to you—and your mother at some point. There's not likely to be much movement on this until they can get a team up there and bring him back down. I called the hospital. All three boys are in satisfactory condition."

"You've been busy. Tell me, chief, do you take care of everybody?"

"No. I just handle details."

She'd heard bigger bullshit in her life, but then she lived in Lunacy. "She do a number on you? The ex-wife?"

He shifted. "Probably."

"Want to spew? Trash her over breakfast?"

"Not so much."

She waited while Wanda served the meal, topped off the coffee. Meg cut into the eggs, letting the yolk run where it liked. "So I slept with this guy in college," she began. "Great looker. Kind of stupid, but he had tremendous staying power. He started playing this head game on me. How I should think about wearing more makeup, dressing better, maybe

I shouldn't argue with people so much. Blah blah. Not," she said with a wag of her fork, "that I wasn't gorgeous and sexy and smart, oh no, but if I just fixed up a little more, went along a little more."

"You're not gorgeous."

She laughed, her eyes dancing, and bit into her toast. "Shut up. This is my story."

"You're better than gorgeous. Gorgeous is just lucky DNA. You're . . . vivid," he decided. "Compelling. That's the sort of thing that comes from inside spaces, so it's better than gorgeous. If you want my opinion."

"Wow." She sat back, surprised enough to forget her breakfast. "If I was anybody else, I'd be speechless after a comment like that. As it is, I've lost my trend. What the hell was I talking about?"

This time when he smiled, it reached his eyes, warmed up the gray. "Asshole college boy you slept with."

"Right. Right." She dived into the hash browns. "There was more than one, but anyway, I was twenty and this dude's passive-aggressive insults were starting to get under my skin—especially when I found out he was boffing this brain-dead bimbo with pots of money and breast implants."

She fell silent, concentrating on her breakfast.

"So, what did you do?"

"What did I do?" She drank some coffee. "Next time we went to bed, I screwed his brains out, then slipped him a couple of sleeping pills."

"You drugged him?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"I paid a couple of guys to carry him down to one of the lecture halls. And I dressed his sorry ass in sexy women's underwear—bra, garter belt,

black hose. That was challenging. I made up his face, curled his hair. Took some pictures to put up on the Internet. He was still sleeping when the first class started piling in at eight.” She ate some eggs. “It was a hell of a show—especially when he woke up, got a clue and started screaming like a girl.”

Enjoying her, appreciating the single-mindedness as much as the creativity of her revenge, Nate toasted her with his coffee. “You can bet I won’t be commenting on your wardrobe.”

“Point of the story. I believe in payback. For the little things, for the big ones. For everything in between. Letting people screw you over is just lazy and uncreative.”

“You didn’t love him.”

“Hell, no. If I had, I wouldn’t have just embarrassed him. I’d have caused him intense physical pain in addition.”

He toyed with the rest of his omelette. “Let me ask you something. Are we exclusive?”

“I consider myself very exclusive, in every way.”

“What we have going on together,” he said patiently. “Is this an exclusive arrangement?”

“Is that what you’re looking for?”

“I wasn’t looking for anything. Then there you were.”

“Uh-oh.” She let out a long breath. “Good one. Seems like you’ve got a whole big pot of good ones. I don’t have a problem limiting myself to swinging from the chandelier with just you, for as long as we’re both enjoying it.”

“Fair enough.”

“She cheat on you, Burke?”

“Yeah. Yeah, she did.”

Meg nodded, continued to eat. “I don’t cheat. Okay, sometimes I

cheat at cards, but just for the hell of it. And sometimes I lie when it's expedient. Or when the lie's just more fun than the truth. I can be mean if it suits me, which is a lot."

She paused, reaching across to touch his hand for a moment so there was a connection between them. "But I don't kick a man when he's down, unless I'm the one who put him down in the first place. I don't put him down unless he deserves it. And I don't break my word if I give it. So I'll give you my word. I won't cheat on you."

"Except at cards."

"Well, yeah. It's going to be light soon. We should get going."

SHE DIDN'T KNOW how she was going to handle it with Charlene. Any angle she picked, the result was going to be the same. Hysteria, accusations, rage, tears. It was always messy with Charlene.

Maybe Nate read her mind, because he stopped Meg outside the door of The Lodge. "Maybe I should break this to her. I've had to give family members this kind of news before."

"You've had to tell people their lover's been dead in an ice cave for fifteen years?"

"The means don't change the impact that much."

His voice was gentle, in direct contrast to the jagged edge of hers. It calmed her. More than calmed her, she realized. It made her want to lean on him.

"Much as I'd like to pass this plate to you, I'd better handle it. You're welcome to pick up the pieces after I'm done."

They went inside. A few people were loitering over coffee or eating an early lunch. Meg flipped open her coat as she signalled to Rose.

"Charlene?"

“Office. We heard Steven and his friends are going to be okay. Roads were still too bad, but Jerk swung in to fly Joe and Lara down this morning. Get you some coffee?”

Nate watched Meg walk through a doorway. “Sure.”

SHE WENT STRAIGHT THROUGH the lobby area, skirted the counter and entered the office without knocking.

Charlene was at her desk, on the phone. She gave Meg an impatient, back-fingered wave.

“Now, Billy, if I’m going to get screwed like that, I expect to be taken out to dinner first.”

Meg turned away. If her mother was haggling over the price of supplies, she had to let it run through. The office didn’t look efficient. It looked like Charlene—female and obvious and foolish. Lots of cotton-candy pink in the fabrics, armies of silly dust catchers. Paintings of flowers in gold frames on the walls, silk pillows mounded on the velvet settee.

It smelled of roses, from the room spray Charlene spritzed every time she entered the room. The desk itself was an ornate reproduction antique she’d bought from a catalog and paid too much money for. Curvy legs and lots of carving.

The desk set was pink, as were all her personal stationery and Post-its. All of them were topped with *Charlene* in fancy, nearly illegible script.

There was a pole lamp beside the settee—a gold wash with a pink beaded shade more suitable, in Meg’s mind, to a bordello than an office.

She wondered, as she often did, how she could have come from anyone whose tastes, whose mind, whose ways, were so directly opposed to

her own. Then again, maybe her own life was nothing more than an endless rebellion against the womb.

Meg turned back when she heard Charlene purr her good-byes.

“Trying a price hike on me.” With a short laugh, Charlene poured herself another glass of water from the pitcher on her desk.

Didn’t look efficient, Meg thought, but looks were deceiving. When it came to business, Charlene could calculate her profit and loss to the penny, any time of the day or night.

“I hear you’re a hero.” Charlene watched her daughter as she sipped. “You and the sexy chief. You stay over in Anchorage to celebrate?”

“We lost the light.”

“Sure. Just a word of advice. A man like Nate’s got baggage and plenty of it. You’re used to traveling fast and light. It’s not a good match.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I need to talk to you.”

“I’ve got calls and paperwork. You know this is my busy time of day.”

“It’s about my father.”

Charlene lowered her water glass. Her face went very still, very pale, then the color erupted in her cheeks. Candy pink to match the room.

“Did you hear from him? Did you see him in Anchorage? That son of a bitch. He’d better not think for one minute he can come back here and pick things up. He’s not getting anything out of me, and if you’ve got any sense, you’ll say the same.”

She shoved away from the desk and stood, her color rising from pink to hot and red. “Nobody, *nobody* walks away from me then walks back. Not ever. Pat Galloway can go fuck himself.”

“He’s dead.”

“Probably had some sob story to tell. He was always good with . . .

What do you mean he's dead?" Looking more annoyed than shocked, she flipped back her curly hair. "That's ridiculous. Who told you such a stupid lie?"

"He's been dead. It looks like he's been dead a long time. Maybe only days after he left here."

"Why would you say something like that? Why would you say something like that to me?" The angry red color had drained, turning her face white, white and drawn and suddenly old. "You can't hate me that much."

"I don't hate you. You've always been wrong about that. Maybe I'm ambivalent toward you most of the time, but I don't hate you. Those boys found an ice cave. It's where they took shelter part of the time they were on the mountain. He was in there. He's been in there."

"That's crazy talk. I want you to get out." Her voice rose to a hoarse shriek. "Get the hell out of here right now."

"They took pictures," Meg continued, even as Charlene grabbed one of her paperweights and heaved it against the wall. "I saw them. I recognized him."

"You did *not!*" She whirled, grabbed a trinket off a shelf, threw it. "You're making this up to get back at me."

"For what?" Meg ignored the statuary and glassware that smashed into walls, onto the floor, even when a shard nicked her cheek. It was Charlene's usual method of venting temper.

Break it, destroy it. Then have someone sweep it up. And buy new.

"For being a lousy mother? For being a big ho? For sleeping with the same guy I was sleeping with to prove you weren't too old to steal him from me? Maybe for telling me, most of my life, what a disappointment I am as a daughter. Which offense am I pulling out of my hat?"

"I raised you by myself. I made sacrifices for you so you could have what you wanted."

"Too bad you never gave me violin lessons. I could use one about now. And guess what, Charlene. This isn't about you or me. It's about him. He's dead."

"I don't believe you."

"Somebody killed him. Murdered him. Somebody hacked an ice ax into his chest and left him on the mountain."

"No. No, no, no, no." Her face was frozen now, as still and cold as the sky behind her. Then it collapsed as she slid down to the floor to sit among the broken china and glass. "Oh, my God, no. Pat. Pat."

"Get up, for God's sake. You're cutting yourself." Still angry, Meg marched around the desk, grabbed Charlene by the arms to haul her up.

"Meg. Megan." Charlene's breath hitched in and out, in and out. Her big, blue eyes swam. "He's dead?"

"Yes."

The tears spilled over, flooded her cheeks. On a wail, she dropped her head on Meg's shoulder and clung.

Meg fought her first instinct to pull away. She let her mother weep, hold on and weep. And she realized it was the first sincere embrace they'd shared in more years than she could count.

WHEN THE STORM PASSED, she took Charlene up the back way to her room. It was like undressing a doll, she thought, as she took off her mother's clothes. She doctored the minor cuts, slid a nightgown over Charlene's head.

"He didn't leave me."

"No." Meg walked into the bath, scanned her mother's medicine cabinet. There were always plenty of pills. She found some Xanax, filled a glass of water.

"I hated him for leaving me."

"I know."

"You hated me for it."

"Maybe. Take this."

"Murdered?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know." She set the glass aside after Charlene took the pill.

"Lie down."

"I loved him."

"Maybe you did."

"I loved him," Charlene repeated as Meg pulled the covers over her.

"I hated him for leaving me alone. I can't stand to be alone."

"Go to sleep for a while."

"Will you stay?"

"No." Meg pulled the drapes, spoke into the shadows. "I don't hate being alone. And I need to be. You won't want me when you wake up anyway."

But she stayed until Charlene slept.

She passed Sarrie Parker on the stairs on the way down. "Let her sleep. Her office is a mess."

"I heard." Sarrie raised her eyebrows. "Must've said something that put her into a hell of a temper."

"Just try to get it cleaned up before she goes back in there."

She kept walking and grabbed her coat as she swung into the restaurant. "I have to go," she said to Nate.

He pushed away from the bar, caught up with her at the door. "Where?"

“Home. I need to be home.” She welcomed the cold, the light slap of the wind.

“How is she?”

“I gave her a tranquilizer. She comes out of it, she’s going to crash down on you. Sorry.” She pulled on her gloves, then pressed her hands to her eyes. “God. God. It was what I was expecting. Hysterics, rage, why do you hate me. The usual.”

“Your face is cut.”

“Just a scratch. China-poodle shrapnel. She throws things.” She breathed carefully as they walked toward the river. She watched the ghost of her breath fly and fade. “But when it sank in, when she understood I wasn’t messing with her, she fell apart. I didn’t expect what I saw then. I didn’t expect what I saw on her face. She loved him. I never considered that. I never thought she did.”

“It doesn’t seem like the best time for either one of you to be alone.”

“She won’t be. I need to be. Give me a few days, Burke. You’re going to have your hands full around here anyway. Few days, this will settle in some. Come out and see me. I’ll fix you a meal, take you to bed.”

“Phones are back up. You could call me if you need anything.”

“Yeah, I could. I won’t. Don’t try to save me, chief.” She slid her sunglasses on. “Just handle the details.”

She turned, pulled his head down to hers and indulged them both in a hot, seeking kiss. And drew back, patted his cheek with her gloved hand.

“Just a few days,” she repeated, then crossed to her plane.

She didn’t look back, but she knew he stood by the river, knew he watched her fly away. She blanked it out of her mind, all of it, and let herself soar over the tops of the trees, on the edge of the sky.

It wasn’t until she saw the drift of smoke from her own chimney and

the silky bullets that were her dogs race across the snow toward the lake that she felt her throat slam shut on her.

It wasn't until she saw the figure step out of her house, slowly follow the path of the dogs that she felt the tears well up in her eyes.

Her hands began to shake so she had to fight to steady them and land. He was waiting for her, the man who'd stepped in as her father when her own had stepped away.

She got out, struggled to keep her voice even. "Didn't think you were coming back for another day or two."

"Something told me to come now." He studied her face. "Something's happened."

"Yes." She nodded, bent to greet her delighted dogs. "Something happened."

"Come inside and tell me."

It wasn't until she was inside, in the warmth, when he'd brewed her tea and watered her dogs, when he listened without comment, that she broke down and wept.



ELEVEN

JOURNAL ENTRY · *February 18, 1988*

I stood above the clouds. This, for me, is the defining moment of any climb. All the exhaustion, the pain, the sheer misery of the cold washes out of you, when you stand at the summit. You're reborn. In that innocence, there is no fear of death or of life. There is no anger, no sorrow, no history and no future. There is only the moment.

You've done it. You lived.

We danced on the virgin snow, nearly thirteen thousand feet above the ground with the sun beaming in our eyes and the wind playing our mad tune. Our shouts slammed and echoed against the sky, and our giddiness swirled into the rippling ocean of clouds.

When Darth said we should jump, I nearly took the leap. What the hell. We were gods here.

He meant it. It gave me a jolt—not quite fear—to realize he was serious. Let's jump. Let's fly! A little too much Dex in my buddy here. A little too much speed to pump him up for the fight to the finish.

He actually grabbed my arm, daring me. I had to pull myself, and him, away from the edge. He cursed me for it, but he was laughing. We both were. Insanely.

He said something a little weird, but it was the place for it, I'd say. Rambling bitching, with that bubbling laughter, about my luck. Bagged myself the sexiest woman in Lunacy and got to sit around pissing away the days while she did the work. Get to take off, free as I please, and not only bang a whore, not only hit it big in the backroom, but I'm standing on the top of the world just because I fucking wanted to.

Now I won't even jump.

Things are going to change, that's what he told me. Things are going to turn around. He's going to get a woman other men want, he's going to hit it big. He's going to live large.

I let him stand and stew about it. It was too fine a moment for pettiness.

I passed through insane joy into the peace—utter and complete. We're not gods here, but only men who've struggled their way to one more peak. I know a thousand things I've done might be insignificant. But not this. This marks me.

We haven't conquered the mountain, but have joined with it.

I think, because I've done this, I might be a better man. A better partner, a better father. I know some of Darth's ramblings are truth. I haven't earned all that I have, not the way I earned this moment. I know the desire to be more strikes me as I stand in the battering wind above a world full of pain and beauty, curtained now by the clouds that tempt me to dive through them, to hurry back to that pain and that beauty.

Strange that I should stand here, where I so desperately wanted to be, and ache for what I left behind.

NATE STUDIED THE PHOTOGRAPHS from the ice cave. There was nothing new to see, and as he'd studied them every spare moment for the last three days, he had every detail imprinted on his brain.

He had a few stingy notes from the State Police. Weather permitting, they'd send up a forensics and recovery team within the next forty-eight hours. He knew they'd interviewed the three boys extensively, but most of what had been asked and answered he'd gotten through the grapevine rather than official channels.

He wanted to set up a case board, but it wasn't his case.

He wasn't going to be allowed to examine the cave, to sit in on the autopsy once the body was brought down. Any data passed to him would be at the investigation team's discretion.

Maybe, once the body had been positively identified as Patrick Galloway, he'd have a little more edge. But he wasn't going to be in the loop.

It surprised him how much he wanted to be. It had been a year since his juices had been stirred by a case. He wanted to work it. Maybe it was partially because Meg was connected, but for the most part it was the photographs. It was the man he saw in them.

Frozen in that moment, seventeen years before. Preserved, and all those details of his death preserved with him. The dead had the answers, if you just knew where to look.

Had he fought? Been taken by surprise? Had he known his killer? Killers?

Why was he dead?

He slid the file he'd started into a drawer when he heard the knock on his office door.

Peach stuck her head in. "Deb caught a couple of kids shoplifting over at the store. Peter's free. You want him to go round them up?"

"All right. Notify the parents, get them down here, too. What did they take?"

"Tried to get some comic books, candy bars and a six-pack of Miller.

Ought to know better. Deb's got an eye like a hawk. Jacob Itu's just come in. He'd like a minute, if you've got one."

"Sure, send him back."

Nate rose, wandered to his coffeemaker. Another hour of sunlight, he calculated, though what there was of it today was gloomy and dank. He looked out his window, picked out No Name, and studied it as he sipped his coffee.

He turned when he heard Jacob approach. The man was an emblem for the classic Native Alaskan with his raw-boned face and dark, intense eyes. His hair was silvered, worn in a single braid. His boots were sturdy, his clothes work-rough, with a long brown vest over flannel and wool.

Nate judged his age at somewhere on the high side of fifty, with a look of health and fitness, and rosy strength.

"Mr. Itu." Nate gestured to a chair. "What can I do for you?"

"Patrick Galloway was my friend."

Nate nodded. "You want coffee?"

"No. Thank you."

"The body hasn't yet been recovered, examined or positively identified." Nate sat behind his desk. It was the same spiel he'd been giving everyone who'd come in or caught him on the street, at The Lodge, over the past couple of days. "The State Police are in charge of the investigation. They'll notify next-of-kin, officially, when the identification's verified."

"Meg would not mistake her father."

"No. I agree."

"You can't leave justice to others."

That had been his creed once. The creed that had sent both him and his partner into an alley in Baltimore.

"It's not my case. It's not my jurisdiction or my province."

"He was one of us, as his daughter is. You stood in front of the people of this place when you came and promised to do your duty to them."

"I did. I will. I'm not letting it go, but I'm well down the feeding chain on this."

Jacob stepped closer, his only movement since coming into the room. "When you were Outside, murder was your business."

"It was. I'm not Outside anymore. Have you seen Meg?"

"Yes. She's strong. She'll use her grief. She won't let it use her."

As I do? Nate thought. But this man with his intense eyes and ruthlessly controlled anger couldn't see what was inside of him.

"Tell me about Galloway. Who would he have gone climbing with?"

"He'd know them."

"Them?"

"A winter climb on No Name would need at least three. He was reckless, impulsive, but he wouldn't have attempted it with less than three. He wouldn't have climbed with strangers. Or not only strangers." Jacob smiled slightly. "But he made friends easily."

"And enemies?"

"A man who has what others covet makes enemies."

"What did he have?"

"A beautiful woman. A quick-witted child. An ease of manner and lack of ambition that allowed him to do as he pleased most of the time."

Coveting another man's woman was often a motive for murder between friends. "Was Charlene involved with anyone else?"

"I don't think so."

"Was he?"

"He may have enjoyed another woman from time to time when he was away from home, as some men will. If he enjoyed one in town, he didn't tell me of it."

"He wouldn't have had to tell you," Nate responded. "You'd have known."

"Yes."

"And so would others. A place like this may have secrets, but that's not the kind that stays buried for long." He considered another moment. "Drugs?"

"He grew a little marijuana. He didn't deal."

Nate lifted his eyebrows. "Just grass?" When Jacob hesitated, Nate leaned back. "Nobody's going to bust him for it now."

"Primarily grass, but he wasn't likely to turn down anything that came to hand."

"Did he have a dealer? In Anchorage, say?"

"I don't think so. He rarely had the money to spend on that sort of indulgence. Charlene held the purse, and she held it tight. He liked to climb and to fish and to hike. He liked to fly but had no interest in learning to pilot. He'd work when he needed money. He disliked restrictions, laws, rules. Many do who come here. He wouldn't have understood you."

The important thing, as Nate saw it, was for him to understand Patrick Galloway.

He asked more questions, then filed away the notes he'd made after Jacob left.

Then it was time to deal with the more mundane matter of a couple of adolescent shoplifters.

With that, a pair of missing skis and a fender bender, he stayed busy until the end of shift.

He was taking the evening off, leaving Otto and Pete on call. Unless there was a mass murder, he was off the clock until morning.

He'd given Meg her few days. He hoped she was ready for him.

It was his own fault, he decided, that he'd gone back to The Lodge to pick up a change of clothes—in case he stayed out at Meg's.

Charlene caught him while he was still in his room.

"I need to talk to you." She scooted around him at the door and walked over to sit on the bed. She wore all black—a snug sweater and snugger pants and those skinny heels she liked to teeter around in.

"Sure. Why don't we go down and have some coffee?"

"This is private. Would you close the door?"

"Okay." But he stood by it, just in case.

"I need you to do something. I need you to go to Anchorage and tell those people they have to release Pat's body to me."

"Charlene, they haven't recovered the body yet."

"I *know* that. Haven't I been on the phone with those bureaucrats and insensitive bastards every day? They're just leaving him up there."

When her eyes filled, Nate's stomach sank.

"Charlene." He looked around, a little desperately for some tissue, a towel, an old T-shirt, and ended up going into the bath. He came out with a roll of toilet paper and pushed it into her hand. "Getting people up there, and making the recovery, is a complicated business."

He didn't want to add that a few days, one way or the other, wasn't going to make a damn bit of difference. "There've been storms up there and high winds. But I talked with Sergeant Coben myself today. If it's clear, they hope to send a team up in the morning."

"They said I'm not next-of-kin, because we weren't legally married." She yanked off several sheets of tissue, buried her face in the wad.

"Oh." He puffed out his cheeks, blew out a breath. "Meg—"

"She's not legitimate." Voice cracking, Charlene waved the soggy wad. "Why should they give him to her? They'll send him back to his parents, back east. And that's not *fair!* That's not *right!* He left them,

didn't he? He didn't leave me. Not on purpose. But they hate me, and they'll never let me have him."

He'd seen people squabble over the dead before, and it was never pretty. "Have you talked to them?"

"No, I haven't talked to them," she snapped, and her eyes dried up cold. "They don't even acknowledge me. Oh, they've talked to Meg a few times, and they gave her some money when she turned twenty-one. Little enough when they've got *piles* of it. They didn't bother with Pat when he was alive, but you can bet your ass they'll want him now that he's dead. I want him back. I want him back."

"Okay, why don't we take this one step at a time." He saw no choice, so he sat down beside her, draped an arm over her shoulder so she could cry on his. "I'll keep in touch with Coben. I'm going to tell you the body's not going to be released for a while anyway. It could be some time. And it seems to me that as his daughter Meg has as much right as his parents."

"She won't fight for him. She doesn't care about things like that."

"I'll talk to Meg."

"Why would anybody kill Pat? He never hurt anybody. But me." She gave a watery laugh, the sort that sounded both sad and wistful. "And he never meant to. He never meant to make you cry or make you mad."

"He make a lot of people mad?"

"Me, mostly. He made me crazy." She sighed. "I loved him like crazy."

"If I asked you to think back, really think back, to the weeks around the time he left, could you? The details of it, even the little ones."

"I guess I could try. It was so long ago, it barely seems real anymore."

"I want you to try, take a couple of days and really think back. Write things down when they come to you. Things he said, did, the people he was with, anything that seemed different. We'll talk about it."

"He's been up there all this time," she whispered. "Alone in the cold."

How many times have I looked at that mountain over the years? Now, every time I do, I'll see Pat. It was easier when I hated him, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess I do."

She sniffled, straightened. "I want his body brought here. I want to bury him here. That's what he'd have wanted."

"We'll do everything we can to make that happen." Since she was softened up with the tears, and not currently hitting on him, it might be the time to press for information. "Charlene, tell me about Jacob Itu."

She dabbed at her eyelashes. "What about him?"

"What's his story? How did he hook up with Pat? It helps me to have a picture."

"So you can find out what happened to Pat?"

"Exactly. He and Jacob were friends?"

"Yeah." She sniffled again, a bit more delicately. "Jacob's sort of . . . mysterious. At least *I've* never understood him."

Judging from the sulky look, that meant she'd never been able to get him into bed. Interesting, Nate decided. "He strikes me as a loner."

"I guess." She shrugged now. "He and Pat hit it off. I think he was sort of, I don't know, *amused* by Pat mostly. But they liked all that hunting and fishing and hiking crap. Pat was good at all the outdoorsy stuff. He and Jacob used to go out into the bush for days while I was back here dealing with a baby and work and—"

"So that was the bond, the connection," Nate interrupted.

"Well, and they both hated the government, but so does everybody else around here. He and Pat liked doing the living-off-the-land stuff together, but under it, it was Meg."

"What was Meg?"

"Well . . ."

She shifted toward him into what Nate recognized as gossip mode.

He stayed where he was, sitting intimately on the bed with her, unwilling to change the dynamics until he'd gotten what he was after.

"Jacob used to be married."

"Is that so?"

"Ages ago. Eons. Back when he was like eighteen, nineteen, living in this little village in the bush outside of Nome." Her face was animated now as she gave her little hair toss and settled in to give him the dish. "I got all this from Pat—and here and there. Jacob never has much to say to me."

She started to sulk again, to pucker up. "So he was married," Nate prompted.

"Some young thing, same tribe. They grew up together and everything—one of those soul mates deals. She died in childbirth. Her and the baby—the girl. She went into labor too early, a couple of months early, and there were complications. Whatever, I can't remember exactly what went wrong, but they couldn't get her to a hospital, not in time anyway. It's sad," she said after a beat, and her eyes, her face, her voice softened with genuine sympathy. "It's really sad."

"Yes, it is."

"Pat said that's why he became a bush pilot. If he'd had a plane, or they'd been able to get one in time, maybe . . . So he moved out here, said he couldn't stay there because there his life was over. Or something like that. Anyway, when we came around, when he saw Meg, Jacob said her spirit spoke to his. He wasn't even high," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Jacob didn't get high. He says that sort of thing. He told Pat that Meg was his spirit child, and Pat thought that was cool. It seemed weird to me, but Pat was okay with it. He figured it made him and Jacob brothers."

"Did he and Pat ever argue about anything? About Meg, for instance?"

"Not that I ever heard of. Of course, Jacob doesn't argue. He just

freezes you with those long—what do you call it?—inscrutable,” she decided. “Those inscrutable stares. I guess he stepped up with Meg when Pat left. But Pat didn’t leave.” Tears welled in her eyes again. “He died.”

“I’m sorry. I appreciate the information. It always helps to get a picture.”

“You talk to Meg.” Charlene got to her feet. “You talk to her about making those Boston people see Pat belongs here. You make *her* see. She won’t listen to me. Never did, never will. I’m counting on you, Nate.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

She seemed to be satisfied with that, and left Nate sitting on the side of the bed, picturing himself being squeezed flat by two difficult females.

HE DIDN’T CALL HER. She might put him off or just not answer the phone. The worst she could do if he showed up on her doorstep was send him away again, and at least he’d have seen for himself if she was okay.

He drove along the tunnel of road with the walls of snow on either side. The sky had cleared some, as predicted, so there was a faint glimmer of moon and starlight. It drizzled on the mountains that filled his view, glinted off his glimpses of the river.

He heard the music before he made the turn to her house. It filled the dark, soared through it and swallowed it. Just as the lights beat back the night. She had them on, all of them, so the house, the grounds, the near trees were lit like fire. And through it, the music streamed and flew.

He thought it was some sort of opera, though that kind of music wasn’t his strong point. It was wrenching, the sort of thing that broke the heart even as it, somehow, lifted the soul.

She’d cleared a walkway, a good three feet wide. He could imagine the time and effort that had taken. Her porch was clear of snow, and a wood box beside the door was full.

He started to knock, then decided nobody could hear a knock over the music. He tried the door, found it unlocked, eased it open.

The dogs, who'd been sleeping despite the music, leaped up from the rug. After a few quick, warning barks, tails wagged. To Nate's relief, they appeared to remember him and pranced over to greet him.

"Good, great. Where's your mom?"

He tried a couple of shouts, then made his way through the first floor. There were cheery fires burning in both the living room and kitchen—and something simmering on the stove that smelled like dinner.

He started to take a peak—maybe a sample—when he caught a movement through the window.

He moved closer. He could see her now, clearly in the flood of lights. She was bundled head to foot, trudging back through the snow on the fat, round snowshoes they called bear claws. As he watched she stopped, lifted her head to the sky. She stood, staring up, music pouring over her. Then she threw her arms back to the sides and fell backward.

He was at the door in one bounding leap. Wrenching it open, he shot out, jumped the steps, skidded on the frosty path she'd cleared.

She popped up when he shouted her name.

"What? Hi, where'd you come from?"

"What happened? Are you hurt?"

"No. I just wanted to lie in the snow for a minute. Sky's clearing up. Well, give me a hand up since you're here."

Even as he reached out, the dogs flew out and leaped on both of them.

"Left the door open," Meg managed as one of the huskies rolled with her in the snow.

"Sorry. Closing it slipped my mind when I thought you had a seizure." He hauled her up. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was in the shed, working on this old snowmobile I picked up a few months ago. Every now and then I go in and give it a few whacks."

"You know how to fix a snowmobile?"

"My talents are endless and varied."

"I bet they are." Looking at her, he forgot all the little irritations of the day. "I was thinking I might buy a snowmobile."

"Really. Well, once I get this one up and running, I'll make you a deal. Let's go in. I'm ready for a drink." She sent him a sidelong look as they started for the house. "So, were you just in the neighborhood?"

"No."

"Checking up on me?"

"Yeah, and hoping for that free meal."

"That all you're hoping for?"

"No."

"Good. Because I'm ready for that, too." She picked up a broom cocked by the door. "Brush me off some, will you?"

When he'd done his best, she took off the bear claws. "Take your coat off, stay awhile," she invited and began to strip off her own.

"Hey. Your hair."

She rubbed a hand over it as she hung up her parka and hat. "What about it?"

"There's a lot less of it."

It came to just below her jaw now, straight and full and thick—and a little crazed from her hands.

"I wanted a change. So I changed." She walked over, got a bottle from the pantry. Getting down glasses, she glanced back and saw him grinning at her. "What?"

"I like it. It makes you look, I don't know, young and cute."

She angled her head. "Young and cute like you want me to dress in a pinafore and Mary Janes and call you Daddy?"

"I don't know what a pinafore is, but you can wear one if you want. I'd as soon skip the Daddy part."

"Whatever blows up your skirt." She shrugged, poured deep-red wine into two glasses. "It's good to see you, Burke."

He walked over, took the glasses out of her hands and set them down on the counter. And using his hands to skim back that thick hair, leaned down, slow, eyes open, and kissed her. Soft and quiet until the warmth sparked with licks of heat. And he watched her watch him through the kiss, saw those perfect blue eyes of hers flicker once.

When he eased her back, he lifted the wineglasses again, gave one to her.

"It's good to kiss you, too."

She rubbed her lips together and was surprised the heat that had pumped into them didn't spark from the friction. "Hard to argue with that."

"I worried about you. You don't want to hear that, puts your back up. But that's the way it is. We don't have to talk about any of it if you're not ready."

She took a drink, then another. A lot of patience inside there, she decided. And the kissing cousin to patience was tenacity.

"Might as well deal with it. Do you know how to make a salad?"

"Ah . . . You open one of those bags of salad stuff you buy at the store and dump it into a bowl?"

"Not a guy for the kitchen, huh?"

"No."

"Still, at this point in our relationship, when you're hot for me, you'll

learn to chop vegetables without complaining about it. Ever peel a carrot?" she asked as she walked to the refrigerator.

"Yes, yes, I have."

"There, that's a start." She piled produce on the counter, handed him a carrot and a peeler. "Do that."

While he did, she began to wash lettuce. "In some cultures, women hack off their hair as a sign of mourning. That's not why I did it, altogether. He's been gone a long time, and I adjusted to that—in my own way. But it's different now."

"Murder changes everything."

"More than death does," she agreed. "Death's natural. It's a pisser because, hey, who wants to, but there's a cycle and nobody gets to jump off the wheel."

She dried the lettuce, those long fingers with their short, blunt nails working briskly. "I could've accepted his death. I'm not going to accept his murder. So I'll push at the State cops, and I'll push at you until I'm satisfied. This may cool off your hotness for me, but that's the breaks."

"I don't think it will. I haven't felt hot for a woman in a while, so I'm due."

"Why not?"

He handed her the carrot for inspection. "Why not what?"

"Why haven't you been hot for a woman?"

"I . . . hmm."

"Performance issues?"

He blinked, managed a strangled laugh. "Well, Jesus. That's a question. But this is just too weird a conversation to have over lettuce."

"Back to murder, then," she replied.

"Who took them up?" he questioned.

“What?”

“They’d have needed a pilot, right? Who flew them to the base camp or whatever you call it.”

“Oh.” She paused, tapped her knife on the cutting board. “You *are* a cop, aren’t you? I don’t know, and it may be tricky to find out after all this time. But between me and Jacob, we should be able to do it.”

“Whoever it is took down at least one less man than he dropped off. But he didn’t report it. Why?”

“And those are the things we need to find out. Good. A direction.”

“The investigators in charge will be asking those questions, heading in that direction. You might want to give yourself some time to deal with the more personal business.”

“You mean the custody battle and funeral Charlene’s planning.” She began to slice interesting ribbons from a hunk of red cabbage. “I’ve already had an earful, which is why I stopped answering the phone yesterday. Fighting over a dead body’s just a little too stupid for me. Especially when she has no idea if his family will object to her burying him here in the first place.”

“Have you met them?”

She got out a pot and began to fill it with water for the pasta. “Yeah. His mother contacted me a few times, and when she offered to fly me out there to meet his family, I was curious enough to go. I was eighteen. Charlene was supremely pissed, which only made me want to go more.”

After the pot was on a burner, she gave the sauce a little stir, then came back to finish the salad. “They’re okay. Snooty, highbrowed, not the sort of people I’d hang out with, or who’d want me hanging around for long. But they were decent to me. They gave me money, which has to earn them some points.”

Reaching for the bottle, she topped off her glass, held it up, eyebrows raised to Nate.

“No, I’m good.”

“It was enough money for me to put a down payment on my plane and this place, so I owe them.”

She paused to sip her wine contemplatively. “I don’t think they’re going to fight Charlene and insist on dragging him back east. She wants to think so, because she likes to hate them. Just like they enjoy disregarding her. That way they can all make more out of my father than he was.”

She got out plates, passed them off to Nate for the table. “Is staying quiet an interrogation technique?”

“It can be. It can also be called listening.”

“There’s only one person I know—well, that I’m willing to spend appreciable time with—who listens like you. That’s Jacob. It’s a good, strong quality. My father would listen to me, sometimes. But you could see him start to drift if it went on too long to suit him. He’d sit it out, but he wasn’t hearing you. Jacob always heard me.

“Anyway,” she said after a huffed-out sigh. “Patrick Galloway. He was an inconsiderate bastard. I loved him, and he was never really inconsiderate to me. But he was to his family, who, whatever their faults, didn’t deserve to have their son take off without a word before his eighteenth birthday. And he was to Charlene, leaving her to earn most of the coin and take care of the bulk of the messy stuff.

“I think she probably loved him, which was—maybe is—her cross to bear. I don’t know if he loved her.”

She pulled a clear glass container of rotini out of a cabinet, dumped some into the boiling water, continued to speak while she adjusted the heat and stirred.

“And I don’t think he’d have stuck it out with us if someone hadn’t killed him before he’d had a chance to take off anyway. But now I can’t know, and he never got the chance to make his choice. That’s what counts. What counts is someone ended him. So that’s my focus on this. Not where he ends up being put in the ground.”

“Sensible.”

“I’m not a sensible woman, Burke. I’m a selfish one. You’ll figure that out for yourself soon enough.” She got a plastic container out of the fridge, shook it, then drizzled the contents over the salad. “There’s a baguette in that drawer there. Fresh from this morning.”

He opened the drawer, found the bread. “I didn’t know you’d been into town.”

“I haven’t. I took a couple days off to burrow.” After unwrapping the bread, she cut a few thick slabs. “Baking’s one of the things I do when I’m burrowing, which prevents it from becoming wallowing.”

“You bake bread.” He sniffed at it. “I’ve never known anybody who bakes bread. Or flies a plane. Or can fix a snowmobile engine.”

“As I said, a woman of strange and varied talents. I’ll show you some more of them after dinner. In bed. Top off the wine, will you? We’re about ready here.”

MAYBE IT WAS THE ATMOSPHERE, maybe it was the woman, but he couldn’t remember a more relaxed meal.

She’d said she wasn’t sensible, but he saw good, clear sense in the way she lived, took care of her home. In how she dealt with shock and grief, even anger.

Jacob had said she was strong. Nate was beginning to believe she was the strongest person he’d ever met.

And the most comfortable with herself.

She asked about his day. It took him a while to get his rhythm there. He'd been so accustomed through his marriage to leaving the job outside.

But she wanted to hear about it, to comment, to gossip, to laugh.

Still, under the ease he felt with her, was a frisson of excitement, anticipation, that sexual buzz that heated his blood whenever he was around her.

He wanted to get his hands in her hair, to get his teeth on the nape that shorter length exposed. He could think of that, imagine that, have his belly tighten even as he felt the weight of the day slide off his shoulders.

At one point, she stretched out, laying her feet in his lap as she leaned back to drink more wine. And his mouth went dry, his mind fuzzy.

"I used to shoplift." She tossed a chunk of bread to each dog and immediately made him think of how such an action would have caused his own mother to freak.

And how much he liked watching the dogs field the bread, like a couple of outfielders shagging pop flies.

"You . . . used to steal."

"I don't really equate shoplifting with stealing."

"Taking things, not paying for them."

"Okay, okay." She rolled her eyes. "But it was really more of a rite of passage, at least for me. And I was too slick to get caught like those kids you bagged today. I never took anything I had any use for. It was more: Hmm, wonder if I can get away with this. Then I'd hide the booty in my room and take it all out at night and gloat over it. I'd take it all back within a couple of days, which was nearly as dangerous and thrilling. I think I'd have been a good criminal if I lived somewhere else, because I got that it's not so much what you get as the getting of it."

"You don't still . . ."

"No, but now that you mention it, it might be fun to see if I still have the knack. And if I get busted, I have this in with the chief of police." She dropped her feet, leaned over to pat his thigh while he studied her with those serious, gray eyes. "Don't look so worried. Everybody in town knows I'm crazy and wouldn't hold it against me."

She rose. "Let's get these dishes out of the way. Why don't you let the dogs out? They like a good run this time of day."

Once the kitchen was tidied to her specifications and the dogs settled down on the floor with a couple of tibia-sized rawhide bones, she wandered into the living room to flip through her CD list.

"I don't think Puccini sets the right tone for the next portion of our evening."

"Is that what that was? The opera stuff?"

"Well, I guess that answers the question of your opinion on that area of music."

"I just don't know anything about it. I liked the way it sounded outside when I drove up. Sort of full and strange and heart-wrecking."

"There may be hope for you. Hmm, could pull out Barry White, but it seems pretty obvious. What do you think of Billie Holiday?"

"Ah, dead blues singer?"

She turned to him. "Okay, what *do* you know about music?"

"I know stuff. What's on the radio or, you know, VH1." Her amused stare had him stuffing his hands in his pockets. "I like Norah Jones."

"Norah Jones it is, then." She found a number, then programmed her unit to select it.

"And Black Crowes," he continued in his own defense. "And actually, Jewel's new stuff is pretty hot. Springsteen's still The Boss. And there's—"

“Don’t sweat it.” She laughed and grabbed his hand. “Jones works fine for me.” She began drawing him up the stairs. “If you do me right, I’ll hear my own music anyway.”

“But no pressure.”

“Bet you can handle it.” At the top of the stairs, she turned into him, backed him through a doorway. “Handle me, chief. I’ve been wanting you to.”

“I think about you all the time. At inappropriate moments.”

She hooked her arms around his waist. She’d been needing him, she’d been wanting him. So strange, so new for her to need and want so very specifically. “Such as?”

“Like picturing you naked when I was going over the weekly rotation with Peach. It can be disconcerting.”

“I like you picturing me naked, especially at inappropriate times.” She grazed her teeth over his jaw. “Why don’t you get me that way now?”

“I like you dressed, too. Just FYI,” he said as he tugged her sweater up.

He liked the feel of her body under his hands and how he had to go layer by layer before he reached skin. And how warm that skin was, how smooth. And despite the fleece and wool and cotton, despite all that practicality, there was the secret, sexy scent of her under it.

She touched him, easily and eagerly, stripping those layers from him as he did from her. And she lit something inside him, something more than lust. Something that had been hibernating far too long.

He could lose himself in her without feeling lost. Let himself go without worrying if he’d find his way back. When his mouth closed over hers, tasted both surrender and demand, he had all he needed.

They circled toward the bed, lowered to it. He heard her sigh and wondered if she could be as relieved or as needy as he. She drew him down, arched and offered when his mouth roamed her throat, when his

teeth nipped their way to her nape. He felt her heart kick lightly against his and the firm, welcoming stroke of her hands on his back.

She wanted him to take what he needed. That was rare for her, a woman who preferred seeing to her own needs first—and often last as well. But she wanted to give to him, to ease away that smudge of sorrow that haunted his eyes. And she knew, somehow, she could give, and he would never leave her wanting.

There was more to the heat of his lips, the greed of his hands than a search for satisfaction. If some part of her worried over it, she brushed it aside. She knew there was always plenty of later for worries and regrets.

So she rose to him, found his face with her hands, with her lips, and let the tender mix with the heady.

He moved over her, stirring little quivers, lighting little fires, and finally clasped her hands with his to keep her from arousing him too much, too soon.

He wanted to taste her. Those shoulders, breasts, that wonderful lean line of her. As his lips roamed over her, she shuddered, her breath catching on a moan as her fingers flexed in his.

He stroked his tongue over her, into her, and set her wild.

She came on a gallop, her body going hot and damp as pleasure flooded her. Her system screamed with release, then churned in a desperate quest for more.

He gave her more, shockingly, until she would have clawed and bit to have him, until her body went lax and dazed with the drug he'd sent swimming into her blood.

"Meg." He pressed his mouth to her belly, under her heart, over it.

As her freed hands gripped his hips, he lifted hers.

He was inside her, at last. Linked. Mated. Dropping his forehead to hers, he fought for breath and waited for his head to clear so he would know every second, every movement, every thrill.

She held him, held him close as bodies merged and minds blurred. He said her name again, an instant before he emptied.

SHADOW

Follow a shadow, it still flies you;
Seem to fly it, it will pursue.

BEN JONSON

And coming events cast their shadows
before.

THOMAS CAMPBELL



TWELVE

SHE DIDN'T MIND lying quiet in the dark. In fact, she liked it, especially when her body was loose from sex.

She heard the dogs come in and settle in their usual tangle on the floor at the foot of the bed.

The grandmother clock from her office down the hall bonged nine. Too early to sleep, she thought. And too relaxed to stir.

The perfect time, then, to satisfy some of her curiosity about the man beside her.

“Why did she cheat on you?”

“What?”

“Your wife. Why did she cheat on you?”

She felt him shift, moving his body slightly apart from hers. A shrink, she supposed, would have theories on that.

“I guess I wasn't giving her what she was looking for.”

“You're good in bed. Better than good. Hold on a minute.”

She rolled out of bed and, since she was determined to ferret out some information, dug out a robe. “Be right back,” she said, and headed down to get the wine and fresh glasses.

When she came back, he was up, had pulled on his pants, and was tossing a fresh log on her bedroom fire. "Maybe I should—"

"If *go* is the next word, forget it. I'm not done with you." She sat back on the bed, poured the glasses. "It's time for that long, sad story, Burke. You might as well start with her, since she's probably the root."

"I don't know that she is."

"You were married," Meg prompted. "She was unfaithful."

"That about wraps it up."

But she only cocked her head, held out a glass. He hesitated, but walked back. Accepting the wine, he sat on the bed with her. "I didn't make her happy, that's all. It's not easy being married to a cop."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." Let me count the ways, he thought. "The job pulls at you all the damn time. The hours suck. Every second time you make plans, you have to cancel. You get home late, and your head's still in the case. When you work homicides, you can drag death around with you even when you don't want to."

"Sounds true enough." She sipped her wine. "Tell me this. Were you a cop when she married you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No, no, I'm asking the questions here. How long did you know each other before you took the leap?"

"I don't know. A year." He took a slow sip of wine and watched the fire. "Closer to two, I guess."

"Was she slow? Stupid?"

"No. Jesus, Meg."

"Just pointing out that you'd have to be one or the other to be involved with a cop for a year or more and not clue in to the rules of the road."

“Yeah, maybe. That doesn’t mean you have to like the rules or want to live with them.”

“Sure, people are entitled to change their minds, whenever. No law against it. I’m saying she married you knowing the package. So using the package as an excuse to cheat or cast blame in your direction if things weren’t working doesn’t wash.”

“She married the son of a bitch she was cheating with, so I guess that plays into it.”

“Okay, she fell for somebody else. Shit happens. But that’s on her. Pushing the blame for her actions on you is just bitchy and cheap.”

He looked at her now. “How do you know she did?”

“Because I’m looking at you, cutie. Am I wrong?”

He took a gulp of wine. “No.”

“And you let her.”

“I loved her.”

Those wonderful eyes clouded with sympathy as she touched his cheek, brushed her hand through his messy mass of hair. “Poor Nate. So she broke your heart and kicked you in the balls. What happened?”

“I knew things weren’t right. I ignored it, so that’s on me. Figured it’d smooth out. I should’ve worked at it harder.”

“Coulda, shoulda, woulda.”

He gave a half-laugh. “You’re tough.”

Easing over, she kissed his cheek. “How’s that? So you didn’t pay enough attention to the cracks in the ice as you should have, in your opinion. What then?”

“Bigger cracks. I thought I could take some time off, and we could get out of town, rediscover. Whatever. She wasn’t interested. I wanted kids. We’d talked about it before we got married, but she’d chilled to the

idea. We had some rounds about that. We had some rounds about a lot of things. It's not all her fault, Meg."

"It never is."

"I came home one day. Bad day. Caught a case, drive-by shooting. A woman and her two kids. She's waiting for me. Tells me she wants a divorce, that she's sick of waiting around until I decide to come home. Sick of having her needs and wants and plans take a backseat to mine, and so on. I blew, she blew, and it comes out she's in love with somebody else—who happens to be our frigging lawyer—and she's been seeing him for months. She lays it all out. I've emotionally deserted her, never consider her needs or desires, expect her to alter her plans at the drop of a hat. I'm not there for her anyway, so she wants me out. And has considerably packed up most of my stuff."

"What did you do?"

"I left. I'd just come in from dealing with the useless slaughter of a twenty-six-year-old woman, her ten- and eight-year-old kids. And after Rachel and I yelled at each other for an hour, I didn't have anything left. I packed up my car, drove around awhile and landed at my partner's. Slept on his couch for a few nights."

To Meg's mind, the woman—Rachel—should've been the one sleeping on a friend's couch, after Nate had delivered a good kick in her ass to help her out the door. But she let it pass.

"Meanwhile?"

"She served me with papers; I went to talk to her. But she was done and made it clear. She didn't want to be married to me. We'd divide up the assets and walk away. I was married to the job, anyway, so she was superfluous. That's what she said. End of story."

"I don't think so. A guy like you might get his heart cracked, and

he might mope about it for a while. Then he gets pissed off. Why haven't you?"

"Who says I didn't?" He got up, set his wine aside, walked to the fire. To the window. "Look, it was a bad year. A long, bad year. Or two. My mother got wind of the divorce in progress and that was lots of fun. She came down on me like bricks."

"Why's that?"

"She liked Rachel. She never wanted me to be a cop in the first place. My father died, line of duty, when I was seventeen; she never got over it. She'd handled, pretty well, being a cop's wife. But she couldn't handle being a cop's widow. And she never forgave me for wanting to be what he was. Somewhere in her head she thought that Rachel, that marriage, would turn me into something else. It didn't, and as far as she was concerned, I'd wrecked it. That pissed me off, for a while, so I buried myself in the job and got through."

"And then?"

He turned away from the window, came back to sit. "Rachel got married. I don't know why it was such a kick in the gut, but it hit me pretty hard, and I guess it showed. Jack, my partner, said we were going out, have a couple drinks. Jack was a family man. He'd go home to his wife and kids, but I was down, he was my partner, so he sat with me over a couple of beers and let me vent. He should've been home, instead of walking out of a bar with me in the middle of the night. He should've been home in bed with his wife. But he wasn't. And we come out, and we see it, half a block up. Drug deal going south. Guy starts shooting, and we pursue. Down the alley, and I'm hit."

Shot, she thought. "The scars on your leg and right side."

"I go down, with the leg shot, but I tell Jack I'm okay. I'm calling for

backup on my cell. And I'm pulling myself up, and he shoots Jack. Chest, gut. Jesus. I can't get to him. Can't, and the shooter's coming back. Crazy, hyped up. Fucking crazy to come back instead of run. He hits me again, not much more than a graze really. Just this hot arrow under the ribs. And I emptied my clip in him. I don't remember, but that's what they told me. I remember crawling to Jack, watching him die. I remember the way he looked at me, how he gripped my hand and said my name—like what the hell? And how he said his wife's name, when he knew. I remember that, every night."

"And blame yourself."

"He wouldn't have been there."

"I don't see things that way." She wanted to gather him up, rock him like a child. A mistake for him, she knew, an indulgence for her. So she sat beside him, only laid her hand on his thigh. "Every choice a person makes takes them somewhere. You wouldn't have been there either if your wife had been waiting at home for you. So you could just as easily blame her and the guy she'd been seeing. Or you could just blame the man who shot him, because you know, somewhere you know, he's the one to blame."

"I know all that. Heard it all before. It doesn't change how I feel at three in the morning or three in the afternoon. Or whenever it wants to slap me down."

Might as well say it all, tell her all, whatever it cost.

"I went into a hole, Meg, a big, black, nasty hole. I've been trying to climb out, and sometimes I'm almost there, right at the edge. Then something from below reaches up and drags me back down again."

"You have therapy?"

"The department arranged it."

"Meds?"

He shifted again. "I don't like them."

"Better living through chemistry," she said, but he didn't smile.

"They make me edgy or jumpy or out of myself. I can't do the job on meds, and if I couldn't do the job, the whole thing was pointless. But I couldn't stay in Baltimore either. Couldn't face it every day. Another body, another case—trying to close the ones Jack and I caught together before. Seeing somebody else at his desk. Knowing he left a wife and kids who loved him, and there was nobody who'd have been left if it'd been me instead."

"So you came here."

"To bury myself. But things happened. I saw the mountains. I saw the lights. Northern lights."

He looked at her and realized by the faint smile on her face she understood. He didn't have to say more. So he could say more.

"And I saw you. Similar reaction to all. Something inside me wanted to come back to life. I don't know how it'll be or if I'm any good for you. I'm not a sure bet."

"I like long odds. Let's just see how it plays."

"I should go."

"Didn't I say I wasn't done with you? I'll tell you what we should do. We should go out and jump in the hot tub for a while, then we should come back up here and roll around naked again."

"Go out? As in outside? Get in a tub of water outside where it's about ten degrees?"

"Not in the tub, it isn't. Come on, Burke, get hardy. Get stimulated." And soak away some of those blues, she thought.

"We could stay right here in bed and get stimulated."

But she rolled away. "You'll like it," she promised, and yanked him out of bed.

She was right: He did like it. The insanity of the rushing cold, the painful plunge into hot water, the absurdly sexy sensation of being naked with her under a sky now mad with stars and those magical, shifting lights.

Steam pumped and plumed off the surface, and the dogs once again raced like maniacs. The only downside he could see was having to heave himself out again, race through the bitter air to the house—and the possibility of a heart attack.

“Do you do this a lot?”

“A couple times a week. Gets the blood moving.”

“I’ll say.”

Sinking a little lower, he tipped back his head. And the northern lights filled his vision. “Oh, man. Do you ever get tired of it? Even used to it?”

She mirrored his pose, enjoying the way the cold streamed into her face while the heat saturated her body. “Used to it in a way that makes you proprietary. Like they belong to me, and I just share them with a few lucky others.

“I go out most nights, just to look. There’s nobody out, and everything’s quiet. And yeah, then they belong to me.”

There were shimmers of lavender tonight, swirls of deep blue, hints of red. The music she’d chosen this time had Michelle Branch singing passionately about the light shining in the dark.

Stirred, he found her hand in the heat of the water, linked fingers. “I guess this is perfect,” he murmured.

“Seems like.”

He soaked himself in the lights and the music, in the heat and the music. “Are you going to get weirded out if I fall in love with you?”

She didn’t speak for a moment. “I don’t know. I might.”

"I might. That's a revelation for me. That I'd have enough left inside to head in that direction."

"I'd say you've got plenty left. On the other hand, I don't know as I have enough to begin with to walk that way."

He looked at her then, smiled. "Guess we'll find out."

"Maybe you should just focus on the moment, enjoy it for what it is. Live that."

"Is that what you do? Live for the moment?"

The red was deepening, overpowering the softer, sweeter lavender. "Sure."

"I don't buy it. You can't run your own business without looking ahead, building for the future."

The movement of her shoulders ripped the water. "Business is business. Life is life."

"Uh-uh. Not for people like you and me. Work is life. That's part of our problem or one of our virtues. Depending on how you look at it."

She was studying his face now, frowning. "Well, that's some hot tub philosophy."

He glanced over as she did, toward the sound of the dogs barking fiercely in the woods. "They always carry on like that?"

"No. Might be they flushed a fox or a moose." But her brow remained creased until the dogs quieted. "Too early in the season for bear. And Rock and Bull can handle almost anything. I'll call them back in a minute."

HE'D BROUGHT A COUPLE of hunks of fresh meat. The dogs knew him, so he wasn't worried. But it was best to be prepared. He was here, surveying the house from the shelter of the trees because he believed in being prepared.

He wasn't sure what it meant that the cop and the daughter of his old friend were frolicking in the hot tub. Maybe it was good. An affair would keep them both occupied.

In any case, he didn't think much of the cop. Just a kind of figurehead who hauled in drunks or broke up fights. Nothing much to worry about there.

Then again, he'd stopped worrying the body would be found. He'd stopped thinking about it and had put the whole ugly business out of his mind years ago. It had happened to someone else. It had never happened.

It would never be a problem.

But now it was.

He would deal with it.

He was older now, calmer now. He was more careful now.

Loose ends to snip. If one of them turned out to be Meg Galloway, he'd be sorry. But he had to protect himself.

He supposed it was best if he began to do so right away.

He shouldered his rifle and left the dogs gobbling up the last of the meat.

HE'D PREPARED EVERYTHING. Standing in the darkened office, he saw nothing, thought of nothing he'd missed. They'd need to talk, of course. It was only right, only fair. He was a fair man.

Still, it was dangerous for him to be here at this time of night. If he was seen, he'd need reasons, excuses. Plausible deniability, he thought with a half smile.

It had been so long since he'd done anything dangerous. So long since he'd been the man who climbed mountains and lived large. The taste of it awakened that old excitement.

That's why they'd called him Darth once. For his ruthlessness and love of dark deeds. It's what had pushed him to do the reckless and the sublime. It's what had urged him to kill a friend.

But that had been a different man, he reminded himself. He'd remade himself. What he did now wasn't for pleasure or for curiosity. It was to protect the innocent man he'd become.

He had the right to do that.

So when his old friend came through the back door, he was waiting quietly. Calm as ice.

Max Hawbaker jolted when he saw the man sitting behind the desk. "How'd you get in?"

"You know you leave the back open half the time." He rose, movements relaxed and easy. "I couldn't stand around outside waiting for you. Someone might have seen me."

"All right, all right." Max dragged off his coat, tossed it aside. "It's crazy meeting here at the paper in the middle of the damn night. You could have come to the house."

"Carrie might hear. You never told her any of this. You swore."

"No, I never told her." Max swiped a hand over his face. "Mother of God, you said he'd fallen. You said he went crazy and cut the rope. That he'd gone down in a crevice."

"I know what I said. I couldn't tell you the truth. It was horrible enough, wasn't it? You were banged up and delirious when I got back to you. I saved your life, Max. I got you down."

"But—"

"I saved your life."

"Yes. All right, yes."

"I'll explain everything. Get out that bottle you keep in your drawer. We need a drink."

"All these years. All these years, he's been up there. Like that." He *did* need a drink and grabbed two coffee mugs, then the bottle of Paddy's out of his drawer. "What am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to do?"

"He tried to kill me. I can still hardly believe it." Plausible deniability, he thought again.

"Pat? Pat tried to—"

"Luke—remember? Skywalker, the Jedi knight. The more drugs he took, the crazier he got. It stopped being a game. When he reached the summit, he wanted to jump, and damned near dragged us both off."

"My God. My God."

"He said it was a joke, after, but I knew it wasn't. We were coming down, rappelling down the face, and he took out his knife. Christ God, he started sawing at my rope and laughing. I barely got to the ledge when he cut it through. I took off."

"I can't believe it." Max swallowed whiskey, poured more. "I can't believe any of this."

"I couldn't believe it when it was happening. He'd lost his mind. The drugs, the altitude, hell, I don't know. I got to the ice cave. I was panicked. I was furious. He came after me."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me. I took the easy way out. You'd've done the same."

"I don't know." Max dragged a hand through his thinning hair.

"You *did* take the easy way. When you thought he'd fallen, you agreed to keep your mouth shut. You agreed not to say anything at all, to anyone. Patrick Galloway took off, parts unknown. End of story."

"I don't know why I did it."

"Three thousand came in handy for your paper, didn't it?"

Max flushed, stared into his glass. "Maybe it was wrong to take it. Maybe it was. I just wanted to put it all behind me. I was trying to start something here. I didn't know him that well, not really, and he was gone. We couldn't change that, so it didn't seem to matter. And you said, you said how there'd be an investigation if we told anyone we'd been up there, that he'd died up there."

"There would've been. The drugs would've come out, Max, you know it. You couldn't afford another drug bust. You couldn't afford to have the cops wondering if you—if either of us—had been responsible for his death. However he died, that's still true, isn't it?"

"Yes. But now—"

"I had to defend myself. He came at me with the knife. He came at me. He said the mountain needed a sacrifice. I tried to get away; I couldn't. I grabbed the ax and . . ." He cupped his hands around the mug, pretended to drink. "Oh, God."

"It was self-defense. I'll back you up."

"How? You weren't there."

Max gulped down whiskey as a bead of sweat trickled down his temple. "They're bound to find out we went up there. There's an investigation. Cops are involved now, and we can't avoid it. They'll backtrack. Maybe they'll find the pilot who took us up."

"I don't think so."

"It looks like murder, and they'll dig. Dig enough and they'll identify us. People saw us with him in Anchorage. They might remember. It's better to come forward now, to give them the whole story, explain what happened. Before they charge one or both of us with murder. We've got reputations, positions, professions. Jesus, I've got Carrie and the kids to think of. I need to tell Carrie, to explain all this to her before we go to the police."

"What do you think will happen to our reputations, our positions if this comes out?"

"We can weather it, if we go to the police and tell them everything."

"That's the way you want to play it?"

"It's the way we *have* to play it. I've been thinking about this since they found him. I've been working it all out. We need to go to the cops before the cops come looking for us."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe you are." He set the mug down, rose as if to pace back and forth behind Max's chair. He drew a glove out of his pocket, slid it onto his right hand. "I need a little more time. To think. To put things in order in case . . ."

"Let's take another day." Max reached for the bottle again. "Give us both time. We'll go to Chief Burke first, get him behind us."

"You think that'll work?" His voice was soft now, with a hint of amusement in it.

"I do. I really do."

"This works better for me." From behind, he grabbed Max's right hand, clamped his own over it on the butt of the gun. And hooking his left around Max's throat, jammed the barrel to his temple. His old friend reared back in shock, gulped for air. And he pulled the trigger.

The explosion was huge in the small room and sent his hand to shaking. But he made sure to press Max's limp finger to the trigger. Fingerprints, he thought, his mind bell-clear even as he shuddered. Gun powder residue. He released his hold so Max's head fell to the desk and the gun clattered to the floor beside the chair.

Carefully, with his gloved hand, he turned on the computer, and brought up the document he'd written while waiting for his friend to meet him.

I can't live with it any longer. His ghost has come back to haunt me.
I'm sorry for what I did, for everyone I hurt.

Forgive me.

I killed Patrick Galloway. And now I'll join him in Hell.

Maxwell Hawbaker

Simple, clear-cut. He approved it and left the computer on. The light from the screen and the flare from the desk lamp shone on blood and gray matter.

He stuffed the soiled glove in a plastic bag, pushed that into the pocket of his coat before putting it on. He donned fresh gloves, his hat, scarf, then picked up the coffee mug—the only thing in the room he'd touched without gloves.

Walking into the bathroom, he poured the whiskey down the sink, rinsed the sink with water. He wiped the mug clean, then carried it back to the office and set it down again.

Max's eyes stared at him, and something about it forced bile up into his throat. But he swallowed it down, forced himself to stand and study the details. Satisfied he'd overlooked nothing, he left the way he'd come in.

He took the side streets, making sure his scarf was over his face, his hat low on his head in case some insomniac looked out a window.

Above him, the sky streamed with the northern lights.

He'd done what he'd had to do, he told himself. Now it was over.

When he got home, washed away the scent of cordite and blood that clung to him, he had a single short whiskey as he watched the old glove burn up in the fire.

There was nothing left now, so he put it all cleanly out of his mind.

And slept the sleep of the innocent.

THIRTEEN

CARRIE STOPPED BY The Lodge on the way to the paper to pick up a couple of bacon-and-egg sandwiches. She'd been surprised, then a little annoyed to find Max gone when she'd wakened. Not that it was the first time he'd gone back to the paper at night, and ended up sleeping there. Or left early in the morning before either she or the kids were awake.

But he always left her some sweet or silly note on his pillow when he did.

There'd been no note that morning, and no answer when she'd called the paper.

It wasn't like him. But then, he hadn't been himself for the last several days. That was starting to annoy her, too.

There was a *huge* story brewing, what with Patrick Galloway's body being discovered. *Allegedly* Pat Galloway's body, she reminded herself. They needed to decide how to handle the story, how much space they'd want to devote to it—and if they should get their butts down to Anchorage when the body was finally brought down.

She'd already dug through her old snapshots and had culled several of Pat. They'd want to run his picture along with the story.

And pictures of the three boys who'd found him. She wanted to inter-

view them, certainly Steven Wise, who was a hometown boy. Rather she wanted Max to do so, as he was better at interviewing than she was.

Max wouldn't talk about it. Why, he'd even snapped at her once when she'd brought it up.

Time for him to go in to the clinic and get himself a physical. He tended to get a delicate stomach when he wasn't eating or sleeping right. Which he hadn't been, come to think of it, since news came down about the Galloway business.

Maybe it was because they were of an age, she mused as she pulled up at the curb in front of *The Lunatic*. And that he'd known the man a little. They'd struck up a friendship in the few months Max had been in Lunacy before Pat . . . left. Best to leave it at *left* until they had all the facts.

But she didn't see why Max should take out his middle-aged blues or whatever on her.

She'd actually known Pat longer than Max had, and she wasn't going into a funk. She was sorry, of course, for Charlene and Meg—they'd have to be interviewed, too—and she intended to give them both her condolences in person as soon as she could.

But it was *news*. The sort she and Max should be investigating and writing about for the paper. For God's sake, they had the hometown advantage here. It could mean having their articles picked up by the wire services.

Well, she was going to make that doctor's appointment for him herself, then nag him into keeping it. They had a hell of a lot to do, what with the Galloway story and their plans to cover the Iditarod. Lord, it was already February, and March first nearly on them. They needed to get started if they were going to get any color on the race before deadline.

She needed her man in tip-top shape—and she'd remind him of it at the top of her lungs if need be.

She climbed out of the car with the take-out bag steaming fragrance and already spotted with grease. And shook her head when she saw the faint wash of light from the rear of their storefront operation. Max had fallen asleep at his desk again, she'd bet the bank.

"Carrie."

"Hi, Jim." She stopped on the sidewalk to talk to the bartender. "Early for you."

"Need some supplies." He nodded toward The Corner Store. "Weather's supposed to stay clear, so I thought I'd do a little fishing." He glanced in the paper's window at the light. "Somebody else is starting early."

"You know Max."

"Nose for news," he said tapping his own. "Hey, Professor. Time for school?"

John stopped to make it a trio. "Just about. Thought I'd walk it while I have the chance. Radio said we might break thirty today."

"Spring's coming," Carrie announced. "And this breakfast is getting cold. I'd better get in and give Max a shove off his desk."

"Got anything on the Galloway story?" John asked her.

She dragged out her keys. "If there's anything to get, we'll have it for the next edition. Have a good one."

After letting herself in, she flipped on the lights. "Max! Rise and shine!" She clamped the take-out bag between her teeth to free her hands. She stripped off her coat, hung it on a peg. She stuffed her gloves in one pocket, her hat in the other.

As a matter of habit, she finger-fluffed her flattened hair.

"Max!" she called again, stopping by her desk to turn on her com-

puter. "I got breakfast, though I don't know why I'm so good to you seeing as you've been cranky as a constipated bear lately."

Setting the bag down, she moved to the coffeemaker and carried the carafe into the bathroom to fill. "Bacon-and-egg sandwiches. I just saw Skinny Jim and The Professor out on the street. Well, I saw The Professor at The Lodge first, finishing up his oatmeal before school. Looks pretty chipper for a change. I wonder if he's thinking, now that Charlene knows her old flame's dead, she's going to settle down with him. Poor slob."

She started the coffee, then dug out paper plates, napkins, for the sandwiches. Under her breath she was humming "Tiny Dancer," the Elton John number that had been playing on her favorite classic rock station on the drive in.

"Maxwell Hawbaker, I don't know why I put up with you. If you're going to be sullen and sulky much longer, I'm going hunting for a happier, younger man. See if I don't."

With a plated sandwich in each hand, she started back to Max's little office. "But before I leave you for my wild, sexual affair with a twenty-five-year-old stud, I'm hauling your dumpy ass to the clinic for . . ."

She stopped in the doorway, and her limp hands folded out at the wrists. The sandwiches plopped, one-two, onto the floor. Through the roar in her ears, she heard the screaming.

NATE HAD HIS SECOND CUP of coffee while he discussed the Lego castle he and Jesse were building as their morning project. He'd had the first at Meg's, and most of his mind was still back there with her.

She'd be flying north today, delivering supplies, then stopping off at Fairbanks to buy items for the locals here. For her fee of five percent

tacked onto the purchase price, they could save themselves the round trip to one of the cities—a choice that wasn't always possible in winter—and have her do the shopping, the transporting and the delivery.

It was, she'd told him, a small but steady portion of her business.

He'd gotten a look at her office that morning, too. It was just as bold and stylish as the rest of the place, and set up for comfort and efficiency.

A sturdy, crate-style desk, a tough-looking black computer with a wide, flat screen. Leather executive chair, he remembered, an old-fashioned freestanding clock and a lot of black-framed, arty pencil sketches on the wall.

There'd been a huge plant, something that had looked like long, green tongues—in a glossy, red pot, snow-white file cabinets and a star-shaped crystal suncatcher hanging from a chain in front of the window.

He'd found it both practical and female.

They'd made no plans for later. She shook off the notion of plans, and he thought that was just as well. He needed some time to think. About what direction they were or might be taking.

His scorecard with women was pitifully low. Maybe he had a chance to change that with her. Or maybe it was just the moment, an interim sort of thing. There was a lot waking up inside him after a long, dark sleep. How did he know what was real? Or if it was real, if he could keep it that way.

If he wanted to.

Better, for now, to drink his coffee, eat his breakfast and build a plastic castle with a kid who was just happy to have the company.

"It should have a bridge," Jesse said. "The up-and-down bridge."

"Drawbridge?" Nate pulled his attention back. "We might be able to work that. We could get some fishing wire."

The boy looked up at him and beamed. "Okay!"

"Here you go, chief."

He caught Rose's wince when she set his plate down. "Okay?"

"Back's a little stiff. Had the same thing with this one." She ruffled her son's hair.

"Maybe you ought to see the doctor."

"I've got a checkup today. Jesse, you let Chief Burke eat his breakfast while it's hot."

"We need fishing wire for the bridge."

She left her hand on his head another moment. "We'll get you some."

She looked over as Skinny Jim stumbled in the door. "Jim?"

"Chief. Chief. You gotta come. Come quick. At the paper. It's Max. Oh, my God."

"What happened?" But he held up a hand even as he said it. He could see from the ghost white pallor of Jim's face, the wide, glazed eyes that it was bad. And beside him the little boy was watching with his rosebud mouth opened in a stunned O. "Wait."

He got up fast, grabbed his coat. "Outside." And he gripped the man's trembling arm, pulling him out the door. "What is it?"

"He's dead. Sweet Jesus God. Max is dead, shot dead. Half his head—half his head's gone."

Nate yanked Jim up when the man's legs buckled. "Max Hawbaker? You found him?"

"Yes. No. I mean, yes, it's Max. Carrie. Carrie found him. We heard her screaming. She went inside, and The Professor and I were standing there talking for a minute, and she started screaming like somebody was killing her. We ran in, and . . . and . . ."

Nate continued to drag him down the street. "You touch anything?"

"What? I don't think. No. The Professor said to go get you, to go to The Lodge and get you. That's what I did." He was swallowing fast and often. "Think I'm going to be sick."

“No, you’re not. You’re going to go to the station house, get Otto. You’re going to tell him what you just told me and that I need a camera, some evidence bags, some plastic gloves, the crime scene tape. Just tell him I need crime scene equipment. Can you remember that?”

“I—yeah. I’ll do it. I’ll do it right now.”

“Then stay there. You stay at the station until I come to talk to you. Don’t talk to anybody else. Go.”

Nate angled toward the paper and quickened his pace. His brain had gone on auto, and preserving the scene was key. Right now, as far as he knew, there were two civilians in there, which meant it was already compromised.

He yanked open the door, and saw John kneeling on the floor in front of a sobbing Carrie. John was still wearing his outdoor gear, minus his gloves, and was pressing a glass of water to Carrie’s lips. He looked up at Nate, and a shadow of relief moved across his shocked face.

“Thank God. Max. Back there.”

“Stay here. Keep her here.”

He started toward the back office. He could smell it. You could always smell it. No, he corrected, not true. There would be no smell of death in the ice cave where Galloway waited. Nature would have covered it.

But he could smell Max Hawbaker’s death even before he saw it. As he could smell, beneath it, the fried eggs and bacon from the two sandwiches on the floor just over the threshold.

His gaze scanned the room from the doorway, the placement of the body, the gun, the nature of the wound. It said suicide. But he knew the first murmur from a crime scene was often a lie.

He moved in, keeping to the edges of the room, noting the pattern of the blood spatter on the chair, the computer screen, the keyboard.

And the pool of it from the head wound that had soaked the desk and dripped onto the floor before death had turned off the pump.

Powder burns, he noted. The barrel of the .22 had probably been directly against the temple. No exit wound. And unlike Jim's babbling statement, the insult to the face was minor. The bullet had left a relatively neat hole before it entered the brain and bounced around gleefully, like a pinball hitting top score.

Dead, most likely, before his head had hit the desk.

Noting the swirling pattern of color from the screen saver, Nate drew a pen out of his pocket and moved in close enough to tap the mouse.

The document sprang on-screen.

His eyes narrowed as he read it, stayed narrowed as he looked down at the body of the man who claimed to have killed Patrick Galloway.

He moved back to the doorway, then signaled for Otto to wait when the deputy rushed in the front. Nate walked to Carrie, and like John, crouched down.

"Carrie."

"Max. Max." She raised red, horrified eyes to his. "Max is dead. Somebody—"

"I know. I'm so sorry." He clasped his hands over hers. "I'm going to help him now. I need you to go over to the station and wait for me."

"But Max. I can't leave Max."

"You can leave him with me. I'm going to take care of him. John's going to help you get into your coat. And in a minute, he and Otto will take you over. I'm going to be there as soon as I can. So you go over there, and you wait for me."

She stared dully, shock still glazing her eyes. "Wait for you."

"That's right." She'd do what he said. The shock and the horror would make her obedient. For a while. "Otto?"

He rose, moved toward the back again.

"Merciful God," Otto said under his breath.

"I need you to take both of them over. Jim's still there?"

"Yeah." He swallowed audibly. "Jesus, chief."

"Keep them there, and keep them separated. Let Peach take care of Carrie for now. I want you to call Peter in, tell him to come straight here."

"I'm here now. Peter can ride herd over at the station while—"

"I need you to start taking statements. You'll handle that better than Peter. Start with Jim. I want the doctor here, too. You get in touch with Ken and tell him to come straight here. I want him standing in. I don't want any mistakes on this, and I want it kept quiet until we have this scene secured and the statements on file. Use a tape recorder. Get the time and the date on it and take notes as a backup. Keep everyone there, everyone in separate places until I get back. You got that?"

"Yeah." He swiped a hand over his mouth. "Why the hell would Max kill himself? That's what it is, isn't it? Suicide?"

"Let's work the scene and the witnesses, Otto. Let's take it a step at a time."

When he was alone, he picked up the camera Otto had brought in to record the scene. He went through one pack of film, reloaded, and shot a second.

Then taking out a notebook, he wrote down details. The fact that the rear door was unlocked, the make and caliber of the gun, the exact wording of the note on-screen. He did a rough sketch of the room, adding in the position of the body, the gun, the lamp, the bottle of whiskey and the single mug.

He had on his gloves and was sniffing at both bottle and mug when Peter came in.

“Take the crime scene tape, Peter. I want you to use it on the front and back doors.”

“I got here as soon as I could—” Otto broke off when he reached the doorway.

When his skin tinged with green, Nate snapped at him. “You don’t get sick in here. You have to puke, you do it outside and take that tape with you.”

Peter angled his body away, looked hard at the wall and breathed through his mouth. “Otto said Max killed himself, but I didn’t think—”

“We haven’t determined that. What we have determined is Max is dead. Right now, this is a crime scene, and I want it secured. Nobody gets in here but the doctor. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Peter fumbled the yellow tape out of the box Otto had thrown together and staggered back outside.

“State boys are going to want you, Max,” he murmured. “It looks like you’re going to tie things up for them, with a fucking bow on top. Maybe that’s just what you did. But I’m not a big believer in bows.”

He walked out and, with his hands still gloved, called Sergeant Coben in Anchorage.

“I’m not leaving this body sitting here until you can fly in from Anchorage,” he said after he’d given Coben the essentials. “You’ve run me by now. You know I’m qualified. I’ve secured and recorded the scene, and I’ve got a doctor on the way in. I’m gathering the evidence and having the body moved to the clinic. Everything I’ve got’s at your disposal once you get here.”

He waved Ken inside when the doctor came to the door. “And I expect the same cooperation regarding the Galloway investigation. This is my town, sergeant. We both want to nail this down, but we’re going to have to share the hammer. I’ll be expecting you.”

He hung up. "I need you to look at the body. Can you give me an approximate time of death?"

"So it's true. Max is dead." Ken slipped his fingers under his glasses, pressed them to his eyes. "I've never had to do this sort of thing before, but I should be able to give you a ballpark."

"Good enough. Put these on." Nate handed him a pair of gloves. "It's not pretty," he added.

Ken stepped in, then took a moment to visibly steady himself. "I've dealt with gunshot wounds. But nothing quite like this, not when I knew the victim. Why the hell'd he do this to himself? The winters can prey on people, but he's been through them before. Worse than this. He wasn't suffering from depression. Carrie would've told me, or I'd've seen it myself." He flicked a quick glance at Nate.

"I never thought about killing myself. Too much effort. If I change my mind, I'll try to let you know first."

"Feeling better these days?"

"Some days. Ready now?"

Ken squared his shoulders. "Yeah, thanks." He stepped over. "Can I touch him? Move him at all?"

He had the photographs and had outlined the body in crime scene tape for lack of something better. So he nodded.

Leaning down, Ken lifted one of Max's hands. Pinched the skin. "I'd do better if I could get him to the clinic, strip the body, do a more thorough exam."

"You'll get your chance. Give me an approximation."

"Well, digging back into my student days, and figuring the temperature of the room, the state of rigor, I'd guess between eight and twelve hours. That's really rough, Nate."

"So, that would be somewhere between nine P.M and one A.M. Good

enough. We might be able to close that in some with Carrie's statement. I'm going to send Peter for a body bag. I need you to put the body somewhere secure—and cold."

"I've got the area we use as a makeshift morgue when we have a death."

"That'll work. I don't want you talking about this to anyone. Keep him under wraps until I get there."

He supervised the transfer of the body, made a printout of the note on the computer before shutting it down. Once he'd locked the doors, he started back to the station.

Hopp ran him down.

"I need to know what the holy hell is going on."

"I'm still working that out. What I can tell you is that Max Hawbaker was found dead at his desk at the paper, apparently from a gunshot wound to the head. Possibly self-inflicted."

"Oh, God. Oh, *goddamn* it. Possibly?" She trotted to keep up with him and plucked at his sleeve when he outdistanced her. "What do you mean possibly? You think he was murdered?"

"I didn't say that. I'm looking into it, Hopp. The State Police have been notified and will be here in a few hours. When I have answers, I'll let you know. Let me do my job." He hauled open the door of the station. And shut it in her face.

He took the time in the Arctic entry to pull off his gear and try to clear his mind. The sun was up now, and the day as clear as the forecasters had promised.

They'd be heading up to retrieve Galloway today, he thought. And maybe, they'd be flying in to pick up the body of his killer. Two for one.

He'd see about that.

He opened the inner door and found John sitting in one of the wait chairs, reading a paperback copy of *Watership Down*. John got to his

feet, stuffed the book in his back pocket without marking his place. "Peach has Carrie back in your office. Otto's with Jim back in a cell. Not locked up," he added quickly. Then sighed. "Hard to think."

"Otto get your statement?"

"Yes. There wasn't that much to tell. I left The Lodge, took a walk, heading to school. I saw Jim and Carrie, stopped for a minute to talk to them. Carrie had breakfast in a bag—and the light was on in Max's office. You could see the backwash of it through the window. She went in, and Jim and I stood there another couple minutes talking. He was going to pick up some bait. Going fishing. He likes to rib me about it because I don't hunt or fish."

He began to rub the left side of his jaw as if it ached. "Next thing we knew, Carrie's screaming. We ran in, and we saw him. Saw Max."

He closed his eyes, drew a couple of breaths. "I'm sorry. I've never seen anyone dead before—not until they were . . . prepared for viewing."

"Take your time."

"I, ah, I pulled Carrie back. Didn't know what else to do. Yanked her away, and I said, 'Jim, the chief's at The Lodge. Go get him.' Carrie was hysterical. I sat her down, held her down at first because she wanted to go back to Max. Then I got her some water and just stayed there until you came in. That's it."

"Any of you go in the room?"

"No. Well, Carrie was just inside the room. She was standing maybe, I don't know, a step or two inside. She was holding a paper plate in each hand. She'd dropped the sandwiches and was just standing there screaming, with a plate in each hand."

"How long between the time you heard her screaming and the time you reached her?"

"Maybe thirty seconds. Nate, she sounded like someone was carving

her up with a knife. We both reacted. We were through the door fast. Probably less than thirty.”

“Okay. I may need to talk to you again, and the State cop who’s coming in will want to. Stay reachable. And I’d like to keep this quiet. Not much chance of it, but I’d like to.”

“I’m going to go on into school.” He checked his watch in an absent gesture. “Already late, but maybe it’ll keep my mind off it. I’ll be there most of the day.”

“Appreciate the help.”

“He always seemed so harmless,” John said as he reached for his coat. “Benign, if you know what I mean. Always looking for a story in a place like this. Town gossip, local color, births. Deaths. I’d have said he was a contented man, running his little paper, raising his children.”

“Hard to see under the surface sometimes.”

“No doubt about it.”

He went in to Jim next, corroborated John’s story. Once he’d sent the man on his way, Nate sat down on the bunk next to Otto.

“I’ve got Peter down at the clinic. I’m going to leave him there for now. He’s a little shaken, and I was hard on him. I need you to start a canvass. Work your way out from the paper, talk to people who live nearby. Ask if anyone heard a gunshot last night. We’re working on between nine P.M. and one A.M. right now. I want to know if anyone saw Max or anyone else around the building. When, where, who. If they heard a car, if they heard voices, if they heard or saw any damn thing, I want to know.”

“State coming in?”

“Yeah.”

Otto’s face settled into bulldog lines. “I don’t think that’s right.”

“Right or not, that’s the way it is. Give Peter an hour, then pull him

in to work the canvass with you. Ken can be trusted to keep the body locked away. Did you talk to Carrie?”

“Tried to. Didn’t get much.”

“It’s all right. I’ll talk to her now.” He rose. “Otto, did Max know Patrick Galloway?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned. “Yeah, sure he did. It’s hard remembering back that far. But it seems to me Max came along the summer before Pat disappeared. Was murdered,” he corrected. “Max worked for a paper in Anchorage and decided he wanted his own rag, small-town deal. That’s the story, anyway.”

“Okay. Start the canvass.”

As Nate approached his office door, he thought he heard singing. Crooning, he corrected, the way you might croon to a baby. Opening his door, he saw Carrie stretched out on a blanket on the floor, her head pillowed in Peach’s ample lap. Peach stroked her hair and crooned.

She looked up when Nate entered. “Best I could do,” she murmured. “Poor thing’s broken to bits. Sleeping now. I, ah, happened to find some Xanax in your desk drawer. I cut one in half for her.”

He had to ignore the twist of embarrassment. “I need to talk to her.”

“Hate to wake her up. Still, she should be a little calmer than she was when Otto tried. You want me to stay?”

“No, but don’t go far.”

When he sat on the floor, Peach closed a hand over his wrist. “I guess I don’t have to tell you to be gentle. You’d know, and you’ve got that in you. But all the same . . .” She trailed off, stroked Carrie’s cheek. “Carrie? Sweetie, you need to wake up now.”

Carrie opened her eyes, and they were unfocused and dull. “What is it?”

“Nate’s got to talk to you, baby. Can you sit up?”

"I don't understand." She rubbed her eyes like a child. "I had a dream . . ." She focused on Nate now, and those eyes filled. "Not a dream. Max. My Max." When her voice broke, Nate took her hand.

"I'm sorry, Carrie. I know this is hard, and I'm sorry. You want some water? Anything?"

"No. No. There's nothing." She pushed herself up, buried her face in her hands. "There's nothing."

Nate rose, helped Peach struggle her way to her feet. "I'll be right outside if you need me," she said and went out, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Do you want a chair, or do you want to stay where you are?"

"I feel like I'm still in a dream. Everything's floating inside my head."

He decided the floor would do, and he sat again. "Carrie, I need to ask you some questions. Look at me. What time did Max leave the house last night?"

"I don't know. I didn't know he was gone until I got up this morning. I was annoyed. He always leaves me a note on the pillow when he goes in to work at night or early in the morning."

"When did you see him last?"

"I saw—this morning—I saw—"

"No." He took her hand again, tried to lead her away from that image. "Before. Was he home for dinner?"

"Yes. We had chili. Max made it. He likes to brag about his chili. We all had dinner together."

"What did you do then?"

"We watched TV. Or I did. The kids watched a little, then Stella got on the phone with one of her friends, and Alex got on his computer. Max was restless. He said he was going to read a book, but he wasn't. I asked him what was up, and he was irritable with me."

A tear spilled over, tracked a lonely line down her cheek. "He said he was working something out, and couldn't I leave him the hell alone for five minutes. We got snappy with each other. Later, when the kids were in bed, he said he was sorry. He had something on his mind. But I was still mad and shrugged him off. We hardly spoke to each other when we went to bed."

"What time was that?"

"About ten-thirty, I guess. But no, that's not right. I went up to bed then, and he muttered something about staying up to watch CNN or something. I didn't pay attention because I was annoyed. I went up to bed early because I was mad and didn't want to be with him. Now he's gone."

"He was still home at ten-thirty. You didn't hear him leave?"

"I just went straight to bed. I fell asleep. When I got up this morning, I knew he hadn't come to bed. He always pulls the sheets out from the bottom of the mattress. Drives me crazy. I thought maybe he'd been sulky and slept on the couch, but he wasn't there. I got the kids off to Ginny's. It was her turn to drive them in. Oh, my God. My God, the kids."

"Don't worry. They're being looked after. I'm going to get all of you home once we're done here. You went into town."

"I decided to forgive him. You can't stay mad at Max. And I was going to make him an appointment for a checkup. He's been off his feed for the last few days. I stopped to get us some breakfast, then I drove to the paper. I saw Jim and John, then I went in and found him. I found him. How could anybody hurt Max that way?"

"Carrie, did he ever leave the back door of the paper unlocked?"

"All the time. He never remembered to lock up. Why bother, he'd say. If somebody really wanted to get in, they'd just kick the door in anyway."

"Did he own a handgun?"

"Sure. A few of them. Everybody does."

"A .22? A .22 Browning pistol."

"Yes. Yes. I need to get my kids."

"In a minute. Where did he keep that gun?"

"That one? In the glove compartment of his truck. He liked to use it to target shoot, mostly. Sometimes he'd like to stop on the way home from work and shoot a few cans. Working out a story idea, he'd say."

"Did he ever say anything to you about Patrick Galloway?"

"Of course. Everybody's talking about Galloway these days."

"I mean specifically. About himself and Galloway."

"Why would he? They only knew each other for a little while before Pat left."

Nate weighed his options. She was next-of-kin and had to be told. It might as well be now. "There was a note written on his computer."

She knuckled at tears. "What kind of a note?"

Nate rose again, opened the file he'd put on his desk. "I'm going to let you read a copy of it. It's not going to be easy, Carrie."

"I want to see it now."

Nate handed it to her, waited. He saw what little color that had come back into her face drain off again. But her eyes, rather than going dull with shock, went hot.

"This is wrong. This is crazy. This is a *lie!*" As if to prove it, she sprang to her feet and ripped the printout into shreds. "This is a terrible lie, and you should be ashamed. My Max never hurt a living soul in his life. How dare you? How dare you try to say he killed someone and killed *himself.*"

"I'm just showing you what was on his computer."

"And I'm telling you it's a lie. Somebody killed my husband, and

you'd better do your job and find out who did this. Whoever hurt my Max put this lie on there, and if you believe it for one second, you can go to hell."

She ran out of the room, and seconds later, he heard her fractured weeping.

He slipped out, saw her enveloped in Peach's arms. "See that she and her kids get home," he said quietly, then eased back into his office.

For a time he just stood, studying the torn shreds of paper on the floor.

FOURTEEN

HOPP KEPT AN OFFICE at Town Hall. It wasn't much bigger than a broom closet and was furnished in that same haphazard style, but since Nate wanted to keep the meeting formal, he arranged to meet her there.

As she was wearing full makeup and a dark suit, he figured they were on the same page.

"Chief Burke." The words were two quick bites, the gesture of her hand toward a chair a short jab.

He could smell the coffee from the mug on her desk, and the pot behind her on the short counter was nearly full. He wasn't asked to help himself.

"I'm going to apologize for being abrupt with you this morning," he began, "but you got in my way at the wrong time."

"I'll remind you that you work for me."

"I work for the people of this town. And one of them's stretched out on a table in our part-time morgue. That means he's my priority, mayor. You're not."

The mouth she'd painted a bold crimson tightened. He heard her long, hissing inhale, and the slow expulsion of air. "Be that as it may, I *am* mayor of this town, which makes its residents my chief concern as

well. I was hardly sniffing around for gossip and resent being treated as if I were.”

“And be that as *it* may, I had a job to do. Part of that was the full intention of giving you a report once I’d completed my preliminary. Which I’m prepared to do now.”

“I don’t like your snippy attitude.”

“Right back at you.”

This time her mouth dropped open, her eyes flared. “Obviously your mother didn’t teach you to respect your elders.”

“Guess it didn’t take. Then again, she doesn’t like me either.”

She drummed her fingers on her desk—short, practical and unpainted nails that didn’t go with the red mouth or business suit. “You know what pisses me off right now?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“The fact that I’m not mad at you anymore. I like holding onto a good mad. But you had a point earlier about the people of this town being your priority. I respect that, because I know you mean it. Max was a friend, Ignatious. A good one. I’m upset about this.”

“I know. I’m sorry for that, and I’ll apologize again for not being more . . .”

“Sensitive, courteous, forthcoming?”

“Take your pick.”

“All right, let’s move on.” She pulled out a tissue, blew her nose enthusiastically. “Get yourself some coffee, and tell me what’s what.”

“Thanks, but I’ve already downed about a gallon. As far as I can piece together, Max left his house sometime after ten-thirty last night. He’d had a spat with his wife—nothing too serious, but she claims he’d been off the last few days. She pinpoints it to the time the news hit about the discovery of Patrick Galloway’s body.”

Hopp's forehead wrinkled; the lines around her mouth deepened. "Why would that be, I wonder. I don't recall they knew each other all that well. Seems to me they hit it off well enough, but Max hadn't been here long when Patrick went missing."

"I don't have any evidence, as yet, that points to Max making any stops before going to his office at the paper. Sometime, if the doc's estimate is correct, before one A.M., he—or person or persons unknown—put a bullet in his brain through his right temple."

"Why would anybody—" She caught herself, waved him on. "Sorry. Go ahead and finish."

"From the on-scene evidence, the deceased was sitting at his desk at the time. The back door was unlocked, which I'm told was fairly habitual. His computer was on, as was the desk light. He had a partial bottle of Paddy's whiskey on the desk and a coffee mug with about a fingerful of whiskey left in it. It'll be analyzed, but I didn't detect any other substance in the mug."

"God. I just saw him yesterday morning."

"Did he seem off to you?"

"I don't know. Can't say I was paying attention." She pressed steepled hands to the bridge of her nose, held them there a moment, then dropped them. "Now that you mention it, maybe he was distracted. But I can't think of any reason he'd do this to himself. He and Carrie had a good marriage. His kids aren't in any more trouble than kids that age are. He loved running the paper. Maybe he was sick? Maybe he'd found out he had cancer or something and couldn't face it."

"Clean bill of health last checkup at the clinic. Six months ago. The weapon found on scene was his, duly registered. According to his wife it was one he most often kept in the glove compartment of his truck. For target shooting. There was no sign of struggle."

“Poor Max.” She grabbed another tissue, but rather than use it, just balled it in her fist. “What could have driven him to end his own life, to do that not just to himself, but his family?”

“There was a note on his computer. It claimed he’d killed Patrick Galloway.”

“What?” The coffee she’d just lifted lapped at the top of the mug as she set it down again. “Ignatious, that’s crazy. Max? That’s just crazy.”

“He used to climb, didn’t he? More fifteen, sixteen years ago than now?”

“Well, yes. Yes. But half the people in town do or did some climbing.” She laid the flat of her hands on the desk. “I will not believe that Max killed anyone.”

“You were prepared to believe he killed himself.”

“Because he’s *dead*. Because everything I’ve heard points to it. But murder? That’s nonsense.”

“There’ll be tests run to verify the .22 in evidence was used. Fingerprints, powder residue. I’m going to tell you that I believe the tests will substantiate what appears to be a suicide, and that in all likelihood his death will be officially ruled same—just as the Galloway homicide will be closed.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“I’m also going to tell you I’m not convinced.”

“Ignatious.” She pressed her hand to her temple. “You’re confusing me.”

“Awfully neat, isn’t it? A computer note? Anybody can tap a few keys. Guilt kills him after all these years? Well, he lived with it pretty well up to now. Carrie said he left her a note on his pillow whenever he decided to go into work late or early. A man does that, but he doesn’t leave a personal note for her when he decides to kill himself?”

“You’re saying . . .”

“Easy to get a gun out of a glove compartment, if you know it’s there.”

Not that hard to stage a suicide if you think it through and keep your blood cool.”

“You think . . . God, you think Max was murdered?”

“I didn’t say that, either. I said I’m not convinced this is what it looks like on the surface. So, if this is ruled a suicide and the Galloway case is closed before I am convinced, I’m going to keep looking into it. You’re paying me, so you ought to know if I’m spending official time chasing a wild goose.”

She stared at him, then he heard her take another of those long, audible breaths. “What can I do to help?”

SERGEANT ROLAND COBEN struck Nate as a solid cop, a twenty-year man with a lot of cases under his belt. He was about six feet, a little thick through the middle, a little tired around the eyes. He had a crisp white-blond crew cut, a regulation shine on his boots and a wad of cherry-scented gum in his mouth.

He’d brought a two-man crime scene unit with him, and both officers were busy combing Max’s office while Coben studied the photographs Nate had taken.

“Who’s been on this scene since the body was discovered?”

“Me, the town doctor and one of my deputies. Before I let them in, I took the pictures, ran the outline, bagged evidence. Everyone gloved up. The scene’s secure, sergeant.”

Coben looked over at the grease stains on the rug just inside the inner door. Nate had dutifully bagged the sandwiches as well. “That as far as the wife got?”

“According to her and the two witnesses, yes. And no one but me touched anything but the body.”

Coben made some sound of assent and studied the note on the computer screen. "We'll take the computer with us, along with the evidence you gathered. Let's have a look at the body."

Nate led him out the back.

"Worked Homicide Outside, didn't you?"

"I did."

Coben climbed easily into Nate's four-wheel. "That's handy. Lost your partner, I hear."

"That's right."

"Took a couple of hits yourself."

"I'm still standing."

Coben dutifully hooked his seat belt. "A lot of medical leave, on and off, your last year with Baltimore."

Nate leveled one quiet look. "I'm not on medical leave now."

"Your lieutenant says you're a good cop and maybe you lost some of your edge, some of your confidence, after your partner went down. Turned in your badge down there last fall and broke off with the department shrink."

Nate stopped in front of the clinic. "You ever lose a partner?"

"No." Coben waited a minute. "But I've lost a couple of friends, line of duty. Just trying to get a feel for you, Chief Burke. City cop from Outside, one with your experience, might get his back up when he has to pass a big case on to State authorities."

"He might. And a State cop might not have the same investment in this town, and what goes on here, as its chief of police."

"You haven't been chief very long." He stepped out of the car. "Maybe we both got a point. The department's been able to handle the press on The Ice Man—they just love to name these violent-crime victims."

"Always do."

“Well, they’re holding the line on the media now, but that changes once the team brings him down. It’s going to be big, fat news, Chief Burke. The sort the national media loves to cover. Now you’ve got the body of the man claiming to be his killer, and there’s more news. Quicker we wrap this up, the better it is for everybody. The neater we wrap it, the better.”

Nate stayed on the opposite side of the car. “Are you worried about me going to the media, stirring up publicity for myself, for the town?”

“Just a comment, that’s all. There was a lot of press out of that shooting in Baltimore. A lot of it focused on you.”

Nate felt the heat rising in him, the long, slow simmer of anger that bubbled from gut to throat. “So you figure I must like seeing my name in print, seeing my face on TV, and a couple of dead men give me the opportunity to tune that up.”

“You could earn yourself some points, seems to me, if you’re planning on going back to Baltimore.”

“Then it’s pretty lucky for me that I happened to come here just in time for all this to go down.”

“Doesn’t hurt to be in the right place at the right time.”

“Are you trying to provoke me, or are you just a natural asshole?”

Coben’s lips quirked. “Could be both. Mostly I’m just trying to get a feel for things.”

“Then let’s clear this up. This is your investigation. That’s procedure. But this is still my town; these are still my people. That’s a fact. And whether or not you trust me, like me, or want to take me to dinner and a movie, I’m going to do my job.”

“Then we’d better take a look at the body.”

Coben headed inside, and fighting off temper, Nate followed.

There was only one person in the waiting area. Bing looked embar-

rassed, then irritated to have been found sitting on one of the plastic chairs.

“Bing,” Nate said with a nod, and the man grunted before jerking the ancient copy of *Alaska* in front of his face.

“Doc’s with a patient,” Joanna said, giving Coben a good once-over. “Sal Cushaw cut her hand on a hacksaw, and he’s stitching her up. She needs a tetanus shot, too.”

“We need the keys to the morgue,” Nate told her, and her eyes darted between him and Coben.

“Doc’s got them, said nobody could go in there but you.”

“This is Sergeant Coben, with the State Police. Would you go get the keys?”

“Sure. Okay.”

She scurried away just as Bing began to mutter. “Don’t need no storm troopers in Lunacy. Take care of our own.”

Nate simply shook his head as Coben glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t bother,” he murmured.

“You sick, Bing?” Nate leaned back on the counter. “Or just passing the time?”

“My business is my business. Just like if a man wants to blow his head off, that’s his business. Cops can’t leave well enough alone.”

“You’re right about that. We’re just pains in the ass with badges. When’s the last time you talked to Max?”

“Never had much to say to him. Pip-squeak.”

“I heard he bitched at you about plowing in his driveway, so you plowed it out and dumped the snow on top of his car.”

Bing’s grin spread in the mass of his beard. “Maybe. Don’t think he blew his head off over it, though.”

"You're a mean bastard, Bing."

"Damn right."

"Chief?" Joanna came back to the counter, held out the keys. "It's the one with the yellow mark. Doc said he'd come back as soon as he's finished with Sal."

"Hey! I'm next in line here." Bing rattled his magazine. "Hawbaker's not going to get any deader."

Joanna folded her lips. "You ought to have some respect, Bing."

"What I got is hemorrhoids."

"Tell the doc to finish with all his patients," Nate said. "Where is it?"

"Oh, sorry. Straight back, then the first door on the left."

They walked back in silence, and Nate used the key to unlock the door. They stepped into a room with a wall of metal shelves and two metal tables. Nate switched on the overhead and noted both tables were the style used for autopsies or funeral parlor prep rooms.

"I'm told they use this as a part-time morgue. There's no funeral parlor in town, no undertaker. They bring one in when they need one, and he'll prep a body for burial here."

He walked to the table where Max was laid out, uncovered to preserve any possible trace evidence, as per Nate's orders. The body's hands were bagged.

"Nails are chewed down below the quick on his right hand," Nate pointed out. "Cut on his bottom lip. Looks like he bit it."

"No defensive wounds evident. Powder burns around the wound. Can we confirm he was right-handed?"

"We can. We have."

Sealing the hands meant preserving them for residue testing. There were photographs of the body, of the scene, even of the outer door from

every possible angle. Witness statements had been taken and typed up while the witnesses were fresh, and the building locked tight and sealed with police tape.

Burke had run a clean scene, Coben thought, and had saved him considerable work.

“We’ll go over him here to see if we can find any trace evidence. Did you go through his pockets?”

“Wallet, open roll of Tums, loose change, book of matches, notebook, pencil. He had his driver’s license, credit cards, about thirty in cash, family pictures in his wallet. Cell phone, another book of matches and a pair of wool gloves in the pockets of the coat in his office.”

Nate slipped his hands into his own pockets, continued to study the body. “I went through the truck parked outside the scene. Registration in the name of the vic and his spouse. Maps, operator’s manual for the truck, an open pack of ammo for the .22, a roll of breath mints, several pens and pencils and another notebook in the glove compartment. A lot of hand-scribbled notes in the books—reminders, ideas for articles for the paper, observations, phone numbers. First-aid and emergency kits in the back of the cab. The truck was unlocked, keys in the ignition.”

“Keys in the ignition?”

“Yeah. Statements from acquaintances indicate he had a habit of leaving the keys in there and rarely remembered or thought to lock up. All removed items are bagged, labeled, listed. I’ve got them locked up back at the station.”

“We’ll take them, and him, in. Let the ME make his determinations. But it looks like suicide. I’m going to want to talk to the wife, the two witnesses, and anyone who might be aware of his relationship with Patrick Galloway.”

"He didn't leave his wife a note."

"Sorry?"

"Nothing personal. Nothing detailed in the computer note, either."

Irritation flickered in Coben's eyes. "Look, Burke, you and I both know that suicide notes aren't nearly as typical as Hollywood makes them. The ME will make the call, but from where I'm standing this is suicide. The note links him to Galloway. We'll pursue that, see if we can find a trail back to confirm. I'm not going to cut corners on this, or on Galloway, but I'm not going to kick, either, if it turns out both cases fall closed in my lap."

"It doesn't add up for me."

"Check your math."

"Do you have a problem with me pursuing this, *quietly*," he added with emphasis, "from a different angle?"

"It's your time to waste. But don't step on my toes."

"I still remember how to dance, Coben."

IT WAS HARD TO KNOCK on Carrie's front door. The intrusion on her grief seemed impossibly callous. He remembered, too well, how Beth had crumbled when he'd first seen her after Jack's death.

And he'd been helpless, bound to a hospital bed, dopey from surgery, drowning in grief and guilt and rage.

There was no grief now, he reminded himself. A little guilt for the way he'd had to handle her earlier. But no rage. Now he was just a cop.

"She's going to resent me," Nate told Coben. "If you play on that, you might get more out of her."

He knocked on the front door of the two-story cabin. When the red-head opened it, he had to flip through his mental files.

“Ginny Mann,” she said quickly. “I’m a friend of the family. A neighbor. Carrie’s upstairs, resting.”

“Sergeant Coben, ma’am.” Coben took out his identification. “I’d really like to speak with Mrs. Hawbaker.”

“We’ll try not to take long.” Artist, Nate remembered now. Painted landscapes and wildlife studies that were sold in galleries here, and in the Lower 48. Taught art at the school, three days a week.

“Arlene Woolcott and I have the kids back in the kitchen. We’re trying to keep them busy. I guess I could go upstairs and see if Carrie’s up to it.”

“We’d appreciate it.” Coben stepped in. “We’ll just wait here.”

“Nice place,” Coben said when Ginny went upstairs. “Homey.”

Comfortable sofa, Nate noted, a couple of roomy chairs, colorful throws. A painting of a spring meadow, backed by the white mountains and blue sky he imagined was the redhead’s work. Framed pictures of the kids, and other family shots, on the tables, along with the everyday mess from an average home.

“They were married about fifteen years, I think. He used to work for a paper in Anchorage but relocated and started his weekly here. She worked with him. It was pretty much a two-man operation, with some—what do you call it—stringers? They published articles from locals, some photographs, and picked up stories from the wire services. Older kid’s about twelve, a girl. She plays the piccolo. Younger son, ten, is a hockey freak.”

“You’ve picked up a lot in the few weeks you’ve been here.”

“I picked up more since this morning. First marriage for her, second for him. She’s been here a couple of years longer than him. Moved up on one of those teacher programs. Gave it up to work with him when he got the paper started, but she still substitutes if they call her in.”

“Why’d he move here?”

"I'm working on that." He shut down when Ginny started back down, her arm draped around Carrie's shoulder.

"Mrs. Hawbaker." Coben stepped forward, voice sober. "I'm Sergeant Coben with the State Police. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"What do you want?" Her gaze riveted, hard and bright, on Nate's face. "We're in mourning."

"I know this is a difficult time, but I need to ask you some questions." Coben glanced at Ginny. "Would you like your friend to stay with you?"

Carrie shook her head. "Ginny, would you stay with the kids? Would you keep them back there, away from this?"

"Of course. You just call me if you want me."

Carrie went into the living room, sank into one of the chairs. "Ask what you need to ask, then go. I don't want you here."

"First I want to tell you we'll be taking your husband's body back to Anchorage, for autopsy. He'll be released to you again as soon as possible."

"Good. Then you'll find out he didn't kill himself. Whatever he says," she added with a quick, resentful glance at Nate. "I know my husband. He'd never do that to me or his children."

"May I sit down?"

She shrugged.

Coben sat on the couch facing her, his body angled slightly in her direction. It was good, Nate thought. He was keeping it between the two of them, keeping it sympathetic. He started her on the standard questions. After the first few, she drew back.

"I told *him* all this already. Why do you have to ask me again? The answers aren't going to be any different. Why don't you go out there and find out who did this to my Max?"

"Do you know anyone who wished your husband harm?"

"Yes." Her face lit up with a kind of horrible pleasure. "Whoever killed Patrick Galloway. I'll tell you exactly what happened. Max must have found something out. Just because he ran a small-town weekly didn't mean he wasn't a good reporter. He dug something up, and someone killed him before he could decide what to do."

"Did he discuss any of this with you?"

"No, but he was upset. Worried. He wasn't himself. But that doesn't mean he killed himself, and it doesn't mean he killed anyone else. He was a good man." Tears began to track down her cheeks. "I slept beside him for almost sixteen years. I worked beside him every day. I had two children with him. Don't you think I'd *know* if he was capable of this?"

Coben changed tacts. "Are you sure about the time he left the house last night?"

She sighed, flicked at tears. "I know he was here at ten-thirty. I know he was gone in the morning. What more do you want?"

"You stated that he kept the gun in the glove compartment of his truck. Who else would have known that?"

"Everybody."

"Did he keep the glove compartment locked? The truck locked?"

"Max couldn't remember to close the bathroom door half the time, much less lock anything. I keep the guns we have in the house locked up, and I keep the key because he was absentminded about that sort of thing. Anybody could have taken that gun. Somebody *did*."

"Do you know the last time he used it?"

"No. Not for certain."

"Mrs. Hawbaker, did your husband keep a diary or a journal?"

"No. He just wrote things down when they came to him on whatever was handy. I want you to go now. I'm tired, and I want to be with my children."

. . .

OUTSIDE, COBEN PAUSED beside the car. "Still some loose ends there I'd like tied up. Be a good idea to take a look through his things, his papers, see if there's anything regarding Galloway."

"Such as motive?"

"Such as," Coben agreed. "Any reason you couldn't work on tying up those ends?"

"No."

"I want to get the body back to Anchorage, start the tests. And I want to be there when they recover Galloway's body."

"I'd appreciate a call on that when you have him. His daughter's going to want to see him. And her mother's going to be pretty insistent about taking custody of the body."

"Yeah, I've already heard from her. Once he's down, and positively ID'd, we'll let the family fight that end out. His daughter can come down for a visual, but his prints are on file. A couple of minor drug busts. We'll know if it's Galloway once we have the body."

"I'll bring her in, I'll tie up your loose ends and I'll do what I can to play mediator with the deceased's family. In return I want copies of every piece of paperwork on both these cases. That includes case notes."

Coben looked back at the neat house on its blanket of snow. "You seriously think somebody staged this suicide to cover up a sixteen-year-old crime?"

"I want the copies."

"Fine." Coben pulled open the passenger door. "Your lieutenant said you had good instincts."

Nate sat behind the wheel. "And?"

"Good doesn't always mean right."



FIFTEEN

HE HAD TO WORK with what he had, and that included his two deputies and his dispatcher. He pulled them all into his office, along with the necessary extra chairs.

There was a plate of peanut-butter cookies and a pot of fresh coffee on his desk, courtesy of Peach. And he thought: Why the hell not?

He took a cookie, gestured with it toward his deputies before biting in. “First, the results of the canvass.”

“Pierre Letreck thinks he might’ve heard what sounded like a gunshot.” Otto pulled out his notebook and made a business out of flipping through pages. “He says he watched a movie on cable. Claimed at first it was *The English Patient*, and I said, ‘Pierre, don’t hand me that shit, you never watched anything of the kind.’ And he said, ‘How the hell do you know what I watch in the privacy of my own home, Otto?’ To which I responded—”

“Just give me the bottom line, Otto.”

Otto scowled, looked up from the notebook and his careful reading. “Just trying to be thorough. What he watched, which he told me after considerable interrogation, was some skin flick called *Alien Blondes*. He thought it went off around midnight, and he was in the bathroom tak-

ing a . . . relieving his bladder,” he amended after a loud throat-clearing from Peach. “He heard what he thought was a gunshot and, being of a curious nature, looked out the bathroom window. At that time he saw no one, but did notice Max’s—the deceased’s—truck parked in back of the paper. He then completed his business and retired for the night.”

“He thinks somewhere in the vicinity of midnight?”

“Chief?” Peter raised his hand. “I checked the listings, and the movie ended at twelve-fifteen. According to Mr. Letreck’s statement, he went straight from his living room to the bathroom and heard the single shot almost immediately.”

“Did he notice anything else? Any other vehicles?”

“No, sir. Otto made him go through it a couple of times, but he stuck with the statement.”

“Anybody else hear anything, see anything?”

“Jennifer Welch thinks she might have.” Otto flipped more pages. “She and Larry, her husband, were sleeping, and she says she thinks she might’ve been wakened by a noise. They’ve got an eight-month-old baby, and she says she sleeps pretty light. As soon as she woke up, the baby started crying, so she doesn’t know, for sure, if it was the baby or a noise that woke her up. But the timing’s about the same as Pierre’s. Said she looked at the clock when she got up to get the baby, and it was about twelve-twenty.”

“Where are these two houses in reference to *The Lunatic’s* back office?” Nate gestured to the chalkboard he’d picked up at The Corner Store and hung on his wall. “Draw it out for me, Otto.”

“I’ll do it.” Peach hauled herself to her feet. “Neither of these two can draw worth a damn.”

“Thanks, Peach.” Nate looked back at his deputies. “Were these the only two you could find who heard anything?”

"That's it," Otto confirmed. "We got Hans Finkle, who said his dog started barking sometime in the night, but he just threw a boot at it and didn't notice the time. Fact is, most people aren't going to pay any mind to a gunshot."

"Are any of you aware of Max having words with anybody lately?"

At the negative responses, Nate looked over at the blackboard. Peach was taking him literally, he noted. Rather than just drawing a diagram, she was busily sketching buildings, adding trees. There was even the silhouette of the mountains in the background.

"Nate?" Otto shifted in his seat. "Not criticizing or anything, but this seems like a lot of official fuss for a suicide, especially since the State's got the body and will be in charge of closing it up."

"Maybe." He opened a file. "What's said in this room stays in this room, until I tell you otherwise. Understood? This was written on Max's computer." He read the note, was met with shocked silence. "Comments?"

"That doesn't seem right." Peach spoke softly, the chalk still in her hand. "I know I'm just a glorified secretary around here, but that doesn't seem right."

"Why?"

"I can't see Max hurting anybody, not in my wildest dreams. And, as I recall, he admired Pat, sort of had a little hero-worship going there."

"Is that so? People I've talked to are saying they barely knew each other."

"That's true enough, and I'm not saying they were the best of friends, but Pat had a way about him. He was good-looking, and charming when he wanted to be, which was most of the time. He played the guitar and drove a motorcycle, he climbed mountains and went off into the bush for days at a time if the mood struck him. He had the sexiest woman in town warming his bed. Had that pretty little daughter who adored him."

She set the chalk aside, brushed the dust from it off her hands. "And he didn't give a damn about much of anything. Plus he could write. I know Max wanted to get him to write for the paper—adventure stuff. I know because Carrie told me about it. She and Max were just getting serious about each other, and she was a little worried because Pat was wild."

When Nate gestured for her to keep going, she walked over, poured herself some coffee. "I was going through the last spin of that bad cycle with my third husband. So with me she had a sympathetic ear and gave me one back. We talked a lot in those days. She was worried Pat might talk Max into going off to do something crazy. According to her, Max said Pat was what Alaska was all about. Living large, living your own way, bucking whatever system tried to stop you."

"Sometimes admiration becomes envy. Sometimes envy kills."

"Maybe it does." Absently, Peach picked up a cookie, nibbled. "But it's hard for me to see it. I know you said this stays here, but Carrie's going to need friends now. I want to go see her."

"That's fine, but you keep what we discuss here out of it." He rose, walked to the board.

She'd drawn in the road running behind the paper, had even put in the street sign and labeled it Moose Lane. The Letreck house was mostly garage, he remembered it now. Pierre ran a small appliance-repair business out of it, and his living quarters were an afterthought attached to his workshop. It sat across from the back of the paper and two lots to the east.

The Welch house, a bungalow style, stood directly across from the rear door of the paper. Hans Finkle's second-story apartment was above Letreck's garage.

She'd sketched in other houses, other businesses, and written the appropriate names across the buildings in her careful script.

"Good work, Peach. What we're going to do now is set up a case

board.” He picked up his file and walked to the freestanding corkboard he’d borrowed from Town Hall. “Anything we get that applies to Galloway or Hawbaker gets copied. A copy gets pinned up to this board. The State’s already gone through the paper, but, Otto, you and I are going over there and go through everything again, in case they missed something. Peach, I’m going to want to get inside the Hawbakers’, go through Max’s things there. Carrie’s not going to be receptive to that, not for a while. Maybe you can try to smooth that way for me.”

“All right. It’s sounding like you don’t believe what it said in that note. And if you don’t believe that—”

“Best not to believe anything until you have all the details lined up,” he interrupted. “Peter, I want you to contact the paper in Anchorage where Max worked. I want you to find out what he did there, who he did it for and with, and why he left. Then you type it all up in a report. Two copies. I want one on my desk before you leave today.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And all three of you have homework. You were here when Pat Galloway disappeared; I wasn’t. So you’re going to spend some time thinking back to the weeks before and after that event. Write down everything you remember, no matter how irrelevant it might seem. What you heard, what you saw, what you thought. Peter, I know you were a kid, but people don’t always see kids, and they say things, do things around them without thinking.”

He finished pinning up the photographs, Galloway on one side of the board, Hawbaker on the other. “There’s one vital piece of information I want. Where was Max Hawbaker when Galloway left town?”

“Not that easy to pin that down, after all this time,” Otto said. “And the fact is Galloway could’ve been killed a week after he left. Or a month. Or six damn months.”

“One step at a time.”

“Hard as it is to take when you’ve drunk beer and fished out of the same hole with somebody, if Max confessed to murder, then shot himself, what are we trying to prove?” Otto pressed.

“That’s supposition, Otto. It isn’t fact. The facts are we’ve got two dead men, some sixteen years apart. Let’s just work from there.”

NATE DIDN’T EVEN STOP by his room on the way out of town. There would be too many questions he couldn’t, or wouldn’t, answer waiting at The Lodge. Better to evade them until he’d worked out an official line.

In any case, he wanted the open space, the frosty dark and the icy shine of the stars. The dark was beginning to suit him, he thought. He couldn’t remember what it was like to begin or end his workday with any hint of the sun.

He didn’t want the sun. He wanted Meg.

He had to be the one to tell her, the one to shake her world a second time. If, once he had, she tried to shut him out, he’d have to push to stay inside.

He’d managed, with little effort, to close people out for months. He wasn’t quite sure if the ease of his solitude had been because he’d been unable to hear people trying to break down the walls, or if there’d simply been no one who’d cared enough to try.

Either way, he knew how painful it was to come back. How all those atrophied emotions and sensations burned and twisted as they struggled back to life. And he knew he cared enough to do whatever it took to spare her from that.

And there was more. He could admit that as he drove alone, with

only the rumble of the heater breaking the silence. He needed her knowledge, her memories of her father to fill in gaps in the picture he was creating.

Because he needed the work, the headachy, exhausting, frustrating buzz of police work. Those muscles were flexing again, painfully. He wanted that pain. Needed it. Without it, he was afraid, very afraid, he'd just slide silently back into the numbness again.

Lights were on in her house, but her plane wasn't there. He recognized the truck outside as Jacob's. A whip of worry slapped down his spine as he pushed out of his car.

The door of the house opened. He saw Jacob in the stream of light an instant before the dogs flew out. Over their noisy greeting, he called out: "Meg?"

"Picked up another job. She'll be camping out tonight in the bush with a hunting party she took in."

"That typical?" Nate asked when he reached the porch.

"Yes. I came to see to her dogs, and check the heat block on her car. That, too, is typical."

"She called you then?"

"Radioed. There's stew if you're hungry."

"Wouldn't mind."

Jacob walked back to the kitchen leaving Nate to close the door. The radio was on, tuned to KLUN. The dj announced a round of Buffy Sainte-Marie as Nate tossed his coat over the arm of a chair.

"You've had a long day," Jacob commented as he spooned up stew.

"You've heard, then."

"Nothing travels swifter than bad news. A selfish last act, to take his own life so brutally, leaving his wife to find the shell. The stew's hot, the bread's good."

"Thanks." Nate sat. "Was Max a selfish man?"

"We all are, and most selfish when we despair."

"Despair's personal, that's not necessarily the same as selfish. So, do you remember when Max came here to start the paper?"

"He was young and eager. Persistent," Jacob added, and poured coffee for both of them.

"Came here by himself."

"Many do."

"But he made friends."

"Some do," Jacob said with a smile. "I wasn't one of them, particularly, though we weren't enemies. Carrie courted him. She set her sights on him and pursued. He wasn't handsome or rich or brilliant of mind, but she saw something and wanted it. Women often see what doesn't show."

"Guy friends?"

Jacob raised his eyebrows as he slowly sipped his coffee. "He seemed to be comfortable with many."

"I heard he used to climb. You ever take him up?"

"Yes. Summer climbs on Denali and Deborah, if I remember, when he first came. He was a fair climber. And once or twice I flew him and others into the bush for hunting parties, though he didn't hunt. He wrote in his book or took photographs. Other flights for other stories and photographs. I flew him and Carrie to Anchorage both times she was ready to deliver their children. Why?"

"Curious. He ever climb with Galloway?"

"I never took them together." Jacob's eyes were intense now. "Why would it matter?"

"Curious, that's all. And since I'm curious, would you say Patrick Galloway was a selfish man?"

"Yes."

“Just yes?” Nate said after a moment. “No qualifications?”

Jacob continued to drink his coffee. “You didn’t ask for qualifications.”

“How’d he rate as a husband, a father?”

“He was, at best, a poor husband.” Jacob finished his coffee, turned to the sink to wash the mug. “But some would say he had a difficult wife.”

“Would you?”

“I would say they were two people with a strong bond, who pulled and twisted that bond in their individual pursuits of opposing desires.”

“Would Meg be that bond?”

Carefully, Jacob laid a cloth on the counter and the cup on it to dry. “A child is. They were no match for her.”

“Which means?”

“She was brighter, stronger, more resilient, more generous than either of them.”

“More yours?”

Jacob turned back, and there was nothing to read in his eyes. “Meg is her own. I’ll leave you now.”

“Does Meg know what happened with Max?”

“She didn’t mention it. Neither did I.”

“She say when she thought she’d be back?”

“She’ll fly the party out the day after tomorrow, weather permitting.”

“You got any problem with me staying out here tonight?”

“Would Meg?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why would I?”

HE KEPT COMPANY with her dogs and made use of her fitness equipment. It felt good, better than he’d imagined, to pump iron again.

He didn't intend to pry into her things, but when he was alone, Nate found himself wandering the house, poking into closets, peeking into drawers.

He knew what he was looking for—pictures, letters, mementos that pertained to her father. He told himself if Meg had been there, she'd have given them to him.

He found the photograph albums on the top shelf of her bedroom closet. Above a wardrobe that fascinated him with its mix of flannel and silk. Beside the album was a shoe box crammed with loose pictures she'd yet to organize.

He sat down with them on the spare bed, opened the red cover of an album first.

He recognized Patrick Galloway immediately in the snapshots behind the clear, sticky plastic. A younger Galloway than the one he'd seen in the digitals. Long-haired, bearded, dressed in the uniform of bell-bottom jeans, T-shirt and headband of the late sixties and early seventies.

Nate studied one where Galloway leaned against a burly motorcycle, an ocean behind him, a palm tree to his right—and his hand lifted, fingers veed in the peace sign.

Pre-Alaska, Nate thought. California, maybe.

There were others of him alone, one with his face dreamy and lit by a campfire while he strummed an acoustical guitar. More of him with a very young Charlene. Her hair was long and blond and curling crazily, her eyes laughing behind blue-tinted sunglasses.

She was beautiful, he realized. Seriously beautiful, with a streamlined body, soft, smooth cheeks, a full and sensual mouth. And couldn't have reached her eighteenth birthday by his estimation.

There were several others—traveling photos, camping shots. Some

were of one or both of them with other young people. A few urban pictures where he thought he recognized Seattle. Some, where Galloway was clean-shaven again, were taken inside an apartment or small house.

Then he came across one with Galloway. The beard was back and he was leaning against a road sign.

WELCOME TO ALASKA

He could track their trail by the photos. Their time in the southeast of the state, working the canneries, he supposed.

And he got his first glimpse of Meg—so to speak—with the photo of a hugely pregnant Charlene.

She wore a skimpy halter and jeans cut below her enormous and naked belly. Her hands were cupped on the mound, protectively. She had the sweetest look on her face, a painfully young face, Nate thought, that radiated hope and happiness.

There were photos of Patrick painting a room—the nursery—others of him building what looked like a cradle.

Then, to Nate's shock, there were three pages of photos detailing labor and delivery.

He'd worked Homicide and had seen, he considered, just about all there was to see. But the sight of those up-close images had the stew rolling dangerously in his belly.

He flipped past them.

The sight of baby Meg settled his stomach and made him grin. He wasted time skimming through those—or maybe not, he thought, as he could study the tender or joyful way one or both of the new parents held the child. The way they held each other.

He could watch the seasons change, the years pass, as he moved to

the next album. And he saw the young, pretty face of Charlene grow harder, leaner, the eyes less full of light.

Photos per year began to diminish into those taken more on holidays, birthdays, special occasions. A very young Meg grinning gleefully as she hugged a puppy with a red bow around its neck. She and her father sitting under a straggly Christmas tree, or Meg by a river, arms full of a fish almost as big as she.

There was one of Patrick and Jacob, arms slung around each other's shoulders. The shot was fuzzy and badly cropped, making Nate wonder if Meg had been behind the camera.

He dumped the shoe box and began to sort through the loose snapshots. He found a series of group shots, all of which obviously were taken the same day.

Summer, he thought, because there was green instead of snow. Did it get that green here? he wondered. That warm and bright? The mountains were in the distance, their peaks gleaming white under the sun, the lower reaches silver and blue and dotted with green.

Someone's backyard cookout, he thought. Or a town picnic. He could see picnic tables, benches, folding chairs, a couple of grills. Platters of food, kegs of beer.

He picked out Galloway. The beard was gone again, and the hair was shorter, though it still nearly reached his shoulders. He looked tough and fit and handsome. Meg had his eyes, Nate thought, his cheekbones, his mouth.

He found Charlene, dressed in a tight shirt that showed off her breasts, brief shorts that showed off her legs. Even in the photo he could see her face was carefully made-up. Gone was the fresh, lovely young girl laughing out of tinted lenses. This was a woman, beautiful and sharp and aware.

But happy? She was laughing or smiling in every shot, and posed as well. In one she sat provocatively on the lap of an older man who looked both surprised and overwhelmed by the armful of her.

He saw Hopp sitting beside a gangly, silver-haired man. They were both drinking beers and holding hands.

He found Ed Woolcott, banker and deputy mayor—leaner, sporting a moustache and short beard, mugging for the camera with the silver-haired man Nate took as Hopp's dead husband.

One by one, he identified people he knew. Bing, looking just as burly and sour as he did today, but about fifteen pounds lighter. Rose, that had to be beautiful Rose, fresh and young as the flower she was named for, holding the hand of a handsome little Peter.

Max, with more hair and less belly, sitting beside Galloway, and both of them about to bite into enormous slices of watermelon.

Deb, Harry and—jeez, a fifty-pounds-lighter Peach—arms linked, hips cocked, smiles blazing for the camera.

He went back through them again, concentrating on Galloway. He was in nearly every shot. Eating, drinking, talking, laughing, playing his guitar, sprawled on the grass with kids.

He culled shots of the men. Some were strangers to him, others looked too old, even then, to have made that arduous winter climb. And some had been too young.

But he wondered as he scanned from face to face, if it would be one of them. Had one of the men who'd celebrated that bright, shiny day, who had eaten and laughed with Patrick Galloway and Max Hawbaker, killed both of them?

More loose shots were individuals, groups, holidays. He found Christmas again, and again a picture or two of Max with Galloway. Jacob with them, or Ed or Bing or Harry or Mr. Hopp.

Ed Woolcott, still with a moustache and beard, a fuming bottle of champagne, Harry in a Hawaiian shirt, Max draped in Mardi Gras beads. He spent another hour with the pictures before putting them back, exactly as he'd found them.

He would have to find a way to confess to Meg that he'd invaded her privacy. Or find a way to have her show him the photos without letting her know he'd already seen them.

He'd decide which later.

Now it was time to let the restless dogs out for a last run. And since he was just as restless, it seemed a good time to practice his snowshoeing.

He went out with the dogs. Instead of racing off, they trotted along beside him as he walked out to get his snowshoes out of the car.

Peter had shown him the basics and had proven to be a patient teacher. Nate still fell on his face—or ass—now and then and sometimes got the shoes bogged down, but he was making progress.

He strapped them on, took a few testing strides. "Still feel like an idiot," he confided to the dogs. "So let's keep tonight's practice session between us."

As if in challenge, the dogs bounded off toward the woods. It would be a hell of a hike, Nate decided as he pushed a flashlight into his pocket, but exercise helped beat back depression. And, if he was lucky, would tire him out enough to let him sleep through any dreams that wanted to haunt him.

He used the house lights and the stars to reach the edge of the woods. His progress was slow and not particularly graceful. But he made it and was pleased he was only slightly out of breath.

"Getting back in shape. Some. Still talking to myself, though. But that doesn't mean anything."

He looked up so that he could see the northern lights, could watch

them spread their magic. Here he was, Ignatious Burke of Baltimore, snowshoeing in Alaska under the northern lights.

And pretty much enjoying it.

He could hear the dogs thrashing around, letting loose with the occasional bark. "Right behind you, boys."

He pulled out the flashlight. "Too early for bear," he reminded himself. "Unless, of course, we've got an insomniac in the area."

To reassure himself, he patted his side and felt the shape of his service weapon under the parka.

He set off, trying to get into an easy rhythm instead of the awkward step-clomp-step he fell into if he wasn't paying attention. The dogs raced back, danced around him, and he was pretty sure they were grinning.

"Keep it up and there'll be no dog biscuits for you. Go do whatever dog business you've got to do. This is thinking time for me."

Keeping the lights of the house visible through the trees to his left, he followed the dog tracks. He could smell the trees—the hemlock he'd learned to identify—and the snow.

Not that many miles west, or north, there would be no trees, so he'd been told. Just seas of ice and snow, rolling forever. Places where no roads cut through that sea.

But here, with the smell of the forest, he couldn't imagine it. Could hardly conceive that Meg, who had a sexy red dress in her closet and baked bread when she brooded, was out there, somewhere in that sea even now.

He wondered if she'd looked up at the northern lights, as he had. And thought of him.

With his head down, the flashlight beam shining ahead, he pushed his body into the steady pace and let his mind wander back to the photos of that sunny day.

How long after that summer picnic had Patrick Galloway died in ice? Six months? Seven?

Were those pictures with Christmas lights from his last holiday?

Had one of those men who'd smiled or mugged for the camera been wearing a mask, even then?

Or had it been impulse, insanity, the momentary madness of temper that had brought that ax down?

But it had been none of those things that had left a man in that cave for all these years, preserved in the ice and permafrost.

That took calculation. That took balls.

Just as it took both calculation and balls to carefully stage a suicide.

Or it could all be bullshit, he admitted, and the note left could be God's own truth.

A man could hide things from his wife, from his friends. A man could hide things from himself. At least until that despair, that guilt, that fear wrapped around his throat and choked him off.

Wasn't he chasing this case for the same reason he was out here in the dark, in the cold, tromping around on oversized tennis rackets? Because he needed to be normal again. He needed to find who he'd been before his world had caved in on him. He needed to break out of his own cocoon of ice and live again.

Everything pointed to suicide. All that was arguing against it were his own instincts. And how could he trust them after letting them lie stagnant so long?

He hadn't worked a murder in close to a year, hadn't done much more than ride a desk for his last months with BPD. And now he wanted to turn a suicide into a homicide because, what, it made him feel useful?

He could feel the weight bearing down on him as he thought of the

way he'd pushed his opinions onto Coben, the way he'd issued orders despite the doubts in his deputies' eyes. He'd invaded Meg's privacy, for no good reason.

He could barely run a little cop shop that dealt mainly with traffic violations and breaking up shoving matches, and suddenly he was the big, bad cop who was going to close the books on a murder that took place sixteen years ago and disprove a nearly textbook suicide?

Yeah, sure, then he'd track down this nameless, faceless killer, sweat a confession out of him and hand him over to Coben, all tied up in a big pink ribbon.

"What bullshit. You can barely pass for a cop now, what makes you think . . ."

He trailed off, staring dully down at the snow that gleamed under the beam of his light. And the tracks that marred its surface.

"Funny. Must've circled around somehow."

Not that he gave a good damn. He could wander around aimlessly all night, just like he wandered around aimlessly most days.

"No." He closed his eyes, broke into a light sweat at the physical effort it took to push away from that void. "Not going back there. That's the bullshit. Not going back down in that hole."

He'd take the antidepressants if he had to. Do yoga. Lift weights. Whatever it took, but he couldn't go back down there again. He'd never crawl his way free if he went back down this time.

So he just breathed, opening his eyes, watching his breath stream out white and vanish. "Still standing," he murmured, then looked down at the snow again.

Snowshoe tracks. Curious, and using the curiosity to hold back the dark, he stepped back, compared those tracks with the ones in front of him. They looked the same, but it was a little tough to gauge any differ-

ence in the beam of his flashlight—and considering the fact he wasn't some wilderness tracker.

But he was sure enough he hadn't tromped around in the woods, circled, and somehow ended up walking over his own path—coming in the opposite direction.

“Could be Meg's,” he murmured. “She might've walked out here anytime, just like I'm doing now.”

The dogs ran back, zoomed over the tracks and toward the lights of the house. To satisfy himself, Nate changed his direction, which almost set him on his ass, and followed the tracks.

But they didn't go all the way through the woods. A fist balled in his belly as he followed the way they'd stopped, where someone had obviously stood, looking through the trees toward the rear of the house—and the hot tub where he and Meg had relaxed the night before.

And the dogs had set up a racket in the woods, he remembered now.

He followed their trail, backtracking now. He saw other tracks. Moose, maybe, or deer? How would he know? But he decided, on the spot, he would damn well learn.

He saw depressions in the snow and imagined the dogs had lain there, rolled there—and again the tracks he followed indicated someone had stood, feet slightly apart, as if watching the dogs.

As he circled around with the trail, he could see where it would lead him now. To the road, several yards from Meg's house.

He was well out of breath by the time he'd followed it to the bitter end. But he knew what he was looking at. Someone had walked, or driven, on that road. Entered the woods well out of sight of a house, then had hiked through those woods—purposely, he thought, directly to Meg's.

Hardly a neighbor paying a call, or someone looking for help due to a breakdown or accident. This was surveillance.

What time had they gone out to the tub the night before? Ten, he thought. No later than ten.

He stood on the side of the road, with the dogs snuffing along the snow-packed ground behind him.

How long, he wondered, to walk back to the road? It had taken him more than twenty minutes, but he imagined you could halve that if you knew what you were doing. Another ten, tops, to get to Max's house, take the gun from the glove compartment. Five more to get into town.

Plenty of time, he thought, plenty to get into the unlocked door, type a note on the computer.

Plenty of time to do murder.



SIXTEEN

NATE WASN'T SURPRISED to find Bing Karlovski had a sheet. It wasn't a big shock to his system to find charges of assault and battery, simple assault, aggravated assault, resisting arrest, drunk and disorderly, on that sheet.

Running names, whether or not he *officially* had a case, was basic procedure. Patrick Galloway might have died while Nate was still learning to handle his first secondhand car, but Max Hawbaker had died on his watch.

So he ran Bing. He ran Patrick Galloway and printed out his record of minor drug pops, loitering, trespassing.

He worked steadily down his list, discovering that Harry Miner had a disorderly conduct and injury to property. Ed Woolcott had a sealed juvie, a DUI. Max had racked up a few trespassing, disorderly conducts and two possession pops.

John Malmont, two D&Ds. Jacob Itu came out clean and Mackie Sr. had a fistful of D&Ds, simple and aggravated assaults, and injuries to property.

He didn't spare his deputies and saw that Otto had mixed it up a few times in his younger days with disorderly conducts, assault and battery—charges dropped. Peter, as he'd suspected, was as clean as fresh snow.

He made lists, notes, and added them to his file.

He played it by the book, as much as he was able. The problem was, as he saw it, he hadn't read the book starring the small-town chief of police nipping his way up the investigative food chain behind a State cop.

He considered it wise, or at least politic, to filter all his inquiries through Coben. Hardly mattered, Nate decided when he hung up the phone, as none of those inquiries could be answered. Yet.

Anchorage was urban, which meant it had all the bogging red tape and backups of an urban area. Autopsy results, not yet in. Lab results, not yet in.

The fact that the chief of police of Lunacy knew in his gut Maxwell Hawbaker had been murdered didn't carry much weight.

He could take the easy way and let it drag him down. Nate figured he'd taken the easy way for a long time now. Or he could use his under-dog status to rise to the occasion.

Sitting at his desk, with the snow falling soft and steady outside his window, Nate couldn't quite see the way to rise.

He had little to no resources, little to no autonomy, a force that was green as a shamrock and an evidentiary trail that pointed its bony finger straight to suicide.

Didn't mean he was helpless, he reminded himself as he got up to pace. To study his case board. To stare hard into the crystal eyes of Patrick Galloway.

"You know who did you," he murmured. "So let's find out what you can tell me."

Parallel investigations, he decided. That's the way he was going to proceed. As if he and Coben were running separate investigations that ran along the same lines.

Rather than sticking his head out the door, he went back and made

use of the intercom. "Peach, call over to The Lodge and tell Charlene I want to talk to her."

"You want her to come over here?"

"That's right, I want her to come over here."

"Well, it's still breakfast time, and Charlene sent Rose home. Ken thinks the baby might come a little earlier than expected."

"Tell her I want her to come over as soon as possible, and that I shouldn't have to keep her long."

"Sure, Nate, but it might be easier if you just went over and—"

"Peach. I want her here, before lunchtime. Got that?"

"All right, all right. No need to get snippy."

"And let me know when Peter gets back from patrol. I need to talk to him, too."

"Awful chatty today."

She cut off before he could comment.

He wished he'd gotten better pictures of the snowshoe prints. By the time he'd driven into town, picked up the camera, driven back to Meg's, fresh snow had been falling. He didn't know what the hell a bunch of snowshoe tracks was going to tell him, and he hesitated to pin them up.

But it was *his* case board, for what it was worth.

He was tromping around in the dark, just as he'd been tromping around in the woods the night before. But if you kept going, you got somewhere eventually. He grabbed a few tacks and pinned up his shots.

"Chief Burke." Apparently Peach had taken a cue from him, as her formal tones came through his intercom. "Judge Royce is here, and he'd like to see you if you're not too busy."

"Sure." He grabbed the buffalo plaid blanket he'd brought in as a makeshift drape for his board. "Send him back," he said, and tossed the red-and-black checks over the board.

Judge Royce was mostly bald, but wore the thin fringe that circled his dome long and white. He had Coke-bottle glasses perched on a nose as sharp and curved as a meat hook. He had what the polite might call a prosperous build, with a wide chest and a heavy belly. His voice, at seventy-nine, resounded with the same power and impact as it had in his decades on the bench.

His thick, dung-colored corduroy pants swished as he walked into Nate's office. With them he wore a matching corduroy vest over a tan shirt. And the off-key adornment of a gold loop in his right ear.

"Judge. Coffee?"

"Never say no." He settled himself in a chair with a windy sigh. "Got a mess on your hands."

"Seems it's on the hands of the State authorities."

"Don't shit a shitter. Two sugars in that coffee. No cream. Carrie Hawbaker was by to see me last night."

"She's going through a bad time."

"Your husband ends up with a bullet in his brain, yep, it's a bad time. Pissed at you."

Nate handed the coffee over. "I didn't put the bullet in his brain."

"Nope, don't figure you did. But a woman in Carrie's state doesn't quibble at taking a shot at the messenger. She wants me to use my influence to have you removed from office, and, hopefully, run out of town on a rail."

Nate sat, contemplated his own coffee. "You got that much influence?"

"Might. If I pressed the matter. Been here twenty-six years. Could say I was among the first lunatics in Lunacy." He blew once on the steaming surface of his coffee, sipped. "Never in my life had a decent cup of cop coffee."

"Me either. Are you here to ask me to resign?"

"I'm cantankerous. You get to be when you hit eighty, so I'm practicing. But I'm not stupid. Not your fault Max is dead, poor slob. Not your fault there was a note on his computer claiming he killed Pat Galloway."

His eyes were very alert behind those thick lenses as he nodded at Nate. "Yeah, she told me that one, and she's trying to talk herself into you making that up, so you can tie things up neat and tidy. She'll get past that. She's a sensible woman."

"And you're telling me this because?"

"It might take her a little while to remember how to be sensible. Meanwhile, she might try to make trouble for you. It'll help her through the grief. I'm going to smoke this cigar." He pulled a fat one out of his shirt pocket. "You can fine me for it once I have, if you've a mind to."

Nate pulled open a desk drawer, dumped out the contents of a tin of push pins. Rising, he walked over, handed it to the judge as an ashtray.

"You knew Galloway?"

"Sure." The judge puffed the cigar to life and filled the air with its subtle stink. "Liked him well enough. People did. Not everybody, as it turns out." He glanced toward the draping blanket. "That your dead board under there?"

When Nate didn't respond, he puffed and sipped, puffed and sipped. "I tried capital cases, back in the dark ages. Presided over them when I was wearing robes. Now unless you think I climbed up No Name when I was past sixty and put an end to a man half my age, you should be able to cross me off your list of suspects."

Nate leaned back. "You had a couple of simple assault pops."

Royce pursed his lips. "Been doing your homework. A man who's lived as long as I have, lived up here as long as I have and hasn't gotten into a tangle couldn't be a very interesting man."

"That may be. A man who's lived here as long as you could probably

handle the climb if he put his mind to it. And an ax against an unarmed man makes up for any age difference. Theoretically.”

Royce grinned around his cigar. “You got a point. I like to hunt and spent some time with Pat out in the bush a time or two, but I don’t climb. Never did. You can verify that if you ask around.”

It only took once, Nate thought, but filed the statement away. “Who did? Who did climb with him?”

“Max did, as I recall, first season he was here. Ed most likely did, and Hopp—both of them once or twice, on easy, summer climbs, I’d say. Harry and Deb. They both like to climb. Bing’s been up a few times. Jacob and Pat did a lot of climbing, a lot of hiking and camping together—or working as a team to guide paying customers. Hell, more than half the people in Lunacy take a whack at the mountains. More than that who’ve been here and gone. He was a good climber, from what I’m told. Made some of his living—such as it was—taking people up.”

“A winter climb. Who around here would’ve been capable of a winter climb on that mountain?”

“Don’t have to be capable so much as willing to challenge the elements.” He puffed and sipped some more. “You going to show me the board?”

Since he could find no reason not to, Nate got up and removed the blanket. The judge sat where he was a moment, lips pursed. Then he pushed his bulk out of the chair and moved closer.

“Death robs youth, most times. You don’t expect it to preserve it. He had potential. Wasted most of it, but Pat still had enough potential to make something of himself. He had that pretty, ambitious woman, a smart, charming child. Had brains, had talent. Problem was he liked to play the rebel so he pissed most of that away. A man would have

to get fairly close in to dig an ax into another man's chest that way, wouldn't he?"

"Seems to me."

"Pat wasn't much of a scrapper. Peace, love, and rock and roll. You're too young to know the era, but Pat was the sort who embraced all that crap. Make love, not war, flowers in your hair and a roach clip in your pocket." The judge sniffed. "Still, I can't see him standing there quoting Dylan or whatever when somebody came at him with an ice ax."

"If he knew who it was, trusted him, didn't take it seriously. There are a lot of possibilities."

"Max being one of them." The judge shook his head as he shifted his attention to the photographs of Max Hawbaker. "I wouldn't have thought so. Get to be my age, nothing much surprises you, but I wouldn't have thought it of Max. Physically, Pat could have swatted him down like a fly. Which you've thought of," the judge said after a moment.

"Harder to swat flies armed with deadly weapons."

"Point. Max was a decent enough climber, but I wonder if he was good enough to get down that mountain, in February, without the help of someone with Pat's skill. I wonder how he managed that and how he lived with settling down here, marrying Carrie, raising his kids, knowing Pat was up there—that he was responsible for killing him."

"The argument's going to be he couldn't live with it."

"Sure is handy, isn't it? Pat's body's found through more luck than sense, and a few days later, Max confesses and kills himself. Doesn't explain, doesn't spell it all out. Just I did it, I'm sorry. Bang."

"Handy," Nate agreed.

"But you're not buying it."

"I'll be saving my money for the time being."

. . .

WHEN THE JUDGE LEFT, Nate made additional notes. He'd need to talk to several more people now, including the mayor, the deputy mayor and some of the town's most prominent citizens.

He wrote PILOT on his pad. Circled it.

Galloway had gone, reportedly, to Anchorage to pick up some winter work. Had he found any?

If Galloway had been playing it straight with Charlene, had fully intended to come back after a few weeks, that would narrow the time of the murder to February.

A big if, but working with that theory, it would be possible—with time and legwork, to verify that Max had been out of Lunacy during that time frame.

If so, for what purpose?

If so, had he gone alone? How long had he been gone? Had he come back alone, or with a companion?

He was going to have to pick his way through Carrie's memories for the answers. She wasn't going to be amenable just now. Maybe she'd talk to Coben, but if the ME ruled suicide, would Coben bother to follow up?

There was a knock, and even as Nate rose to cover the board again, Peter stepped in. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah. Close the door. Question."

"Yes, sir, chief."

"You know any reason somebody would be out snowshoeing in the woods by Meg's place, in the dark?"

"Sorry?"

"I'm just guessing here, but I don't think most people would go out shoeing around in the woods, in the dark, for sport."

"Well, I guess you could, if you were going to visit someone or something, or couldn't sleep. I don't get it."

He gestured to the board. "I found those tracks last night, when I was out practicing, giving the dogs a last run. I followed them from the road, about fifty yards up from Meg's place, and to the edge of the woods by the back of her house."

"Sure they weren't yours?"

"I'm sure."

"How do you know they were made at night? Somebody, most anybody, might have taken a hike there any time. Wanted to do some hunting or take a walk across from the lake."

Good points, Nate conceded. "Meg and I were out there the night Max died. Took a dip in her hot tub."

Peter looked politely at the wall, cleared his throat. "Well."

"While we were out there, the dogs got antsy. Took off into the woods. They were barking like they'd scented something, carried on long enough that Meg was on the point of calling them back, but they settled down. Now before you point out they could have treed a squirrel or chased down a moose, I found a spot where it looked like they'd rolled around in the snow, and the tracks, the snowshoe tracks, indicated somebody stopped and stood there. I'm not Daniel frigging Boone, Peter, but I can follow the dots."

He tapped a finger on the photographs. "Somebody entered the woods, far enough from Meg's as not to be seen. Then walked in a reasonably direct line—as someone would who knew the layout and had a purpose—toward the back of her house. The dogs' behavior indicates

they recognized this individual and considered him or her friendly. This individual then stopped at the edge of the screen of trees.”

“If, um, I was hiking around and happened to spot you and Meg . . . taking a dip in her hot tub, I’d probably be, you could say, hesitant to make myself known. I’d probably back off and leave, with the sincere hope you didn’t spot me. It’d be embarrassing otherwise.”

“Seems to me it’d be less embarrassing altogether not to go sneaking around by her house in the dark.”

“It would.” Studying the pictures, Peter pulled on his bottom lip. “Maybe it was somebody setting or checking traps. It’s really Meg’s property, right there by her house, I mean, but a little poaching maybe. She wouldn’t like it, because of her dogs. I bet she had the music going.”

“She did.”

“So, somebody might’ve headed toward the house, just to see, especially if he was checking traps.”

“Okay.” It was reasonable. “How about you and Otto taking a run out there, see if you can find any traps. If you do, I’d like to know who set them. I don’t want to see one of the dogs hurt.”

“We’ll get right on that.” He glanced back toward the board. He might’ve been green, but he wasn’t slow. “You think somebody was spying on her? Somebody who’s involved in all this?”

“I think it’s worth finding out.”

“Rock and Bull wouldn’t let anybody hurt her. Even if they considered the . . . individual friendly, anybody made any kind of threatening move on her, they’d attack.”

“That’s good to know. Let me know about those traps, one way or the other, as soon as you can.”

“Ah, chief? I think you should know Carrie Hawbaker’s been making a lot of calls, talking to a lot of people. She’s saying you’re trying to

smear Max's character so you can puff yourself up. Mostly people know she's just upset and a little crazy right now, but, well, some of them, maybe some who didn't much like the idea of bringing in someone from Outside, are stewing about it."

"I'll handle it, but I appreciate the heads-up."

There was concern in his dark eyes and a hint of anger on his face. "If people knew you were working so hard to try to find out the whole truth, they might settle."

"Let's just do the job for now, Peter. Cops never win popularity contests."

HE WASN'T GOING TO WIN one with Charlene either, Nate decided, when she stormed into his office an hour later.

"I'm up to my ears over at The Lodge," she began. "Rose isn't in any shape to wait tables or anything else. And I don't appreciate you calling me over here like I'm some criminal. I'm in mourning, goddamn it, and you should have some respect."

"I've got nothing but respect, Charlene. If it'll help any, you can cross my room off the housekeeping schedule until things get back to routine. I can deal with it myself."

"That's hardly going to make a difference, with every other person in town coming in to gossip and sniff around about my Pat and about poor Carrie. You think because Max went and killed himself she's got more grief than I do?"

"I don't think it's a contest."

She tossed her head, jutted up her chin. Nate figured she'd stomp her foot next, but she folded her arms instead.

"If you talk to me that way, I don't have a thing to say to you. Don't

think I'm going to tolerate you taking that attitude with me just because you're banging Meg."

"You're going to want to sit down and shut up."

Her mouth dropped open, her cheeks flamed. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I think I'm the chief of police, and if you don't stop being a pain in my ass and cooperate, I'm going to put yours in a cell until you do."

Her mouth, painted Caribbean coral, opened and closed like a guppy's. "You can't do that."

Probably not, Nate thought, but he was past playing with her. "You want to sit around sulking and playing the injured party? I know that tune, and it gets old and boring for everybody who has to hear it. Or do you want to do something about it? Do you want to help me find out who killed the man you say you loved?"

"I *did* love him! The stupid, selfish bastard." She dropped into a chair, burst into tears.

He debated for five seconds on how to handle her. He walked out, grabbed the box of tissues Peach kept on her desk and ignored his dispatcher's wide eyes. Back in the office, he dropped the box on Charlene's lap.

"Go ahead, have a jag. Then mop yourself up, pull it together and answer some questions."

"I don't know why you have to be mean to me. If you treated Carrie like this, no wonder she's saying terrible things about you. I wish you'd never come to Lunacy."

"You won't be the only one to wish it, once I find the man who killed Patrick Galloway."

She lifted her swimming eyes at that. "You're not even in charge."

"I'm in charge of this office. I'm in charge of this town." The anger

that was stirring inside him felt good; it felt just. Cop juice, he realized. He'd missed it.

"And right now, I'm in charge of you. Did Pat Galloway leave town alone?"

"You're nothing but a bully. You're—"

"Answer the damn question."

"Yes! He packed a bag, tossed it in the truck and left. And I never, ever saw him again. I raised our child alone, and she's never once been grateful for—"

"Did he have plans to meet up with anyone?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. He was supposed to get some work. We were about tapped. I was *tired* of living hand to mouth. His family had money, but he wouldn't even consider—"

"Charlene. How long did he plan to be gone?"

She sighed, began to shred the damp tissue. Winding down, Nate thought.

"Couple of weeks, maybe a month."

"He never called, never got in touch."

"No, and I was mad about that, too. He should've called after a week or two, to let me know what was going on."

"You try to get in touch with him?"

"*How?*" she demanded, but the tears were dried up now. "I badgered Jacob. Pat always talked to him more than me, but he said he didn't know where he was. He could've been covering for him for all I know."

"Jacob was still flying regularly then?"

"So?"

"Making regular runs, the way Meg does now." Her answer was a shrug, so Nate kept probing. "Was he, or anyone else you can think

of, out of town for, let's say, a week or ten days during February of that year?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know that? I don't keep tabs on people, and it was sixteen years ago. This month," she added, and he could see that the fact it was a kind of anniversary had just occurred to her.

"Sixteen years ago Pat Galloway disappeared. I bet if you put your mind to it, you could remember a lot of details about those weeks."

"I was scrambling to pay the rent, just like I was more than half the time. I had to ask Karl for more hours work at The Lodge. I was a hell of a lot more worried about myself than what other people were up to."

But she leaned back, closed her eyes. "I don't know. Jacob left about the same time. I remember because he came by to see Pat, the day Pat left, and said he'd have flown him into Anchorage if he'd known he was going. He was flying Max down, and a couple others, I think. Harry. Harry was hitching a ride to Anchorage to look into a new supplier or something. Or maybe that was the year after, or before. I don't know for sure, but I think it was then."

"Good." He made notes on his yellow legal pad. "Anyone else?"

"It was a slow winter. Hard and slow. That's why I wanted Pat to find some work. Town was dead; we couldn't get the tourists in. The Lodge was damn near empty, and Karl gave me busy work just to tide me over, help me out. He was a sweet man; he looked out for me. Some people went hunting, some holed up and waited for spring. Max was trying to get the paper off the ground and was hunting up advertisers, pestering people for stories. Nobody took him seriously back then."

"Was he in town the whole month?"

"I don't know. Ask Carrie. She was chasing him like a hound chases a rabbit, back then. Why do you care?"

"Because I'm in charge of this office, of this town, of you."

"You didn't even know Pat. Maybe it's like some people are saying. You just want to make a big stir, get some press before you go back where you came from."

"I'm from here now."

HE ANSWERED A COUPLE OF CALLS, including another residential chimney fire and a complaint about the Mackie brothers blocking the road with an overturned Jeep Cherokee.

"It wasn't like we did it on purpose." Jim Mackie stood in the thickly falling snow, scratching his chin and scowling at the Jeep that lay on its side like a tired old man taking a nap. "We got it cheap, and we were hauling it home. Gonna rebuild the engine, paint her up and sell her again."

"Less we decided to keep her," his brother put in, "hook a plow up to her and give Bing some competition."

Nate stood in the snow, in the miserable cold, and studied the mess. "You don't have a trailer hitch, a tow bar or any of the standard towing equipment. You just figured you'd haul this heap twenty miles with a couple of rusted chains hooked onto your truck with, what is this, balancing wire?"

"It was working." Bill furrowed his brow. "Till we hit that rut and she rolled over like a dog playing dead, it was working fine."

"We were working out how to get her up again. No cause for everybody to go crazy about it."

He heard the howl of what had to be a wolf, eerie and primal in the ghostly gloom. It served to remind him he was standing on a snowy, rural road on the edge of the Alaskan Interior with a couple of lamebrains.

“You’re blocking traffic and obstructing the town plow from clearing the road for people who have enough sense to drive responsibly. If this had happened five miles the other way, you’d have hampered the fire department on a call. Bing’s going to get this thing upright and tow it to your place. You’re going to pay his standard fee—”

“Son of a bitch!”

“And the fine for towing a vehicle without proper equipment or signage.”

Bill looked so pained that Nate wouldn’t have been surprised to see tears run from his eyes. “How the hell are we supposed to make a profit on this if you go around fining us and making us pay that penny-pinching Bing’s towing fee?”

“That’s a puzzle, all right.”

“Hell.” Jim kicked the bald rear tire of the Jeep. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.” Then he grinned. “We’ll fix her up good. Maybe you’ll want to buy her for the police department. Hook a plow to her cheap enough. Be useful.”

“Take it up with the mayor. Let’s get this off the road.”

It took Bing, his helper Pargo, both Mackies and Nate to get the job done. When it was over, and Bing was towing the Jeep away, Nate tried to roll the kinks out of his back.

“How much you pay for it?”

“Two thousand.” Bill got a gleam in his eye. “Cash.”

He calculated, loosely, what it would cost to make it roadworthy, how much Bing would skin them for over the towing. “I’m going to let this go with a warning. Next time you boys decide to be enterprising, get a tow bar.”

“You’re all right, chief.” Both Mackies slapped him on the back and

nearly sent him pitching face-first in the snow. "Pain having cops around, but you're all right."

"Appreciate that."

He drove the short distance back to town and swung to the curb when he saw David helping Rose out of their truck in front of the clinic.

"Everything okay?" he called out.

"Baby's coming," David yelled back.

Nate jumped out and took Rose's other arm. She continued to take slow, steady breaths, but she smiled at him with those melted chocolate eyes.

"It's okay. Everything's fine." She leaned against her husband as Nate opened the door. "I didn't want to go to the hospital in Anchorage. I wanted Doc Ken to deliver. Everything's fine."

"My mother has Jesse," David told him. He was looking a little pale, Nate thought. And he felt considerably pale himself.

"Do you want me to stay, do anything?" Please say no. "Call anyone?"

"My mother's coming." Rose let David help her out of her coat. "Doc said I could go anytime when I saw him last checkup. Looks like he was right. Four minutes apart," she told Joanna, who hurried over. "Steady and strong now. My water broke about twenty minutes ago."

And that, Nate decided, was about all a man, even one with a badge, needed to hear.

"I'll let you get to it." He took Rose's coat from David, hung it up. "Call if . . . whatever. Peter's out doing something for me, but I'll call him in if you want."

"Thank you."

They disappeared into the back, to do things he didn't care to think about. But he dug out his phone. It rang in his hand.

“Burke.”

“Chief? It’s Peter. We didn’t find any traps, any sign of them either. If you want, we can extend the search, um, widen the parameters.”

“No, that’ll do. Head on back. Your sister’s in the process of making you an uncle again.”

“Rose? Now? Is she okay? Is she—”

“She looked fine to me. She’s here at the clinic now. David’s with her. His mom has Jesse, and your mom’s on her way.”

“So am I.”

Nate stuffed the phone back in his pocket. He should probably stand by, at least until more of the family arrived. The waiting room of the clinic was as good a place as any to sit and think about tracks in the snow.

And what he would tell Meg when she returned to Lunacy.



SEVENTEEN

IT WAS A GIRL, eight full pounds of one, with the requisite complement of digits and a thatch of black hair. Her name was Willow Louise, and she was beautiful. This information came from Peter, who rushed into the station four hours after he'd rushed into the clinic.

Knowing his job, Nate had stopped by The Corner Store and picked up cigars. And while he was there found a sturdy five-ring binder. It was army green rather than the black he would have preferred but he bought it, charged it to the Lunacy PD account.

It would hold his notes, copies of all the reports and photos. It would be his murder book.

He passed the cigars out with some ceremony to Peter, Otto and an amused Peach. The gesture warmed the cold shoulder she'd given him since he'd snapped at her that morning.

After some backslapping and smelly smoke, he gave Peter the rest of the day off.

Nate hunkered back in his office, spent some time with the hole punch and the copier. He put his murder book in order. Having it and the board gave him that tangible foundation. It was cop work.

It was his work.

He intended to spend the next part of his shift harassing Anchorage with more calls, but Peach came in. She shut the door, sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

“Problem?”

“You think those tracks back at Meg’s place are something to worry about?”

“Well . . .”

“Otto told me, since you didn’t.”

“I, ah—”

“If you told me what’s what around here, I wouldn’t get irritable.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her lips twitched at that. “And don’t think I’m not onto you, Ignatious. You use that agreeable tone when you want to change the subject or make someone *think* you’re agreeable when you’re not.”

“Busted. I thought it was worth checking out, that’s all.”

“And you don’t mention it to your dispatcher because maybe you don’t think she’s smart enough to know you’re spending as much free time as you can manage out there snuggled up with Megan Galloway?”

“No.” Watching her, he tapped the corner of his murder book right, tapped it left. “But maybe I didn’t want to discuss said snuggling with the woman who brings me sticky buns. Because she might get the wrong idea.”

“And Peter and Otto wouldn’t?”

“They’re guys. Mostly guys only have one idea about . . . snuggling, so it didn’t apply. I’m sorry I was short with you this morning, and I’m sorry I didn’t keep my valued and respected dispatcher in the loop.”

“You’ve got a smooth way about you,” she said after a minute. “You worried about Meg?”

"I'm wondering what business anybody had sneaking around there, that's all."

"She'd be the first to tell you she can handle herself and always could. But I'm of the opinion it never hurts a woman to have a good man looking out. People around here, they don't hurt each other. Oh, some fist-fights now and then or some backbiting, what have you. But it's a place you feel safe, where you know if you had trouble, somebody'd lend a hand."

She drew the pencil out of her bun, ran it through her fingers. "Now this happens, and you wonder if feeling safe was just an illusion. People get worked up. Get scared and spooked."

"And a lot of those people are armed and territorial."

"And a little bit crazy," she added with a nod. "You're going to want to be careful."

"Who did Max trust enough to let get that close, Peach? Close enough to put a bullet in his head?"

She played with the pencil another moment, then stuck it firmly back in her bun. "You're not going to let it be suicide."

"I'm not going to let it be what it's not."

She sighed, twice. "Can't think of anybody he wouldn't have trusted. Same goes for me, and just about everyone in Lunacy. We're a community. We may argue and disagree and kick some ass now and then, but we're still a community. And that's next door to family."

"Put it this way. Who would Max have climbed with back when Galloway went missing that he'd trust well enough today?"

"God Almighty." Staring at him, she pressed a fist to her heart. "You're scaring me some. Putting it that way, you're making me think which one of my neighbors, my friends, might be a cold-blooded killer."

"I don't know that it's cold."

But you are, she realized suddenly. When it comes down to this, you are. “Bing, Jacob, Harry or Deb. Lord God. Ah, Hopp or Ed, though Hopp was never too keen on climbing. Mackie Sr., Drunk Mike if he was sober enough. Even The Professor went up a couple times. Short, summer climbs as far as I know.”

“John always had a thing for Charlene.”

“Holy hell, Nate.”

“Just getting a picture, Peach.”

“I guess so. Long as I can remember anyway. Not that she looked twice at him—well, anymore than she looked twice or three times at any man when she was with Pat. Then she married Karl Hidel, what, about six months after Pat left. Everybody knew, including Old Man Hidel, that she married him for his money, for The Lodge, but she was good to him.”

“Okay.”

Her gaze flicked to his board, away again. “How am I going to look at these people straight on now?”

“Downside of being a cop.”

She looked a little dazzled, and a little chagrined, at being termed a cop. “Guess it is.” She pushed to her feet, stood in her red sweater with pink Valentine hearts around the hem. “I want you to know before I say this last thing that I like Meg. I’ve got a lot of affection and respect for her. But I’ve got a lot of affection and respect for you, too, and I’m hoping she doesn’t break your heart.”

“Noted.”

He waited until she’d gone out to swivel around in his chair and stare out at the snow. A few weeks before, he hadn’t thought there was enough left of his heart to break. Now he didn’t know whether to be pleased or annoyed to realize there was.

Recovery? he wondered. Or stupidity? Maybe they were the same thing.

He swiveled back and made the calls.

SHE DIDN'T COME BACK that night. Nate spent it at her place, with her dogs. He worked off some frustration, and a growing anger, in her weight room. In the morning, when the snow had slowed to a thin drizzle, he drove back to Lunacy and the job.

SHE HADN'T CONTACTED HIM, and that was deliberate. Inconsiderate, Meg admitted when she settled back in the cab at Anchorage Airport. He'd probably worry some. He had worry-about-the-woman genes if she was any judge. He'd be hurt and he'd be mad, and that was also deliberate on her part.

The man had spooked her.

There'd been a look in his eye when he'd watched her climb into her plane. More than that was the sensation that look had caused to roll around inside her.

She wasn't after that sort of depth and feeling and *contact*. Why the hell couldn't people just enjoy some good, simple sex without mucking it up with . . . whatever. Loyalty was one thing, and she'd give and get that—as long as the blood ran hot. She wasn't her mother, ready to roll with whoever came along. But she wasn't a woman looking to share home and hearth for the long term either.

That's what he was about, and she'd known it. She'd known what was behind those sad, wounded eyes the first time she'd looked into them.

She'd had no business sleeping with a man who'd want or expect more than sex.

Wasn't her life complicated enough right now without feeling obliged to make adjustments for anybody else? For a man, for God's sake.

She'd been smart to take the extra jobs, and she loved the feeling of being flush. She'd been smarter yet to stay away from him and Lunacy for a couple extra days. Settle herself down.

God knew she needed to be settled for what she was about to do.

She hadn't contacted Nate, but she'd contacted Coben.

The body had been recovered and brought to the facilities in Anchorage.

Now she was on her way to the morgue to identify her father.

Alone. Another deliberate act. She'd been living her life, handling her affairs, dealing with her own details alone nearly as long as she could remember.

She had no intention of changing that now.

If it was her father in the morgue—and she knew in her gut it was—then *he* was her responsibility, her grief and, in a strange way, her release.

This she wouldn't share, even with Jacob. The only person she loved absolutely.

What she was doing was a formality, more a courtesy. Coben had made certain, in his flat and polite way, she knew that. Patrick Galloway had a record, and his prints were on file. Officially, he'd already been identified.

But she was next of kin and permitted to see him, to confirm the identity, to sign papers, give her statement. Deal with it.

When she arrived, she paid off the cab. Steeled herself.

Coben was there, waiting.

"Ms. Galloway."

“Sergeant.” She offered her hand, found his cool and dry.

“I know this is difficult and want to thank you for coming.”

“What do I have to do?”

“There’s some paperwork to clear. We’ll streamline it, make this as quick as we can.”

He led her through it. She signed where she needed to sign, accepted her visitor’s badge and hooked it on her shirt.

She kept her mind blank as he led her down a wide, white corridor and did her best to ignore the vague and persistent odors that snuck into the air.

He took her into a little room with a couple of chairs and a wall-mounted TV. There was a window, covered on the other side by tight, white blinds. Bracing herself, she walked to it.

“Ms. Galloway.” He touched her shoulder, lightly. “If you’ll look at the monitor.”

“Monitor?” Confused, she turned, stared at the dull, gray screen. “The television? You’re going to show him to me on television. Christ, don’t you think that’s more ghoulish than just letting me . . .”

“It’s procedure. It’s best. When you’re ready.”

Her mouth had gone dry, with a sandy coating that tasted foul. She was afraid to try to swallow it, afraid that it would simply come up again, erupt out of her in ripe sickness before she’d even begun.

“I’m ready.”

He lifted a phone from the wall, murmured something. Then, picking up a remote, aimed it at the screen and clicked.

She saw him only from the tops of his shoulders. They hadn’t closed his eyes, was her first, panicked thought. Shouldn’t they have closed his eyes? Instead, they were staring, the icy blue she remembered filmed

over. His hair, moustache, the stubbly beard were all the pure, dark black she remembered.

There was no ice now to silver them, to sheen like glass over his face. Was he still frozen? she thought dully. Internally? How long did it take for heart and liver and kidneys to thaw out when a hundred-and-seventy-pound man had been frozen solid?

Did it matter?

Her stomach shuddered, and she felt a tingling in the tips of her fingers, the tips of her toes.

“Can you identify the deceased, Ms. Galloway?”

“Yes.” There was an echo in the room—or in her head. Her voice seemed to go on forever, shimmering back, tinny and soft. “That’s Patrick Galloway. That’s my father.”

Coben clicked off the screen. “I’m very sorry.”

“I’m not finished. Turn it back on.”

“Ms. Galloway—”

“Turn it back on.”

After a brief hesitation, Coben complied. “I should warn you, Ms. Galloway, the media—”

“I’m not worried about the media. They’re going to splash his name around whether I worry about it or not. Besides, he might’ve enjoyed that.”

She wanted to touch him, had prepared herself for that. She couldn’t say why she’d wanted that contact—her skin against his skin. But she could wait, wait until they’d done what they needed to do to the shell of him. When they had, she’d give him that last touch, the touch she’d denied herself in childish pique so many years ago.

“All right. You can turn it off.”

“Would you like a minute? Would you like some water?”

"No. I'd like information. I want information." But her legs betrayed her, going loose at the knees so she had to let herself fold into a chair. "I want to know what happens now, how you intend to find the person who killed him."

"It might be best if we discussed this elsewhere. If you come back with me to—"

He broke off when Nate stepped into the room. "Chief Burke."

"Sergeant. Meg, you should come with me. Jacob's waiting upstairs."
"Jacob?"

"Yeah, he flew me in." Without waiting for assent, Nate took her arm. He pulled her up, led her from the room. "I'll get Ms. Galloway to the station, sergeant."

Her vision was blurry. Not tears, but shock, she realized. It was seeing her father dead on that screen, dead on TV, as if his life, the end of it, had been some sort of episode.

A cliff-hanger, she thought giddily. One hell of a cliff-hanger.

So she let him guide her and said nothing to him, nothing to Jacob, nothing at all until they walked outside.

"I need some air. I need a minute." Pulling her arm free, she walked half a block. She could hear the traffic, busy, city traffic, and could see out of her periphery the smears and blurs of color from people passing her on the sidewalk.

She could feel the cold on her cheeks, and the thin winter sunlight that filtered through those thickly overcast skies on her exposed skin.

She drew on her gloves, put on her sunglasses and walked back.

"Coben contacted you?" she asked Nate.

"That's right. Since you've been out of touch, there are some things you need to know before we talk to him again."

"What things?"

"Things I don't want to discuss on the damn sidewalk. I'll get the car."

"Car?" she said to Jacob when Nate strode away.

"He rented one at the airport. He didn't want you in a cab. He wanted you to have some privacy."

"Considerate. Which I'm not. You don't have to say it," she went on when Jacob stood in silence. "I can see it in your eyes."

"He tended your dogs while you were gone."

"Did I ask him to?" She heard the bitchiness in her voice and swore. "Damn it, *damn it*, Jacob, I'm not going to feel crappy for living my life the way I've always lived it."

"Did I ask you to?" He smiled a little, and the pat of his hand on her arm nearly broke the wall she'd built viciously against tears.

"They put him on a television screen. I couldn't even look at him, not really."

She walked to the curb when Nate pulled up in a Chevy Blazer. And climbing in, squared her shoulders. "What do I need to know?"

He told her of Max in the detached, straightforward style he would have used to inform any civilian with a need to know in regards to a case. He continued to speak, continued to drive with his eyes on the road, even when she turned her head to stare at him.

"Max is dead? Max killed my father?"

"Max is dead. That's a fact. The medical examiner ruled it suicide. The note left on his computer claimed responsibility for the murder of Patrick Galloway."

"I don't believe it." There was too much churning inside her, too much beating against that defensive wall. "You're saying Max Hawbaker went homicidal all of a damn sudden, stuck an ice ax in my father's chest, then climbed down the mountain and strolled back into Lunacy? That's just bullshit. That's stupid cop tie-it-up-and-forget-it *bullshit*."

"I'm saying that Max Hawbaker is dead, that the ME ruled it a suicide, determining same from physical evidence, and that there was a note written on the computer—which was decorated with some of Max's blood and brains—that claimed responsibility. If you'd bothered to contact anyone over the last few days, you would have been apprised and updated."

His voice was flat, and so, she noted, were his eyes. Nothing there, nothing that showed. She wasn't the only one with walls. "You're being awfully careful not to express your opinion, Chief Burke."

"It's Coben's case."

He left it at that and pulled into a visitor's slot at the parking lot of the State Police.

"HAWBAKER'S DEATH has been ruled a suicide," Coben stated. They gathered in a small conference room. Coben had his hands folded on a file on the table. "The weapon was his, and his prints—only his prints—were found on it. Gunpowder residue was found on his right hand. There was no sign of break-in or struggle. A whiskey bottle and a mug thereof were on his desk. Autopsy results prove he'd consumed just over five ounces of whiskey prior to his death. His prints—and only his—were on the keyboard of the computer. The wound, the position of the body, the position of the weapon, all indicate self-infliction."

Coben paused. "Hawbaker was acquainted with your father, Ms. Galloway?"

"Yes."

"And you're aware he had occasion to climb with your father from time to time?"

"Yes."

“Were you aware of any friction between them?”

“No.”

“You may also be unaware that Hawbaker was fired from the paper in Anchorage for drug use. My investigation indicates that Patrick Galloway was known to use recreational drugs. As yet, I’ve found no evidence that your father sought or had gainful employment in Anchorage, or elsewhere, after he left Lunacy, purportedly to seek same.”

She spared him a glance. “Not everyone works on the books.”

“True. It would appear that Hawbaker, whose whereabouts during the first and second week of February of that year cannot as yet be determined, met Patrick Galloway and together they sought to climb the south face of No Name. Supposition would be that during that climb, perhaps influenced by drugs and physical distress, Hawbaker murdered his companion and left the body in the ice cave.”

“It could be supposed that pink pigs fly,” Meg returned. “My father could have snapped Max in two without breaking a sweat.”

“Physical superiority wouldn’t hold up against an ax, particularly in a surprise attack. There was nothing in the cave that indicated a fight. We will, of course, continue to study and evaluate all evidence, but sometimes, Ms. Galloway, the obvious is the obvious because it’s truth.”

“And sometimes crap floats.” She got to her feet. “People always say suicide’s a coward’s way. Maybe that’s valid. But it seems to me it takes a certain amount of guts and determination to put the barrel of a gun to your head and pull the trigger. Either way, Max doesn’t fit the bill for me. Because either way is extreme, and he just wasn’t. What he was, Sergeant Coben, was ordinary.”

“Ordinary people do the unspeakable every single day. I’m sorry about your father, Ms. Galloway, and I give you my word that I’ll con-

tinue to work the case to its conclusion. But at this time, I have nothing more to tell you.”

“Another minute, sergeant?” Nate turned to Jacob and Meg. “I’ll meet you outside.” He closed the door behind them himself. “What else do you have? What aren’t you telling her?”

“Do you have a personal connection with Megan Galloway?”

“Undetermined at this particular time and irrelevant. Give and take, Coben. I can tell you that there are a good half dozen people still living in Lunacy who could have climbed with Galloway that winter, people Max knew as friends and neighbors and who could have sat in that office with him on the night of his death. The ME’s determination was made on facts, but he doesn’t know the town, the people. He didn’t know Max Hawbaker.”

“And you barely did.” Coben held up a hand. “But. I have evidence there were three people on that mountain at the probable time of Galloway’s death. Evidence that only two of them were in that cave. Evidence I believe was written by Galloway’s own hand.”

He pushed the file toward Nate. “He kept a journal of the climb. There were three of them up there, Burke, and I’m dead sure Hawbaker was one of them. I’m not sure he was the second man in that cave. There’s a copy of the journal in the file. I’m having an expert verify it’s Galloway’s writing from another sample, but eyeballing it, I’d say it is. It’s up to you if you want to share that with his daughter.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Against the grain some to share it with you. Just like it is to admit you’ve got more Homicide experience than I do and a better handle on the people of that town. Lunacy fits, Burke, because I’d say you’ve got at least one certifiable lunatic living under your nose.”

. . .

HE FLEW BACK WITH MEG, with the file tucked under his parka. After he'd read it, he'd decide if he'd tell her about it. Decide if he'd tell anyone.

Since he couldn't quite pull off the denial that he was in the air, he did what he could to enjoy the view.

Snow. More snow. Frozen water. Icy beauty with dangerous pockets. Not unlike his current pilot.

"Is Coben an asshole?" she asked abruptly.

"I wouldn't say so."

"Is that because you cops stick together, or is it an objective opinion?"

"Some of both, maybe. Following the evidence doesn't an asshole make."

"It does if either of you seriously believes Max whacked my father with an ax. I expected better from you."

"See where expectations get you?"

She took the plane into a deep, left dip that had his stomach sloshing toward his throat. Before he could object, she dipped right.

"You want me puking in your cockpit, you just keep it up."

"Cop ought to have a stronger stomach." She nosed down with such speed he could see nothing but that white world hurtling toward them—and his own mangled body in twisted, burning wreckage.

His vicious, violent cursing had her laughing as she shot the plane up again.

"You got a death wish?" he shot out.

"No. You?"

"I did, but I got over it. You pull that again, Galloway, and when we're on the ground, I'm going to knock you on your crazy ass."

"You wouldn't. Guys like you don't hit women."

"Oh, just try me."

She was tempted, was feeling just crazed enough to be tempted. "You ever knock the cheating Rachel around?"

He looked over. There was a wildness about her, in her eyes, vivid on her face. "Never even considered it, but I'm forging new territory every day."

"You're pissed off at me. All mopey and hurt because I didn't radio in every hour to make kissy noises."

"Just fly the plane. My ride's at your place. That's where Jacob picked me up."

"I didn't need you there. I didn't need you coming in to hold my hand."

"I don't believe I offered to hold your hand." He waited a beat. "Rose and David had a girl. Eight pounds. Named her Willow."

"Oh?" Some of that wild temper eased out of her face. "A girl? They're okay?"

"Fine and dandy. Peach says she's beautiful, but when I went to see, she looked like a really irritated guppy with black hair."

"Why are you talking to me conversationally when you're mad enough to pop me between the eyes?"

"I prefer to keep things neutral as Switzerland until you land the damn plane."

"Fair enough."

Once she had, she grabbed gear, hopped out. Slinging what she could over her shoulders, she bent to greet her excited dogs. "There you are, there's my guys. Miss me?" She shot a glance up at Nate. "Going to deck me now?"

"If I did, your dogs would rip my throat out."

"Sensible. You're a sensible man."

“Not always,” he said under his breath as he followed her to the house.

Inside, she tossed her gear aside then went directly to the fire to stack logs and kindling. She needed to deal with the plane. Drain the oil and haul it to the shed to keep it warm. Cover the wings.

But she wasn't feeling practical and efficient. She wasn't feeling quite sane.

“Appreciate you looking out for Rock and Bull while I was gone.”

“No problem.” He turned his back, carefully laying the file under his parka. “Busy were you?”

“Making hay.” She got the fire started. “Jobs fall into my lap, I take them. Now I've got a couple of nice fat fees to bank.”

“Good for you.”

She dropped into a chair, hooked a leg over the arm. All insolence now. “Back now, and it's good to see you, lover. You got time, we can go upstairs for some welcome-home sex.” She smiled as she began unbuttoning her shirt. “Bet I could get you up for it.”

“That's a poor imitation of Charlene, Meg.”

It wiped the smile off her face. “You don't want to fuck, fine. No need to insult me.”

“But there seems to be a need for you to hurt me, make me mad. What is it?”

“Your problem.” She pushed up, started to shove by him, but he gripped her arm, swung her back.

“Nope,” he said and ignored the warning growl from the dogs. “It appears to be yours. I want to know what it is.”

“I don't *know!*” The distress in her tone turned the growls into snarls. “Rock, Bull, relax. Relax,” she said more calmly. “Friend.”

She knelt down, hooked an arm around each of them, nuzzled.

“Damn it. Why don’t you yell or storm out or tell me I’m a cold, heartless bitch? Why don’t you give me a damn break?”

“Why didn’t you bother to contact me? Why have you been spoiling for a fight since you saw me?”

“Hold on a minute.” She got up, snapped her fingers for the dogs to follow her into the kitchen. After digging out Milk Bones, she tossed one to each dog. Then she leaned back against the counter and looked at Nate.

Not quite gaunt anymore, she thought. He’d put on a little weight in the last month or so. The kind that looked good on a man, the sort that spoke of muscles toning. His hair looked wild and sexy and a little past trimming time. And those eyes, calm and wrenchingly sad and irresistible, stayed level and patient on hers.

“I don’t like being accountable to anyone. I’m not used to it. I built this place, built my business, built my life a certain way because they suit me.”

“Are you worried I’m going to start holding you accountable? Expecting you to change the order of things for me?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I see a difference between accountability and caring. I was worried about you. For you. And your dogs weren’t the only ones who missed you. As to the order of things, I’m still working on my own. A day at a time.”

“Tell me something. No bullshit. Are you falling in love with me?”

“Feels like it.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Like something coming back inside me. Warming up and trying to find its rhythm. It feels scary,” he said, crossing to her. “And good. Good and scary.”

“I don’t know if I want it. I don’t know if I’ve got it.”

“Me, either. But I do know I’m tired of being tired, and empty, and just going through the motions so I can get by. I feel when I’m with you, Meg. I feel, and some of that’s painful. But I’ll take it.”

He cupped her face in his hands. “Maybe you should try that for now, too. Just take it.”

She closed her hands over his wrists. “Maybe.”



EIGHTEEN

JOURNAL ENTRY · *February 19, 1988*

He's gone crazy. Out of his freaking mind. Too much Dex, and Christ knows what else. Too much altitude. I don't know. I think I've calmed him down. Storm came up so we've taken shelter in an ice cave. Hell of a place. Like some sort of miniature magic castle with ice columns and arches and sudden drops. Wish all of us had gotten here. I could use a little help bringing old Darth back to earth.

He's got some whacked-out idea that I tried to kill him. We had some trouble on the rappel, and he's screaming at me, into the wind, that I want to kill him. Came at me like a maniac, and I had to knock him flat. Calmed him down though. Got him calm. He apologized, laughed about it.

We'll just take a breather here, pull ourselves together. We've been playing the first-thing-I'll-do-when-I'm-back-in-the-world game. He wants a steak; I want a woman. Then we both agreed we wanted both.

He's still jittery; I can see it. But hell, the mountain does that to you. We need to get back to Han, get moving down. Get back to Lunacy.

Weather's clearing, but there's a feeling in the air. Something's coming down. It's time to get the hell off the mountain.

. . .

IN HIS OFFICE, with the door shut, Nate read the last entry in Patrick Galloway's climbing journal.

Took you another sixteen years to get off the mountain, Pat, he thought. Because something sure as hell came down.

Three went up, he thought, and two came down. And two kept silent for sixteen years.

But there were only two in that cave, Galloway and his killer. Nate was more certain than ever that the killer hadn't been Max.

Why had the killer let Max live for so long?

If Han equaled Max, Max had been injured, not seriously, but enough to make the descent difficult. He'd been the least experienced and hardy of the three if he was reading correctly between the lines of Galloway's journal.

But the killer had brought him down, let him live another sixteen years.

And Max had kept the secret.

Why?

Ambition, blackmail, loyalty? Fear?

The pilot, Nate decided. Find the pilot and the story he had to tell.

He locked the copy of the journal in a desk drawer along with his murder book, pocketed the keys.

When he went out, he found Otto just coming in from patrol. "Ed Woolcott said somebody broke the lock on his ice-fishing shack and took off with two of his rods, his power auger, a bottle of single-malt scotch, and defaced the shack with paint."

His face pink from the cold, Otto headed straight to the coffeepot. "Kids most likely. I told him he's the only one around here who locks his shack, and that just makes kids want to break in."

"How much is it worth. Altogether?"

"*He* says about eight hundred. StrikeMaster power auger runs about four hundred." Both disgust and derision covered his face. "That's Ed for you. You can pick up a good hand auger for maybe forty, but he's gotta fly first class."

"We have a description of the property?"

"Yeah, yeah. Any kid stupid enough to show off a rod that has Ed's name brass-plated on it deserves to get busted. Scotch? They likely drank themselves sick on it. Probably just drilled a hole through the ice somewhere with the auger, did a little fishing and drinking. I expect they'll ditch the gear somewhere or try to sneak it back to the shack."

"It's still breaking and entering and theft, so let's follow it through."

"You can bet they're insured, and for more than he paid for them. You know he talked to a lawyer about suing Hawley for running him off the road back around the first of the year? A lawyer. Jesus H. Christ."

"I'll talk to him."

"Good luck." Otto sat at his desk with his coffee and scowled at his computer screen. "Gotta write this up."

"I'm heading out, doing a follow-up on something." He paused. "You do much climbing these days?"

"What do I want to go up a damn mountain for? I can see them fine from here."

"But you used to."

"Used to tango with loose women, too."

"Yeah?" Amused, Nate sat on the corner of Otto's desk. "You're a deep pool, Otto. These women wear tight dresses and skinny high heels?"

Humor battled grouchiness. "They did."

"With those sexy slits in the skirt, on the side so their legs slid out like a slice of heaven when they moved?"

Otto's glower lost its war with a smile. "Those were the days."

"Bet they were. I never learned to tango, or climb. Maybe I should."

"Stick with the tango, chief. Surer to live through that."

"The way some people talk about climbing, it's like a religion. Why'd you give it up?"

"Got tired of flirting with frostbite and broken bones." His eyes darkened as he looked down into his coffee. "Last time I went up was on a rescue. Party of six, avalanche took them. We found two. The bodies. You've never seen a man taken out by an avalanche."

"No, I haven't."

"Count your blessings. That was nine years back next month. I never went up again. Never will."

"You ever climb with Galloway?"

"Couple times. He was a good climber. Damn good for an asshole."

"You didn't like him?"

Otto began to play hunt-and-peck with the keyboard. "If I disliked every asshole I met, there wouldn't be many left. Guy got himself stuck in the sixties. Peace, love, drugs. Easy way out, you ask me."

In the sixties, Nate thought, Otto had been sweating in a jungle in Nam. That sort of friction—soldier and hippy—could blow up under less stress than a winter climb.

"You yammer about living the natural life and save the frigging whales," Otto went on as he jabbed at keys, "and what you're doing is sitting on your ass living on the government you bitch about all the time. Got no respect for that."

"I guess you wouldn't have had a lot in common, what with you coming from the military."

"We weren't drinking buddies." He stopped typing, looked up at Nate. "What's all this about?"

"Just trying to get a full picture of the man." As he rose, he asked, casually, "When you did climb, who'd you use as a pilot?"

"Mostly Jacob. He was right here."

"I thought Jacob did some climbing, too. You ever go up with him?"

"Sure. Get Hank Fielding maybe, out of Talkeetna to fly us, or Two-Toes out of Anchorage, Stokey Loukes if he was sober." He shrugged. "Plenty of pilots around to take up a party if you got the money to pool. If you're really thinking of going up, you get Meg to take you and get yourself a professional guide, not some yahoo."

"I'll do that, but I think I might settle for the view from my office."

"Smarter."

Interrogating his own deputy didn't give him any pleasure, but he'd write up the conversation in his notes. He couldn't picture Otto going berserk on speed and attacking a man with an ax. But he couldn't picture him doing the tango with a woman in a tight dress either.

People did a lot of changing in sixteen years.

He went to The Lodge and found Charlene and Cissy serving the early dinner crowd. Skinny Jim worked the bar. And The Professor manned his stool, nursing a whiskey and reading Trollope.

"Got a pool starting on the Iditarod," Jim told him. "You want in?"

Nate sat at the bar. "Who do you like?"

"I'm leaning toward this young guy, Triplehorn. An Aleut."

"He's gorgeous," Cissy commented when she stopped by with empties.

"Doesn't matter what he looks like, Cissy."

"Does to me. Need a Moosehead and a double vodka rocks."

"Sentimental money's on this Canadian, Tony Keeton."

"We're sentimental over Canadians?" Nate wondered as Jim poured the vodka.

"Nah. The dogs. Walt Notti bred his dogs."

“Twenty then, on the Canadian.”

“Beer?”

“Coffee, thanks, Jim.” While Jim and Cissy dealt with drinks and continued to argue over their favored mushers, Nate turned to the man beside him. “How you doing, John?”

“Not sleeping very well. Yet.” John marked his page, set the book down. “Can’t get the image out of my head.”

“It’s tough. You knew Max pretty well. Wrote some articles for his paper.”

“Monthly book reviews, the occasional color piece. Didn’t pay much, but I enjoyed it. I don’t know if Carrie will keep the paper going. I hope she does.”

“Somebody told me Galloway wrote some pieces for *The Lunatic*. Back in its early days.”

“He was a good writer. He’d have been a better one if he’d focused on it.”

“I guess that’s true of anything.”

“He had a lot of raw talent, in several areas.” John glanced over his shoulder, toward Charlene. “But he never buckled it down. Wasted what he had.”

“Including his woman?”

“I’d be biased on that subject. In my opinion, he didn’t put much effort into his relationship or much of anything else. He had a couple of chapters of several novels, dozens of half-written songs, any number of abandoned woodworking projects. The man was good with his hands, had a creative mind, but no discipline or ambition.”

Nate weighed the possibilities. Three men, drawn together by location, avocation—the writing—and the climb. And two of the three in love with the same woman.

"Maybe he'd have turned that around, if he'd had the chance."

John signaled for Jim to refill his glass. "Maybe."

"You read his stuff?"

"I did. We'd sit around over a beer, or two, or some other recreational drug," John added with a half smile. "And discuss philosophies and politics, writing and the human condition. Young intellectuals." John lifted his glass in toast. "Who were going absolutely nowhere."

"You climbed with him?"

"Ah, adventure. Young intellectuals don't come to Alaska without needing to have them. I enjoyed those days and wouldn't have them back for a Pulitzer." Smiling the way a man does over past glories, he sipped at the fresh whiskey.

"The two of you were friendly?"

"Yes. We were friends, on that intellectual level, in any case. I envied him his woman; that was no secret. I think it amused him and made him feel a bit superior to me. I was the educated one. He'd tossed the prospect of a superior education away, yet look what he had."

John brooded into his drink. "I imagine he'd still be amused that I continue to envy him his woman."

Nate let that sit a minute, drank coffee. "Did you two climb with a group, or alone?"

"Hmm." John blinked, like a man coming out of a dream. Memories, Nate thought, were just another kind of dream. Or nightmare. "Groups. There's camaraderie in the insanity. The best I remember was a summer climb on Denali. Groups and solos picking their way up that monster like ants on a giant cake. Base camp was like a little town all of its own and a crazed little party."

"You and Pat?"

"Mmm, along with Jacob, Otto, Deb and Harry, Ed, Bing, Max, the

Hopps, Sam Beaver, who died two years ago from a pulmonary embolism. Ah, let's see, Mackie Sr. was there, as I recall. He and Bing started to beat the snot out of each other for something, and Hopp—the deceased Hopp—broke it up. Hawley was there, but he fell over drunk and cracked his head. We wouldn't let him climb. And there was Missy Jacobson, a freelance photographer with whom I had a short, intense affair before she moved back to Portland and married a plumber."

He smiled at that. "Oh yes, Missy, with her big, brown eyes and clever hands. Those of us from Lunacy had put our party together like a holiday. We even had a little flag we were going to stick on the summit for photo ops for the paper. But none of us made it to the top."

"None of you?"

"No, not then. Pat did later, as I recall, but on that climb we were plagued with bad luck. Still, that night at base camp we were full of possibilities and goodwill. Singing, screwing, dancing under that wonderful, endless sunlight. As alive as I think any of us had ever been."

"What happened?"

"Harry was sick. Didn't know it, but by morning he was running a fever. Flu. He said he was fine, and nobody wanted to argue. He didn't make it five hours. Deb and Hopp got him back down. Sam fell, broke his arm. Missy was getting sick. Another group coming down took her back to base. The weather turned, and those of us who were left pitched tents and huddled down praying for it to pass. It didn't, got worse. Ed got sick, then I got sick. One thing after another until we had to call it and go back. Miserable end to our little town holiday."

"Who got you back to town?"

"Sorry?"

"You have a pilot?"

"Oh. I remember being stuffed into that plane, everyone sick or

pissed or sullen. Can't remember the pilot. Some friend of Jacob's, I think. I was dog sick, that I recall vividly. I wrote about it at some point. Tried for a little humor in a piece for *The Lunatic*."

He polished off the whiskey. "I always regretted not hoisting that flag."

Nate let it go and wandered to Charlene. "Can you take a break?"

"Sure. When Rose is back on her feet."

"Five minutes. You're not that crowded yet."

She shoved her order pad in her pocket. "Five. We don't keep things moving in here, people will start going to The Italian Place. I can't afford to lose my regulars."

She clipped her way out of the restaurant into the empty lobby. The sound of her heels made Nate think of the tango, and he wondered what sort of vanity would overcome a woman's need for comfort when she was going to be hopping on her feet for a few hours.

"To your knowledge, Patrick Galloway was going to Anchorage to look for work."

"We've been through this."

"Indulge me. If he went there, and got a wild hair to do a climb, who would he most likely hire to fly him to Sun Glacier?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know? He wasn't supposed to be climbing, he was supposed to be looking for a job."

"You lived with him for close to fourteen years, Charlene. You knew him."

"If it wasn't Jacob, and he was in Anchorage, it would probably have been Two-Toes or Stokay. Unless he got that hair when neither of them were around, then he'd have hired whoever was handy. Or more likely have bartered something for the flight. He didn't have any money to spare. I only gave him a hundred out of my household fund. Any more, I knew he'd piss it away."

"You know where I can find either of those pilots?"

"Ask Jacob or Meg. They run in that world; I don't. You should have told me they brought him back down, Nate. You should have told me and taken me to see him."

"There was no point in putting you through that. No," he said before she could object. "There wasn't."

He nudged her into a chair, sat beside her. "Listen to me. It won't help you to see him that way. It won't help him."

"Meg saw him."

"And it ripped her up. I was there; I know it. You want to do something for him, for yourself? You want to find your closure? Make time to go see your daughter. Be her mother, Charlene. Give her some comfort."

"She doesn't want comfort from me. She doesn't want anything from me."

"Maybe not. But offering it might help you." He got to his feet. "I'm going out to see her now. Anything you want me to tell her?"

"You could tell her I could use a hand around here for the next couple of days, unless she's got something more important to do."

"Okay."

IT WAS FULL DARK when he got back to Meg's. He could see she looked calmer, steadier and more rested. The position of the pillows and throw on the sofa told him she'd had a nap in front of the fire at some point.

He'd figured out the best way to handle things and handed her a bouquet of mixed mums and daisies he'd picked up at The Corner Store. They weren't particularly fresh, but they were flowers.

"What's this for?"

“See, I realized we were working backward, in the traditional sense. I got you into bed, or you got me, so that pressure’s off. Now I’m romancing you.”

“Is that right?” She sniffed at them. Maybe it was a cliché, but she had a weakness for flowers, and men who thought to offer them. “Then the next step would be what, a pickup at a bar?”

“I was thinking more of a date, dinner, say. But you could pick me up in a bar. That works for me, too. Meanwhile, I’d like you to pack some things and come back with me to The Lodge for the night.”

“Oh, so we can still have sex during this romancing period.”

“You could get your own room, but I’d rather have the sex. You could bring the flowers, too. And the dogs.”

“And why would I leave the comfort of my own home to have sex with you in a hotel room?” She twirled the flowers, watched him over them. “Oh, for the thrill factor in our backward relationship. It’s stupid enough to appeal to me, Burke, but I’d as soon stay here, and we can pretend we’re in some cheap motel room. We can even see if there’s any porn on cable.”

“That sounds really good, but I’d like you to come back with me. Someone was skulking around in your woods the other night.”

“What are you talking about?”

He told her about the tracks.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me about this when it was light, so I could see for myself?” She tossed the flowers down on the table and headed for her parka.

“Hold on. It snowed, a good six inches. You won’t be able to see anything. Otto and Peter already tromped around in there anyway. I didn’t tell you before because you had enough on your plate. This way you had a nap and some quiet time. Pack what you need, Meg.”

"I'm not going to be driven out of my house because somebody walked around in the woods. Even if I want to take a page out of your book of paranoia and conclude he or she was spying or up to some nefarious plan, I wouldn't be driven out. I can—"

"Handle yourself. Yes, I know."

"You think I can't?" She spun on her heel, marched into the kitchen.

When he came in behind her she was yanking a rifle out of the broom closet.

"Meg."

"Just shut up." She checked the chamber. To his distress, he saw it was fully loaded.

"Do you know how many accidents go down because people keep loaded weapons in the household?"

"I don't shoot anything by accident. Come out here."

She pulled open the door.

It was dark, it was cold and he had an irritated woman with a loaded rifle on his hands. "Why don't we just go inside and—"

"That branch, two o'clock, seven feet up, forty feet out.

"Meg—"

She shouldered the rifle, got her bead and fired. The blast of it boomed in his head. The branch exploded, six inches in.

"Okay, you can shoot a rifle. Gold medal for you. Come inside."

She fired again, and the six inches of branch jumped on the snow like a rabbit.

Her breath steamed out as she fired again and obliterated what was left.

Then she picked up her spent shells, walked back inside and replaced the rifle.

"A plus on marksmanship," Nate commented. "And though I have no intention of letting it come to that, I will point out that blasting the shit

out of a tree branch isn't anywhere near the same level as putting a bullet into flesh and bone."

"I'm not one of your dainty Lower 48 women. I've taken down moose, buffalo, caribou, bear—"

"Ever shot a human being? It's not the same, Meg. Believe me, it's not. I'm not saying you're not smart or capable or strong. But I am asking you to come back with me tonight. If you won't, I'll stay here. But your mother could use some help at The Lodge with Rose out. She's overworked and churned up about your father."

"Charlene and I—"

"I can't connect with mine, you know. My mother. She barely speaks to me, and my sister stays away from both of us because she just wants to have a nice, normal life. Can't blame her."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"She's two years older. Lives in Kentucky now. I haven't seen her in . . . five years, I guess. The Burkes aren't big on family gatherings."

"She didn't come to see you when you were shot?"

"She called. We didn't have a lot to say to each other. When Jack was killed and I was shot up, my mother came to see me in the hospital. I thought, as much as I was thinking, that maybe, just maybe, something would come out of all that horror. I thought we'd work our way back to each other. But she asked me if I'd stop now. If I'd resign from the force before she had to visit my grave instead of my hospital bed. I told her no, that it was all I had left. She walked out without another word. I don't think we've exchanged more than a dozen words since.

"The job cost me my best friend, my wife, my family."

"No, it didn't." She couldn't stop herself from taking his hand, lifting it to her cheek. Rubbing it there. "You know it didn't."

"Depends how you turn it, that's all. But I didn't give it up. I'm here

because even at the bottom, it was the one thing I kept. Maybe it's what stopped me from sinking all the way down, I don't know. But I do know you've got a chance to make some sort of peace with your mother. You ought to take it."

"She could've asked me to give her a hand."

"She did. I'm just the filter."

On a sigh, she turned around and gave the under-the-sink cabinet a testy little kick. "I'll chip in some time, but don't look for happy-ever-after on this, Nate."

"Ever after's too long to worry about anyway."

HE DROPPED HER OFF at The Lodge, then went back to the station.

He spent some time writing up notes from his conversations with Otto and John, then began a search-and-run on the names of the pilots Otto had given him.

He found no criminal on Stokey Loukes, nothing more than a few traffic violations. He lived in Fairbanks now and was employed as a pilot for a tour organization called Alaska Wild. Their web page promised to show clients the real Alaska, and help them bag game, reel in enormous fish and capture scenes of The Great Alone all for various package prices. Group rates available.

Fielding moved to Australia in '93 and died of natural causes four years later.

Thomas Kijinski, aka Two-Toes was a different story. Nate found several pops for possession of controlled substances, intent to distribute, D&D, petty larceny. He'd been kicked out of Canada, and his pilot's license had been suspended twice.

On March 8, 1988, his body had been found stuffed in a trash bin on

a dock in Anchorage, multiple stab wounds. His wallet and watch had been missing. Conclusion: mugging. The perpetrator or perpetrators had never been identified.

Shine a light on it another way, Nate thought as he printed out the data, and you have a cleanup rather than a mugging. Pilot takes three, brings back two. Couple weeks later, the pilot's stabbed and stuffed in the garbage.

Made a man stop and think.

With the station quiet around him, Nate uncovered his case board. He brewed more coffee and dug up a can of processed ham from the storeroom to make himself what passed for a sandwich.

Then he sat at his desk, studying the board, reading his notes, reading Patrick Galloway's last journal.

And spent the long evening hours thinking.

NINETEEN

HE DIDN'T TELL HER about the journal. When a woman ended the day tired and irritable, it seemed unwise to give her one more thing to add to the mix.

He had to give Meg points for shoving up her sleeves and pitching in at The Lodge, and bonus points for rolling out of bed the next morning and handling the breakfast crowd. Especially since the tension between her and Charlene was thick enough to slice up and fry alongside the bacon.

Still, when he took a table, she walked over, coffeepot at the ready. "Hi. I'm Meg, and I'll be your server this morning. Since I'm looking for a really big tip, I'm going to wait until after you eat to bash this pot over Charlene's head."

"I appreciate that. How long before Rose comes back on?"

"Another week or two anyway, and then Charlene's going to let her set her own schedule until she feels ready for full-time."

"You gotta say, that's obliging."

"Oh, she's plenty obliging with Rose." She shot a short and bitter look over her shoulder in Charlene's direction. "She loves her. It's me she can't tolerate. What'll it be, handsome?"

"If I say the two of you are probably after the same things, in different ways, are you going to bash me over the head with that coffeepot?"

"I might."

"Then I'll have the oatmeal."

"You eat oatmeal?" She wrinkled her sexily crooked nose. "Without somebody holding a knife to your throat?"

"It sticks with you."

"Yeah, for weeks."

With a shrug, she walked off to take more orders, top off mugs of coffee.

He liked watching her move. Quick, but not rushed, sexy, but not obvious. She wore the ubiquitous flannel shirt, open over a white thermal. A silver pendant bounced lightly from its chain between her breasts.

She'd slapped some makeup on—he knew because he'd watched her, and *slapped* was the operative word. Fast, efficient, absent, quick brushes of color on the cheeks, shadowy stuff on the eyes, then careless flicks of mascara on those long, dark lashes.

And when a man noticed how a woman handled mascara, Nate mused, he was sunk.

Charlene came out with an order; Meg went back with her pad. They didn't acknowledge each other, except for the sudden dip in temperature.

He picked up his coffee, pulled out his notebook to use it as a shield when Charlene headed in his direction. Even a man who was sunk had enough self-preservation to stay out of the middle of two sniping women.

"Want me to top that off for you? She get your order? I don't know why she can't be more pleasant to the customers."

"No, thanks. Yes, she did. And she was pleasant."

"To you, maybe, because you're balling her."

"Charlene." He caught the unmuffled snickers from the booth where Hans and Dexter habitually sat. "God."

"Well, it's no secret, is it?"

"Not anymore," he muttered.

"Spent the night in your room, didn't she?"

He set his coffee down. "If that's a problem for you, I can take my things to her place."

"Why should it be a problem for me?" Despite his no, thanks, she topped off his coffee in an automatic gesture. "Why should anything be a problem for me?"

To his utter terror, her eyes filled with tears. Before he could think how to handle it, or her, she rushed out of the room, coffee sloshing in her pot.

"Women," Bing said from the booth behind him. "Nothing but trouble."

Nate shifted around. Bing was plowing through a plate of eggs, sausage and home fries. There was a sneaky grin on his face, but if Nate didn't mistake it, a little gleam of sympathy in his eyes.

"You ever been married, Bing?"

"Was once. Didn't stick."

"Can't imagine why."

"Thought about doing it again. Maybe I'll get myself one of those Russian mail-order women, like Johnny Trivani's doing."

"He's going through with that?"

"Sure. Got it down to two, last I heard. Thought I'd see how it works out for him, then look into it."

"Uh-huh." Since they were having what passed as a conversation, Nate decided to probe. "Do you do any climbing, Bing?"

“Used to some. Don’t like it much. I got free time, I’d rather go hunting. You looking to recreate?”

“Might be. Days are getting longer.”

“You got city all over you, and a skinny build. Stick with town, chief, that’s my advice. Take up knitting or some shit.”

“I’ve always wanted to macramé.” At Bing’s blank look, Nate only smiled. “How come you don’t have a plane, Bing? Guy like you, likes his independence, knows his machines. Seems like a natural.”

“Too much work. I’m gonna work, it’s gonna be on the ground. Besides, you have to be half crazy to pilot.”

“So I hear. Somebody mentioned some pilot to me, funny name. Six-Toes something.”

“That’d be Two-Toes. Lost three of them on one foot to frostbite or some shit. Now that was one crazy bastard. Dead now.”

“That so? Crashed?”

“Nah. Got himself beat up in a fight. Or no . . .” Bing’s brow wrinkled. “Stabbed. City crime. Teach you to live with that many other people.”

“There you go. Did you ever go up with him?”

“Once. Crazy bastard. Flew a bunch of us out to the bush for caribou. Didn’t know he was higher than the frigging moon until he damn near killed us. Blackened his eye for it,” Bing said with relish. “Crazy bastard.”

Nate started to respond, but Meg came out of the kitchen—and the front door opened.

“Chief Nate!” Jesse flew in, steps ahead of David. “You’re here.”

“You, too.” Nate flicked a finger down the boy’s nose. “David. How’s Rose, and the baby?”

“Good. Really good. We’re giving her a break, having a man’s breakfast here.”

“Can we sit with you?” Jesse asked. “’Cause we’re all men.”

“You bet.”

“And the best-looking men in Lunacy.” Meg slid the oatmeal, a plate of wheat toast and a bowl of mixed fruit in front of Nate. “You driving yet, Jesse?”

He laughed and scooted into the booth beside Nate. “No.” He bounced. “Can I fly your plane?”

“When your feet reach the pedals. Coffee, David?”

“Thanks. You sure this is all right?” he asked Nate.

“Sure. I’ve missed my usual breakfast buddy here. How’s it feel to be the big brother?”

“I dunno. She cries. Loud. And then she sleeps. A lot. But she held my finger. She sucks on Mom’s boobie to get milk.”

“Really,” was all Nate could think to say.

“Why don’t I get you some milk, in a glass?” Meg poured coffee for David.

“Rose heard you were pitching in for her.” David added sugar to his coffee. “She wanted you to know she appreciates it. We all do.”

“No problem.” Meg glanced over when Charlene came back in. “I’ll get that milk while you decide what to have for your manly breakfast.”

Nate left his truck for Meg and walked to the station. The sunlight was weak, but it was light. The mountains were misted by clouds, the kind he now knew carried snow with them. But the bitter wind and the cold it whipped up had mellowed. The walk warmed his muscles, cleared his head.

He passed familiar faces, exchanged greetings in the absent way people who saw each other almost every day were wont to do.

And he thought, with some surprise, that he was making a place for himself. Not just an escape, a refuge or a stopgap, but a place.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd thought about leaving or just drifting to some other town, some other job. It had been days since he'd had to force himself out of bed in the morning or since he'd sat in the dark for hours, afraid to face sleep and the nightmares that ran with it.

The weight could still come back, into his head, his shoulders, his gut, but it wasn't as heavy, wasn't as often.

He looked to the mountains again and knew he owed Patrick Galloway. Owed him enough for cracking open that dark so that he couldn't and wouldn't give up trying to find him justice.

He stopped when Hopp swung her four-wheel over. She rolled down her window. "I'm on my way to see Rose and the baby."

"Give them my best."

"You ought to pay a call yourself. Meanwhile, couple of things. Feds'll be setting off a controlled avalanche the day after tomorrow so the road between here and Anchorage is going to be blocked."

"Say that again?"

"Feds set off an avalanche from time to time, clear the mountain. Got one scheduled for about ten o'clock A.M., day after tomorrow. Peach just got the dispatch and told me when I stopped in. You'll need to get a bulletin out."

"I'll take care of it."

"And there's a damn bull moose wandering around the school yard, and when a couple of kids decided to chase it, it bashed into a couple of parked cars, then chased back. They've got the kids inside now, but that moose is *pissed*. What're you grinning at?" she demanded. "You ever see a pissed-off moose?"

"No, ma'am, but I guess I'm going to."

"If you can't head it out of town, you're going to have to take it down." She nodded when he stopped grinning. "Somebody's going to get hurt."

"I'll take care of it."

He quickened his pace. Damn if he was going to shoot some stupid moose, especially on school grounds. Maybe that labeled him an Outsider, but that's the way it was.

He pushed into the station and saw his staff, and Ed Woolcott. Otto's face was flushed with temper, and his nose and Ed's were all but bumping.

Avalanches, a pissed-off moose, pissed-off deputy, pissed-off banker. A well-rounded morning.

"It's about damn time," Ed began. "I need a word with you, chief. In your office."

"You'll have to wait. Peach, get the information on the scheduled avalanche to KLUN. I want it announced every half hour through the day. And make up some fliers, get them posted around town. Peter, I want you to ride out, personally inform anyone residing south of Wolverine Cut that this is coming and they'll be cut off until the roads are cleared."

"Yes, sir."

"Chief Burke."

"Just a minute," he said to Ed. "Otto, we've got an angry moose down at the school. Already some vehicular damage." He strode to the weapon cabinet as he spoke. "I need you to come with me, see if we can herd it out."

He unlocked the cabinet, chose a shotgun with the sincere prayer he wasn't going to have to use it.

"I've been waiting ten minutes," Ed complained. "Your deputies are capable of handling a simple wildlife situation."

"You can wait here, or I'll come by the bank as soon as this situation is under control."

"As deputy mayor—"

"You're being a real pain in the ass," Nate finished. "Otto, we'll need your car. Mine's back at The Lodge. Let's go."

"Looked like a landed trout, gulping," Otto said when they were outside. "He's going to want to fry you for that, Nate, sure as God made little green apples. Ed doesn't take to being stonewalled."

"He's outranked. The mayor told me to deal with the moose; I'm dealing with the moose." He climbed in Otto's car. "We're not shooting it."

"Why do you have the shotgun?"

"I plan to intimidate him."

The town's schools were a connected trio of small, low-slung buildings with a pretty grove of trees on one side and a little squared-off field on the other. He knew the younger kids were allowed out into the field twice a day for a kind of recess—weather permitting.

Since most of the kids had been born there, it took some pretty serious weather to cancel recess.

The high schoolers liked to use the grove to hang out—maybe smoke or fool around—before and after classes.

There was a flagpole, and at this time of day both the U.S. and the Alaskan flag should have been up and waving. Instead, they were a little under half-staff and flicking fitfully in the disinterested wind.

"Kids must've been hoisting the flags when they spotted it," Nate muttered. "Decided to chase after it."

"Just going to irritate it doing that."

Nate glanced at the two smashed-up cars in the tiny lot. "Looks like."

He spotted the moose now, at the edge of the grove, rubbing his antlers on bark. He also saw a light trail of blood. Since no one had reported an injury, he assumed it was moose blood.

"Doesn't look like he's causing any trouble now."

"Looks like he cut himself up bashing those cars, so he's not going to

be in a good mood. If he decides to stay around, he'll be trouble, especially if some idiot kid slips by a teacher and decides to chase it again or runs home to get a gun and shoots at it."

"Well, shit. Get as close as you can, and maybe it'll move off."

"Charge, more likely."

"I'm not shooting some moose while it's scratching itself on a tree, Otto."

"Somebody else will, if he sticks close to town. Moose meat's a good meal."

"It's not going to be me, and it's not going to be within town limits, damn it."

He saw the moose turn as they edged closer and saw to his consternation a look more fierce than dumb in those dark eyes. "Hell. Shit, damn, fuck. Blast the horn."

Moose weren't slow. Where had he gotten the idea they were? It galloped toward them, apparently more challenged by the sound of the engine and horn than intimidated. Still cursing, Nate hitched himself out of the window, aimed the gun toward the sky and fired. The moose kept coming, and adding his own oaths to the mix, Otto swerved to avoid collision.

Nate pumped, fired into the air again.

"Shoot the son of a bitch," Otto demanded as he whipped the wheel and nearly dumped Nate out of the window.

"I'm not doing it." Pumping the shotgun again, Nate fired into the snowy ground, a foot in front of the moose.

This time it was the moose that veered off and, with his ungainly trot, headed into the trees.

Nate fired, twice more, to keep it going.

Then he dropped back on the seat, huffed out two breaths. From be-

hind them came the sounds of hoots and cheers and laughter as kids popped out of the school doors.

“You’re crazy.” Otto pulled off his cap to scrub a hand over his crew cut. “You’ve got to be crazy. I know you shot a man dead back in Baltimore and sent him to hell. And you can’t put some buckshot into a moose?”

Nate took another deep breath and pushed the image of the alley out of his mind. “The moose was unarmed. Let’s go, Otto. I need to deal with the deputy mayor. You can come back and take the reports.”

THE DEPUTY MAYOR had not deigned to wait. In fact, Peach told Nate, he’d stormed out after a short diatribe on why it had been a mistake to hire some lazy, puffed-up Outsider.

Taking it in stride, Nate passed the shotgun to Otto, snagged a two-way and set out to walk to the bank.

Somewhere in the wide, wide world, Nate imagined there was a place colder than Lunacy, Alaska, in February. And he hoped to God he never paid a visit there.

The sky had cleared, which meant any stingy heat had lifted up and away. But the sun streamed, so with luck they might hit a sweaty twenty degrees by midafternoon. And the sun, Nate saw, was ringed by a rainbow circle, a colorful halo of reds and blues and golds. What Peter had told him was called a sun dog.

People were out and about, taking advantage of the bright morning to do their business. Some of them called out greetings to him or flipped waves.

He saw Johnny Trivani, the hopeful groom, chatting on the sidewalk with Bess Mackie, and Deb outside the store washing windows as if it had been a fine spring day.

He lifted a hand to Mitch Dauber, who sat in the window of KLUN spinning records and observing life in Lunacy. He expected Mitch would have something philosophical to say about the moose before the end of the day.

February. It struck him as he stood on the corner of Lunatic and Denali. Somehow it had gotten to be so far into February they were nearly to March. He was coming right up on the line of his sixty days, his own point of return. And was still here.

More than here, he thought. Settling into being here.

Thoughtful, he crossed over and into the bank.

There were two customers doing business at the bank counter, and another picking up mail from the post office. From the way they and the tellers eyeballed him, Nate imagined Ed had still been in a temper when he'd come in.

In the silence that fell, he nodded, then stepped through the short, swinging gate that separated the bank lobby from the offices.

It didn't boast a drive-through, and there were no ATMs lurking outside, but the bank had a nice carpet, a few local paintings on the wall and a general air of efficiency.

He walked to the door that had Ed Woolcott's name on a shiny brass plaque, and knocked.

Ed opened it himself, sniffed. "You'll have to wait. I'm on the phone."

"Fine." When the door shut in his face, Nate simply slipped his hands into his pockets and studied the paintings.

He noted one of a totem in a snowy woods was signed by Ernest Notti. One of Peter's relatives? he wondered. He still had a lot to learn about his Lunatics.

He glanced around. There was no protective glass between teller and

customers, but there were security cameras. He'd checked the place out already, before he'd opened his own accounts.

Now that conversation had started up again, he tuned into snatches. Movie night, an upcoming bake sale to benefit the school band, the weather, the Iditarod. Small-town small talk, and nothing like what he would have heard if he'd walked into one of the branches of his bank in Baltimore.

Ed kept him waiting ten minutes, a little power flex, and was stone-faced, with a little flush on his cheekbones, when he opened the door.

"I want you to be aware I've made a formal complaint to the mayor."

"Okay."

"I don't like your attitude, Chief Burke."

"Noted, Mr. Woolcott. If that's all you want to tell me, I need to get back to the station."

"What I want is to know just what you're doing about the theft of my property."

"Otto's handling that."

"My property was vandalized and damaged. Expensive fishing gear has been stolen. I believe I'm entitled to the attention of the chief of police."

"And you've got it. A report has been duly filed, and the officer in charge is pursuing the matter. The theft isn't being taken lightly by me or my staff. We have a detailed description of the stolen property, and if the thief is dumb enough to use it, talk about it or try to sell it within my jurisdiction, we'll make an arrest and recover your property."

Ed's eyes were slits in his rawhide face. "Maybe if I was female, you'd take more interest."

"Actually, I don't think you'd be my type. Mr. Woolcott," he continued, "you're upset, and you're angry. You've got a right to be. You were

violated. The fact that it was, most likely, kids being stupid doesn't lessen that violation. We'll do everything we can to get your property back. If it helps, I'll apologize for being abrupt with you earlier. I was concerned that children might be injured, and that took priority. You have two children in that school. I assume their safety would take precedence over an update on your stolen property."

The flush had died down, and a long huff told Nate the crisis had passed. "Be that as it may, you were rude."

"I was. And distracted. To be frank, I've got a lot on my mind just now. Patrick Galloway's murder, Max's apparent suicide." He shook his head, as if overwhelmed. "When I signed on for this job, I expected to be handling, well, at worst the sort of theft you've experienced."

"Tragic." Ed sat now and was gracious enough to gesture Nate to a chair. "It's so damn tragic and shocking. Max was a friend, a good one."

He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "I thought I knew him and had no idea, no clue, that he was contemplating suicide. Leaving his wife, his kids that way." He held up his hands, a kind of silent apology. "I guess I'm more upset about it than I've wanted to admit, and it's been eating at me. I owe you an apology, too."

"Not necessary."

"I've let this theft build up. Defense mechanism. It's easier to get riled about that than think about Max. I've been trying to help Carrie with the details on his memorial and some of the finances. A lot of paperwork comes along with death. It's hard. It's hard to deal with it."

"Nothing harder than burying a friend. You knew him a long time."

"A long time. Good times. Our kids have grown up together. And this on top of finding out about Pat . . ."

"You knew him, too."

He smiled a little. "Before I married Arlene. Or as she'd say, before she

tamed me. I wasn't always the solid citizen and family man I am now. Pat was . . . an adventure. Those were good times, too. In their way."

He looked around his office as if it belonged to someone else, and he couldn't quite remember how he'd come to be there. "It doesn't seem possible. None of it."

"It's been a shock for everyone to find out about Galloway."

"I thought he'd taken off—everyone did—and it didn't surprise me. Not really. He was restless, reckless. That's what made him so appealing."

"You climbed with him."

"God." Ed sat back now. "I used to love to climb. The thrill and the misery. Still do love it, but I rarely have, or take, the time. I've been teaching my son."

"I've heard Galloway was good."

"Very good. Though that recklessness was there. A little too much of it for comfort for me, even when I was thirty."

"Do you have any thoughts on who would've been climbing with him that February?"

"None, and believe me, I have thought about it since we heard the news. I suspect he might have picked up someone, or a group, and taken them up for a winter climb. It was the sort of thing he might do on impulse, to earn a little money, and for the buzz. And one of them killed him, God knows why." He shook his head. "But aren't the State Police handling that investigation?"

"They are. I'm just curious, unofficially."

"I doubt they'll ever find out who it was, or why. Sixteen years. God, how things change," he murmured. "You hardly notice as they do. You know I ran the bank single-handed at one time, lived here, too. Kept the money in that safe right over there."

He gestured to a black floor safe.

"I didn't know that."

"I was twenty-seven when I landed here. Going to carve my place out of the wilderness, civilize it to my liking." He smiled now. "Guess I did just that. You know, the Hopps and Judge Royce were my first customers. Took a lot of faith for them to put their money in my hands. I never forgot it. But we had a vision, and we built this town out of it."

"It's a good town."

"Yes, it is, and I'm proud of my part in making it. Old Man Hidel was here, with the original Lodge. He banked with me, too, after a while. Other people came along. Peach with her third, no it was her second husband. They lived out in the bush awhile, came here for supplies and company from time to time. She came back for good when he died. Otto, Bing, Deb and Harry. Takes strength of character and vision to make a life here."

"Yes, it does."

"Well . . ." He drew air in through his nose. "Pat had vision, of his own kind, and he was a character. I don't know about that strength. He was an entertaining bastard, though. I hope this will all be put to rest properly. Do you think we'll ever know, for certain, what happened up there?"

"Odds aren't favorable. But I think Coben will give it the proper time and effort. He'll look for the pilot, and anyone who might have seen Galloway in the days before he went up. They might want to talk to you, about who he used as a pilot on his climbs."

"It would've been Jacob, most usually. But surely if Jacob had taken him up, he'd have reported it when Pat didn't come back." He lifted his shoulders. "So, logically, it would have to have been someone else. Let me think . . ."

He picked up a silver pen, tapped it absently against his desk blotter. "When we climbed with Jacob, as I recall, he sometimes used—what

was his name—Vietnam vet, Lakes . . . Loukes. That’s it. Then there was this maniac. Two-Toes, they called him. Do you think I should call this Coben and tell him?”

“Couldn’t hurt. I should get back.” He rose, held out a hand. “I hope we’re square now, Mr. Woolcott.”

“Ed. And we are. Damn auger. I paid too much for it, so it’s a double annoyance. It’s insured, so are the rods, but it’s the principle.”

“Understood. Listen, I’ll take a ride out to your ice shack, take a look around.”

Satisfaction settled over Ed’s face. “Now, I appreciate that. I put a new lock on. Let me get you the keys.”

SINCE MOOSE AND APOPLECTIC deputy mayors had been dealt with, Nate swung by to see Rose. He made what he hoped were appropriate noises over the baby, who looked like a black-headed turtle swaddled in a pink blanket.

He called in, let Peach know he was taking a run out to the lake to run another check of Ed’s ice shack. On impulse, he stopped by the dog run at The Lodge, sprang Rock and Bull, and took them with him so they could have an hour of free rein.

It was a nice ride, with the radio turned from Otto’s choice of country-western to Nate’s preference for alternative rock. He drove to the lake to the bouncy beat of blink-182.

Ed’s shack sat alone on a rippled plate of ice. It was, Nate estimated, about the size of two generous outhouses stuck together and was fashioned out of what he thought might be cedar shakes. A little more upscale than he’d expected, with the sides silvered by weather and topped by a peaked roof.

And set well apart from the huddle of other shacks.

He decided it looked like the manor house and the peasant village, amusing himself.

The dogs raced over the ice like a couple of kids on school holiday, while Nate slipped and slithered his way across.

The quiet was amazing—like a church—with a kind of musical hush from that light wind through the snow-drenched trees. The sun dog shimmered in the icy blue sky and had the frozen lake gleaming.

The sense of silence and solitude was so strong that he jumped, reached for his weapon when he heard the long, echoing call overhead.

The eagle circled, gold-brown and gorgeous against the heavy sky. The dogs bumped each other playfully, then dived into the bank of snow at the edge of the lake.

He could see Meg's plane from here, he realized. The red flash of it just at the long curve of the frozen water. And other little snips of civilization if he cared to look. There, a stream of smoke from a chimney, a glimpse of a house through the thick trees, his own breath streaming out.

He let out a short laugh. Maybe he should give this ice-fishing business a shot. There had to be something to be said for the primitive rush of dropping a line through a hole in the ice and sitting in the quiet on a plate of frozen water.

He crossed to the shack and saw the sloppy spray-painted **DICK SHIT!** spewed across the door in virulent yellow.

Another sign of civilization, Nate thought as he fished out the keys.

Ed had bolted on two new padlocks, each with a fat, shiny chain.

He dealt with them, stepped in.

The graffiti artists had been at work inside. Obscenities squirreled around the walls. He adjusted his annoyance with Ed. He'd have been royally pissed, too, to find this sort of thing in one of his sanctuaries.

He could see the rack where the rods had been, as well as the utter tidiness under the disorder the vandals had caused.

The tackle, the Coleman stove, the chairs hadn't been touched, but a cabinet he suspected had held the scotch—Glenfiddich, according to Otto's report—and some food supplies was empty and open.

He found cleats that snapped on boots and made a mental note to buy some for himself. He found a first-aid kit, extra gloves, hat, an old, worn parka, snowshoes and a couple of thermal blankets.

The snowshoes were hung on the wall, just over a screaming yellow ASSHOLE. If they'd been used recently, Nate couldn't tell.

There was fuel for the stove, a fish scaler and a couple of wicked-looking knives. A number of magazines, a portable radio. Extra batteries.

Nothing, he supposed, that you wouldn't expect to find in an ice-fishing shack in Alaska.

When he walked out again, he circled around. He looked down toward Meg's plane, then across where her woods began.

He tried to picture Ed Woolcott—pompous, but tough—skulking around the woods on snowshoes.



TWENTY

THE MOOSE WAS the hot topic for most of the week. Nate was razzed or congratulated on his moose dispersing technique, depending on the source.

Nate considered the moose a kind of blessing. It took people's minds off murder and death, at least for a little while.

He'd considered going back to speak with Carrie, and some strategies for getting past the probability she'd slam the door in his face and refuse to see him. The notification that the body had been released and cremated—and that Meg was flying Carrie into Anchorage to pick up the ashes—decided him.

"I'm going to need to come with you," he told Meg.

"Look, chief, it's going to be hard enough to deal with coming and going without you there to rub the circumstances in her face."

"I don't intend to do any rubbing. I'm going to go see her now. We'll meet you at the river."

"Nate." She finished dragging on her boots. "Maybe you think the Lunacy PD has to be represented here, for whatever cop reason, but send Otto or Peter. Fair or not, you're the last person Carrie wants to see today."

"We'll meet you at the river." He was halfway to the door of the room they were temporarily sharing, when it struck. He turned, grinned.

“Rock and Bull. I’m slow, but I just got it. Must be all the moose talk. Rocky and Bullwinkle.”

“You are slow. Or you had a deprived childhood.”

“No. I just figured they were macho names, like, I don’t know, boxers. The Rock, Raging Bull, whatever.”

Her lips tipped up at the corner. Why was it he could charm her even when she was annoyed with him. “The Rock’s a wrestler.”

“Close enough. See you in an hour.”

He’d already informed his staff—who had the same pessimistic attitude as Meg—that he’d be making the trip to Anchorage that morning. So he drove straight to Carrie’s.

The door swung open before he was halfway up the walk. She stood in a black sweater and pants, blocking the door. “You can just turn around and go back to your car. I don’t have to talk to you, and I don’t have to let you into my house.”

“I’d like five minutes, Carrie. I sure as hell don’t want to stand out here shouting what I have to say to you through a closed door. I don’t think you’d like that either. It’d be easier on both of us if you give me that five minutes inside, especially since I’m going to be on the plane with you in an hour.”

“I don’t want you with me.”

“I know that. If you still feel that way after you hear what I have to say, I’ll send Peter instead.”

He could see the struggle on her face. Then she turned, walked away, leaving the door open to him and the brisk cold.

He walked in, shut the door. She stood in her living room, her back to him, her arms folded against her chest tight enough that he saw her knuckles whiten against her own biceps.

“Are your kids here?”

"No, I sent them to school. They're better off with the routine, with their friends. They need some normal. How can you come here like this?" She whirled around. "How can you come here and harass me on the day I'm going to bring my husband's ashes home? Don't you have any heart, any compassion?"

"I'm here officially, and what I'm going to say to you is confidential."

"Officially." She all but spat it. "What do you want? My husband's dead. He's dead and he can't defend himself against the terrible things you say about him. You won't say those things in his house. This is Max's house, and you won't say those horrible lies about him here."

"You loved him. Did you love him enough to give me your word that what I do say here won't be repeated? To anyone. Anyone, Carrie."

"You'd dare ask me if I loved—"

"Just yes or no. I need your word."

"I've got no interest in repeating your lies. Say whatever you have to say and get out. I'll promise to forget you were even here."

It would have to do. "I believe Max was on the mountain with Patrick Galloway at the time of Galloway's death."

"Go to hell."

"I also believe there was a third person with them."

Her mouth trembled open. "What do you mean, a third person?"

"Three of them went up, two of them came down. I believe that third person is responsible for Galloway's murder. And I believe he killed Max or induced Max to kill himself."

While she stared, her hand groped out, fumbled its way to the back of a chair. Her body seemed to sink into it. "I can't understand you."

"I can't give you all the details, but I need your cooperation . . . I need your help," he amended, "to prove what I believe. There was a third man, Carrie. Who was it?"

"I don't know. God, I don't know. I—I told you someone killed Max. I told you he didn't kill himself. I told Sergeant Coben. I keep telling him."

"I know. I believe you."

"You believe me." Tears gushed out of her eyes, rained down her cheeks. "You believe me."

"I do. But the fact is the ME's ruled it suicide. Coben may have his doubts, and he may have his instincts, even a certain amount of circumstantial evidence, but he doesn't have the investment we do. He doesn't have the room or the time to push on this the way I do. We're going to need to go back, a long time. You're going to need to try to remember details, feelings, conversations. It's not easy. And you're going to need to keep this to yourself. I'm asking you to take a risk."

She brushed at tears. "I don't understand."

"If we're right, and someone killed Max because of what happened on that mountain, that someone may be watching you. He may wonder what you know, what you remember, what Max might have told you."

"You think I could be in danger?"

"I think I want you to be very careful. I don't want you discussing this with anyone, not even your kids. Not your best friend, not your priest. No one. I want you to let me go through Max's things, his personal papers. Everything—here and at the paper. And I don't want anyone to know about it. I want you to go back and think about that February. What you did, what Max did, who he spent time with, how he behaved. Write it down."

She stared at him with something that looked like hope fighting through the grief. "You're going to find out who did this to him? To us?"

"I'm going to do everything I can."

She mopped at her cheeks. "I said terrible things about you to—to anyone who'd listen."

"Some of them were probably true."

"No, they weren't." She pressed her fingers to her eyes now. "I'm so confused. I'm sick, sick in my heart, in my head. I made myself hire Meg to take me, to bring us back, because I needed to prove I didn't believe . . . that I wasn't ashamed. But part of me was." She dropped her hands, and her eyes were shattered. "If he was up there, he must have known . . ."

"We're going to work all that out. Some of the answers may be hard, Carrie, but it's better than just having questions."

"I hope you're right." She got to her feet. "I need to fix myself up a little." She started out, then stopped and turned around. "That business with the moose, out at the school? Max would've loved that. He would have loved writing that up. 'Troublemaking Moose Expelled from Lunacy High,' or something like that. That sort of story just tickled him. A man like that, a man who could find such pleasure in something so foolish, he couldn't have done what was done to Pat Galloway."

"I WANTED TO MARRY HIM almost as soon as I met him. I liked the way he'd talk and talk about starting up a town paper, how it was important to record the little things, just as much as the big ones."

Carrie looked out the window in her seat beside Meg, and Nate could see her gaze was on the mountains. "I came here to teach, and I stayed because it got inside me. I wasn't a very good teacher, really, but I wanted to stay. And I liked the odds—a lot more men than women. I was looking for a man." She slid a sideways glance at Meg.

"Who isn't?"

Carrie laughed a little, but the sound was hoarse. "I wanted to get mar-

ried and have kids. One look at Max and I decided he'd fit the bill. He was smart, but not too smart, cute, but not so handsome I'd worry other women would be after him. A little wild—more that he wanted to be wild—but the sort you knew you could fix up with some time and effort.”

She broke off, and her hitching breaths were an obvious fight against tears.

“Do women make checklists of stuff like that? You know, like you do on a house you're thinking of buying. Fixer-upper. Solid foundation but needs new trim. That kind of thing?” Nate asked.

Carrie let out a watery giggle, pressed her hand to her lips.

“We do. Or I sure did the closer I got to thirty. I didn't love him right off, I mean not like some huge, hot burst. But I got him into bed, and that part was good. Another check in the plus column.”

There was another beat of silence, then Nate cleared his throat. “Ah, are those particular checks size-specific or color-coded?”

“Don't worry, Burke, you get a nice fat check in that column, too,” Meg interjected. She flipped him a glance that was full of appreciation and understanding. He was keeping it light and easy for the widow. As much as he could. She looked over at Carrie. “You always looked good together. Like a team.”

“We were a good team. Maybe I never got that big, hot burst, but I'll tell you when I fell in love with him—really, absolutely, no-going-back in love with him. It was when he held our daughter for the first time. The look on his face when he lifted her up that first time, the way he looked at me when he did. All that shock and wonder, the thrill and the terror, all of it on his face. So I didn't get an explosion, but what I got was warm and steady and real.

“He didn't kill your father, Meg.” She looked out the window again.

“The man who held that baby the way he did, he couldn’t have killed anyone. I know you have reason to think different, and I want you to know how much I value and appreciate your . . . kindness in taking me today.”

“We both lost someone we loved. It wouldn’t prove anything if we slapped each other about it.”

Women, Nate thought, were tougher and more resilient than any man he knew. Including himself.

HE TRACKED DOWN COBEN as soon as they landed, and though it felt callous, he left Meg with Carrie to deal with the arrangements and release of Max’s ashes.

“Thomas Kijinski aka Two-Toes. He looks like the best bet. There’s a pilot, Loukes, works out of Fairbanks now, and a couple others Galloway used occasionally.” He set the list he’d made on Coben’s desk. “But Kijinski pops for me. He ends up dead, a couple of weeks after Galloway.”

“Stabbing, investigated and deemed a mugging.” Coben drew in a breath. “Kijinski played with some bad boys. He gambled pretty heavy, was suspected of running drugs. Time of his death he had markers out for somewhere in the neighborhood of ten large. Investigating officer believed one of his IOUs was collected in flesh, but he couldn’t prove it.”

“And you’re buying that kind of coincidence?”

“I’m not buying anything. The fact is, Kijinski lived a bad life and met a bad end. If he happened to be the pilot who took Galloway on his last climb, he isn’t going to tell us about it.”

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem for you to give me a copy of the file on him.”

Coben sucked air through his nose again. “I’ve got the press on my ass on this, Burke.”

“Yeah, I’ve caught some of the reports. I’ve given some reporters an official statement.”

“You’ve seen crap like this?” He yanked a copy of a tabloid out of a drawer, tossed it down. The headline screamed:

ICE MAN RECOVERED FROM FROZEN GRAVE

There was a picture of Galloway, as he’d been in the cave, in lurid color under the boldface type.

“You had to expect shit like this,” Nate began.

“One of the recovery team had to take that shot. One of them cashed in, made a few bucks by selling it to the tabloids. My lieutenant’s breathing down my neck. I don’t need you doing the same.”

“There was a third man on the mountain.”

“Yeah, there was, according to Galloway’s journal. Of course, we can’t prove he died after that last journal entry. With sixteen years between, we’ve got a lot of room on time of death. Could’ve been then, or a month after. Six months after.”

“You know better than that.”

“What I know.” Coben lifted one hand. “What I can prove.” Then the other. “ME ruled suicide, and my lieutenant likes it. Too damn bad Hawbaker didn’t name names in his note.”

“Give me the file, and I’ll get names. You can smell it the same as I can, Coben. If you want to close the lid on the stink, that’s up to you. But I’ve got a memorial to go to and a woman with two kids who deserves to know the truth, so she can learn to live with it. I can take a few days and go hunting for information here in Anchorage, or you can give me the file and let me get back to Lunacy.”

“If I’d wanted to close the lid, I wouldn’t have given you Galloway’s

journal.” Frustration rippled around him in nearly visible waves. “I’ve got brass to answer to, and they want the lid closed. The prevailing theory is that Hawbaker killed Galloway, and the third man—the one who was injured according to the journal. And if you look at this straight on, that’s what plays. Why would Galloway’s killer spare an injured man, a potential witness? Hawbaker does them both. Then fear of exposure, remorse, and he offs himself.”

“That’s tidy.”

Coben flattened his lips. “Some like it tidy. I’ll get you the file, Burke, but you keep your personal investigation low-key. The lowest. The press, my lieutenant, anybody gets wind you’re poking around, and I’m helping you, it comes down on me.”

“Done.”

MEG WAS SO SATURATED with Carrie’s grief that she didn’t mind spending another evening waiting tables. Given a choice, she’d have preferred to load up her dogs and fly out to the bush. Somewhere. Anywhere she could spend a couple of days completely alone, away from the pulls and tugs of people and all their needs.

That, she thought as she swung into the overheated kitchen at The Lodge, was the Galloway gene. Take off, flip it off, shrug it off. Life’s too short for hassles.

But there was enough of something else in her—Christ, she hoped it wasn’t Charlene—to make her stay and see it through.

She hooked her orders on the turntable for Big Mike. Two meat loafs, a vegetarian special and the salmon surprise.

She picked up the completed orders from her last trip in, balanced them with such ease it made her wince. Nothing against waitpersons

the world over, she thought as she carried the food out, but she wished she wasn't so good at it. It wasn't on the scope for her, even as a fallback career.

God, she wanted the air, some silence. Her dogs. Her music. Some sex. She was ready to pop.

She worked another two hours, through the clatter, the complaints, the gossip, the bad jokes. She could feel the pressure building up inside her, the desperate need to get out, get away. When the crowd thinned out, she caught Charlene at the kitchen door.

"That's all you get for tonight. I'm taking off."

"I need you to—"

"You're going to have to need somebody else. Shouldn't be hard for you." She headed for the stairs. She wanted a shower, and by God, she was packing up her things and going home.

This time it was Charlene who caught her.

"We're going to have another rush in an hour. People coming in to drink, to—"

"Oddly enough, I don't care." She'd have closed the door in Charlene's face, but her mother was through the door and slamming it behind her.

"You never did. I don't *care* that you don't care, but you owe me."

Forget the shower, she'd just pack. "Bill me."

"I need help, Megan. Why can't you ever just help me out without being so bitchy about it?"

"I inherited the bitch from you. Not my fault." She ripped open a drawer and dragged whatever was in it out, tossed it on the bed.

"I built something here. You benefited from that."

"I don't give a rat's ugly ass about your money."

"I'm not talking about money." Charlene grabbed clothes from the

bed and hurled them into the air. "I'm talking about this place. It means something. You never cared. You couldn't wait to get away from it and from me, but it means something. We've been written up in the paper, in magazines, in tour guides. I got people working here who depend on their paycheck to put food on their table and clothes on their kids' backs. I've got customers who come in here every damn night because it means something."

"You've got," Megan agreed. "It's nothing to do with me."

"That's what he always said, too." Enraged, she kicked at a pair of jeans on the floor. "You look like him, you sound like him."

"That's not my fault either."

"Nothing was ever his fault. Bad run of luck playing poker, gee, guess there's no money this week. Need a little space, Charley, you know how it goes. I'll be back in a couple of days. Something'll turn up; stop nagging at me. Somebody had to pay the bills, didn't they?" Charlene demanded. "Somebody had to pay for medicine when you got sick or come up with the cash to get you shoes. He could bring me all the wildflowers he could pick in the summer or write me pretty songs and poems, but they didn't put food on the table."

"I put food on my table. I buy my own shoes." But she'd calmed a little. "I'm not saying you didn't work. You did plenty of scheming on top of it, but it's your life. You got what you wanted."

"I wanted him. Goddamn it. I wanted him."

"So did I, so we both lost out there. Nothing we can do about it." She'd come back for her things, Meg thought. Right now she just needed out. She walked to the door, hesitated.

"I called Boston, talked to his mother. She's . . . she won't block you from claiming his body, from burying him here."

"You called her?"

"Yeah, it's done." She opened the door.

"Meg, Megan, please. Wait a minute." Charlene sat on the side of the bed, clothes strewn on the floor around her. "Thank you."

Hell. Oh, hell. "It was just a phone call."

"It matters." Charlene gripped her hands together in her lap and stared at them. "It matters so much to me. I was so mad at you for going to Anchorage to . . . to see him. For cutting me out."

Meg closed the door, leaned back against it. "That's not what I was doing."

"I wasn't a good mother. I wanted to be at first. Tried to be. But there was always so much to do. I didn't know there'd be so much to do."

"You were pretty young."

"Too young, I guess. He wanted more." She looked up then, shrugged. "He just loved you to pieces, and he wanted more kids. I wouldn't let it happen. I just didn't want to go through it all again, getting fat and tired, going through that *pain*. Then having all that to do. And the money that was never there when you needed it or just wanted it. He pushed for it, and I pushed back with other things, until it seemed we spent half the time pushing each other. And I was jealous because he doted on you, and I was always the outsider, always the one saying no."

"I guess somebody had to."

"I don't know if we'd have made it. If he'd come back, I don't know if we'd have stuck it out. We started wanting such different things. But I know if we'd split, I know he'd have taken you."

As if to keep her hands busy, she smoothed the bedspread on either side of her. "He'd have taken you," she repeated. "I'd've let him. You should know that. He loved you more than I could."

It was hard, harder than anything she could remember, to walk to the bed and sit. "Enough to scrape the money together to buy me shoes?"

"Maybe not, but enough to take you camping so you could look at the stars. Enough to sit at the fire and tell you stories."

"I like to think you'd have made it if he'd come back."

Charlene looked over, blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. I like to think you'd have found a way to make it work. You'd already stuck together a long time. Longer than a lot of people do. I want to ask you something."

"This seems like the time."

"Was there a big, hot blast the first time you met him? When you fell for him?"

"Oh God, yes. Nearly burned me up. And it never stopped. I'd think it was dead, cold and dead, when I got mad enough or tired enough. But then he'd look at me, and it was back. I never had that with anyone else. I keep waiting for it, but I never get it."

"Maybe you should be looking for something else this time. Somebody told me recently about the benefits of a good, steady warmth."

She rose, picked up scattered clothes. "I can't go back down there and work tonight."

"Okay."

"I'll work breakfast for you, but I need you to get somebody else to cover for Rose. I've got to get back to my place, my life."

Charlene nodded, pushed to her feet. "You gonna take the sexy cop with you?"

"Up to him."

SHE PACKED UP, tidied the room. Meg considered leaving Nate a note but decided that was a little too rude, a little too wrong, even for her.

Didn't have her car anyway, she remembered, not that she was above "borrowing" his. Or someone else's. And telling them about it later.

In the end, she slung her knapsack over her shoulder and hoofed it to the station, after a detour by The Italian Place.

He'd said he'd be working late, covering the desk. Whatever. Since his car was locked, she debated briefly. She could dig out her handy set of keys, probably find one that would work. But he wouldn't appreciate it if he'd set the car alarm.

Which, being city bred, he might have done.

She carried her pack, and the large pizza, into the station.

Awfully damn quiet, was her first thought. How did the man work without music? She tossed her pack aside, started to call out, but he appeared in the doorway.

If she hadn't been looking, she wouldn't have seen the way his hand rested on the butt of his holstered weapon—or the way it drifted away when he smiled at her.

"I smell food—and woman. Gets my caveman instinct going."

"Pizza, pepperoni. Figured you could use something hot, which includes me, about this time."

"That's a big affirmative to both. What's the knapsack for?"

She hadn't seen him look at it. "I'm running away. Want to come with?"

"Fight with Charlene?"

"Yes, but that's not why. We sort of made up, actually. I just have to get the hell out of here, Burke. Too many people for too long. Gets me edgy. I thought pizza, then some sex back in my place would scratch that itch before I hurt someone and you had to arrest me."

"That's a plan."

"I was going to just go, but I didn't. I want the points for doing it this way."

“Scoreboard’s adjusted. Why don’t you bring that back? I’ll dig up something to wash it down with.”

“Got that.” She dug one-handed into her duffel, pulled out a bottle of red. “Liberated it from the bar at The Lodge. We’ll have to drink it all, to dispose of the evidence.”

She passed him the bottle as she walked past him, then turned into his office and set the pizza on his desk.

He’d closed his files, both hard copy and computer, and had tossed the blanket over the board when he heard the outer door open.

“Napkins?” she asked.

It wasn’t gentlemanly, but he couldn’t leave her alone in the office. “Under Peach’s counter.” He pulled out his Swiss Army knife, levered out the corkscrew. “Never actually used this one before. Lot of damn work, but hey.” He muscled out the cork as she came back in. “Success.”

She tossed down the napkins, got two mugs from beside his coffee-maker. “What’s this?” she tugged the side edge of the blanket with a finger.

“Don’t.” At her look of surprise, he shook his head. “Just don’t. Let’s eat.”

They sat, divvied up wine and pizza. “Why are you working so late, and alone? Are you killing time until I finish my moonlighting for the night?”

“That’s one part. But tell me, what did you fight with Charlene about?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Her being demanding, me being ungrateful, and so on and so forth. Then we came around to my father, and . . . other things, and some of it made sense to me. Enough for me to be able to admit he wasn’t the

easiest guy to be with, as a partner, and that she, in her own strange and annoying way, probably did the best she could. That we both loved him, more than we can love each other.”

She poured more wine, deliberately picked up a second slice of pizza though her stomach had gone knotty. “Under that blanket’s about my father, isn’t it? I’ve seen enough cop movies, enough cop TV, Burke, to know you people stick up photographs and reports and what have you when you’re investigating.”

“I’m not investigating anything, officially. Yes, it has to do with your father, and I want you to leave that blanket where it is.”

“I told you before, I’m not delicate.”

“And I’m telling you now, there are some things I don’t share. Won’t ever.”

She was silent, studying her pizza. “That the sort of statement that had your wife doing another man?”

“No,” he said evenly. “She couldn’t have cared less about my work.”

She closed her eyes a moment, then made herself open them and meet his. “That was a cheap shot. I’m not above a cheap shot.” She tossed the pizza down. “I don’t like myself very much tonight. That’s why I have to get out, get away, get back to who I am when I like me.”

“But you came here first, to bring me pizza and wine.”

“You’ve got a little hook in me somewhere. I don’t know if it’s going to stick, but it’s there for now.”

“I love you, Megan.”

“Oh, Jesus, don’t say that *now!*” She sprang up, pulling at her hair as she paced. “When I’m in this pissy, bitching mood. Do you *look* to be kicked in the face by women, Ignatious? Are you just itching for somebody else to smack your heart around?”

“It was that big blast for me,” he went on calmly. “It took a big blast

to break through, I'd guess, since I've been pretty busy wallowing for the last year. Most of the time, lately, it banks down to a nice simmer. Easier to live with the simmer than the blast. Now and then it kicks up again though. Goes right through me like a fireball."

She stopped, dropped down again because her knotty stomach was busy doing flips. "God help you."

"Yeah, I thought the same myself. But I do love you, and it's different than it was with Rachel. I had all this stuff planned out then, a nice, steady, sensible, normal kind of step and stage."

"And you're not looking for sensible and normal with me."

"Be a waste of time."

"Don't give me that. You've got home and hearth tattooed on your butt."

"Do not. You're the one with the tattoo, which I find incredibly erotic, by the way. Maybe when you decide you're in love with me, we can think about what happens next, but for now—"

"When I decide."

"Yeah, when. I'm patient, Meg, and relentless in my way. I'm starting to get my edge back. It's been blunted a long time, but it's coming back. You'll just have to deal with that."

"Interesting. A little scarier than I expected, but interesting."

"And it's because I love you, and I trust you, that I'm going to show you this."

He opened the file on his desk. Taking the copied pages of Patrick Galloway's journal, he handed them to her.

He saw the instant she recognized the handwriting, the way her body went stiff and still, the quick, almost inaudible drawing in of breath. Her gaze flicked up to his once, briefly, then riveted on the pages in her hand.

She said nothing as she read them. She didn't weep or rage or tremble as another woman might have done. Instead, she picked up her wine again, sipped slowly, and read the pages straight through.

"Where did these come from?"

"They're copies from the pages out of a notebook he had inside his parka. Coben gave them to me."

"How long ago?"

"Few days."

There was a little burn in the center of her belly. "And you didn't tell me. You didn't show me."

"No."

"Because?"

"I needed to evaluate, and you needed to settle."

"Is that part of your edge, chief? Making unilateral decisions?"

"It's part of my professional responsibilities, and my personal feelings. You can't discuss this with anyone, until I determine otherwise."

"You've shown them to me now because in your professional opinion you've evaluated and I've settled."

"Something like that."

She closed her eyes. "You take care, don't you? Professionally, personally. It's pretty much the same to you, the caring."

He said nothing, and she opened her eyes. "No point in tossing a bunch of bullshit out at you when you did what you thought was right. Probably was right."

Knowing it wouldn't go down easy now, she set the wine aside. "What does Coben think?"

"It's more what his superiors think at this point. The theory is Max killed Galloway, then killed the third man. When your father's body was discovered, fear of discovery and remorse drove him to suicide."

“That’s how they’ll write it up, close it down, whatever the cop-speak for it is.”

“I think so, yes.”

“Poor Carrie.” She leaned forward, laid the pages back on his desk.

“Poor Max. He never killed Patrick Galloway.”

“No,” Nate said and closed the file again. “He didn’t.”

TWENTY-ONE

THEY PACKED INTO Town Hall for Max Hawbaker's memorial. It was the only place big enough to hold the crowd. It was interesting to Nate how many showed up—in work clothes or Sunday clothes, in Alaskan tuxedos or bunny boots. They came because he'd been one of them, and his wife and kids still were. They came, Nate thought, whether they thought he was a small-town hero or a murderer.

And many did believe the latter. Nate saw it in their eyes or heard it in snatches of conversation. He let it go.

Max was eulogized with warmth and with humor—and the name Patrick Galloway was carefully omitted from any public statement.

Then it was done. Some went back to work, and some went to Carrie's for what he always thought of as the post-funeral replay.

Nate went back to work.

CHARLENE AMBUSHED MEG as she off-loaded supplies from her plane. She grabbed her arm, tugged her away from Jacob. "I need to see him."

"Who?"

"You know who. I want you to fly me into Anchorage, to the funeral home that's holding his body till spring. I have a right."

Meg studied Charlene's face. "Well, I can't. It's too late to fly to Anchorage today, and I've got jobs booked. Iditarod's under way. People want to fly over the route, get pictures."

"I've got a right—"

"What brought this on?"

"Just because we didn't get married doesn't mean I wasn't his wife. His true wife, just the same as Carrie was to Max."

"Oh shit." Meg paced out two tight circles. "You know, I thought you showed a lot of class going to the memorial, looking Carrie right in the eye and giving her your condolences. And here you are working up a mad because she got all that attention."

"That's not it." Or only part of it, Charlene admitted. "I want to see him, and I will. If you won't take me, I'll call Jerk in Talkeetna, pay him to fly me down."

"You've been stewing about this since Max's memorial, haven't you? Just stewing and churning it around since then. What's the point, Charlene?"

"You've seen him."

"Score one for me."

"How do I know he's gone? How do I know it's him unless I see for myself? The way Carrie got to see Max."

"I can't take you."

"You'd make me go with a stranger?"

Meg looked back at the river. There'd been some overflow. Cracks and gaps in the shifting ice that had the water below welling up, freezing thin. Dangerous business, because the new ice looked just like the rest and would break under you and take you down.

What you thought was safe would kill you.

There were handwritten warning signs. Nate's doing, she knew. He was a man who understood all about thin ice and the dangers of what looked safe and normal.

"Would you settle for a picture? A photograph?"

"What do you mean?"

She turned back. "If I brought you a picture of him, would that do it?"

"If you can go down and take his picture, why—"

"I don't have to. Nate has pictures. I can get one, bring it to you."

"Now?"

"No, not now." She yanked off her cap, drove her fingers through her hair. "He wouldn't like it. Evidence or something. But I'll get it tonight. You can look at it, satisfy yourself, and I'll take it back."

OUTSIDE THE STATION, Meg flipped through her keys and found the one marked PD. She'd left Nate sleeping and hoped he stayed that way until she got back. She didn't want to explain this little bit of insanity to him.

She let herself in, pulled out her penlight. Part of her wanted to poke around and enjoy the sensation of being somewhere she shouldn't. But more, she wanted to get this little chore over with and get back to bed.

She went straight into Nate's office. Here she risked the overhead lights, flipping them on before crossing to the covered corkboard.

She removed the blanket carefully. And it fell to the floor from her numb hands as she took one wavering step in retreat.

She'd seen death before and had never known it to be pretty. But those stark and graphic photos of Max Hawbaker had her breath whistling out.

Best not to think about it, not quite yet. Better to take the photo of her father—how much *cleaner* his death seemed—and take it to Charlene.

She slid the photo inside her jacket, turned the lights off and went back out the way she came.

Charlene was in her room, answered the door wearing a floral robe. There was a scent of whiskey, smoke, perfume.

"You'd better be alone," Meg said.

"I am. I sent him on. Where is it? Did you get it?"

"You're going to look, then I'm taking it back and I don't want to hear any more about this."

"Let me see. Let me see him."

Meg drew it out. "No, you can't touch it. You wrinkle it up or anything, Nate will know." She turned the photo face front.

"Oh. Oh." Charlene stumbled back, much as Meg had at the corkboard. "God. No!" She shot a hand out to stop Meg from putting the picture away again. "I need to . . ."

She stepped forward again and, at Meg's warning look, clasped her hands behind her back. "He . . . he looks the same. How can that be? He looks the same. All these years, and he looks the same."

"He never had a chance to look different."

"It would've been quick, do you think? Would it have been quick?"

"Yes."

"He was wearing that parka when he left. He was wearing it the last time I saw him." She turned, cupped her elbows with her hands. "Go away now." She shuddered, then pressed both hands to her mouth. "Meg," she began and spun around.

But Meg was already gone.

Alone, Charlene walked into the bath, turned on the lights and studied herself in the hard glare.

He'd looked the same, she thought again. So young.

And she didn't. She never would again.

. . .

IT WAS MARCH IN ALASKA, but the longer days didn't make him think of approaching spring, however close the calendar crept toward the official day.

Nate awoke to daylight now and most often on the left side of Meg's bed. When he walked through town, he saw more of people's faces and less of sheltering hoods.

The plastic eggs hanging from the branches of snow-draped trees, the plastic bunnies crouched on white carpets of lawn didn't make him think spring, either.

But his first breakup did.

He watched, with a kind of buzzy wonder, the little cracks creeping along the icy ribbon of river, like crazed zippers. Unlike the overflow, these didn't fill in and freeze up. It astonished him so much that it took him twenty minutes to stop staring and head back to the office.

"There are cracks in the river," he told Otto.

"Yeah? Little early for breakup, but we've had a warm spell."

Maybe, Nate thought, if he lived in Lunacy for, oh, a hundred years, he'd think of a few days of forties and damp, chilly lower fifties as a warm spell. "I want signs posted. I don't want a bunch of kids playing hockey falling through the ice."

"Kids got more sense than to—"

"I want signs posted, like we did for overflow, but more so. Check at The Corner Store, see if they've got any more sign board. Either Peach or Peter needs to write them. Ah, 'No skating, thin ice.'"

"It's not so much thin as—"

"Otto, just go get me a half dozen signs."

He grumbled, but he went. And Nate noticed Peach's lips were folded tight on a smile she was trying to suppress.

"What?"

"Nothing. Not a thing. I think it's a fine idea. Shows we've got concern for our citizenship, and order. But I think you could just write, 'Breakup, and steer clear.'"

"Write whatever you think best. Just write it." He started through the station to head out the back and find what he could use for stakes. "And don't let Otto write it."

When he was satisfied the signs were under way, he wrote and printed fliers off his computer and set out to distribute them.

He pinned them up in the post office, the bank, the school, worked his way to The Lodge.

There, Bing came over and read behind his shoulder—and snorted. Saying nothing, Nate read his own words.

BREAKUP IN PROGRESS.

NO SKATING, WALKING OR OTHER ACTIVITIES

WILL BE PERMITTED ON THE RIVER,

BY ORDER OF THE LUNACY POLICE DEPARTMENT.

"I spell something wrong, Bing?"

"Nope. Just wonder who you think's stupid enough to go skating around on the river during breakup."

"Same sort of person who jumps off a roof to see if he can fly after he's read a couple Superman comics. How long does breakup take?"

"Depends, doesn't it? Winter started early, now spring's doing the same thing. So we'll just see. River breaks up every frigging year, so does the lake. Nothing new."

“A kid goes out there fooling around, falls through the ice, we could be going to another memorial.”

Bing pursed his lips thoughtfully as Nate walked out again.

He still had fliers in his hand when he saw movement behind the display window of *The Lunatic*.

He crossed over, found the door was locked. Knocked.

Carrie studied him through the glass a minute, then opened up.

“Carrie. I’d like to post one of these in your window here.”

She took it, read it, then walked to her desk to get tape. “I’ll put it up for you.”

“Appreciate it.” He glanced around. “You here alone?”

“Yes.”

He’d interviewed her twice since the memorial, and each time her thoughts and answers had been scattered and vague. He’d tried to give her time, but time was passing. “Have you been able to remember any more details from that February?”

“I tried to think about it, write things down like you said, at home.” She taped the flier, face-out on the glass. “I couldn’t do it there. I couldn’t seem to do it at my parents’ when I took the kids down for a couple weeks. I don’t know why. I just couldn’t get the thoughts out or the words down. So I came here. I thought maybe . . .”

“That’s fine.”

“I wasn’t sure I could come here. I know Hopp and some of the other women came in and . . . cleaned up after—when they were allowed to, but I wasn’t sure I could come back here.”

“It’s hard.” He’d gone back to the alley, forced himself to go back. And all he’d felt was numb despair.

“I had to come back. There hasn’t been a paper since . . . it’s been too long. Max worked so hard, and this meant so much to him.”

She turned around, drawing careful breaths as she looked around the room. "Doesn't look like anything really. Doesn't even look like a real paper. Max and I went to Anchorage, Fairbanks, even Juneau, to tour a real paper, real newsrooms. His eyes would just light up. Doesn't look like much here, but he was proud of it."

"I don't agree with you. I think it looks like a lot."

She struggled to smile, nodded briskly. "I'm going to keep it going. That's something I decided today. Just today before you came in. I thought I'd let it go, that I just couldn't do this without him. But when I came back here today, I knew I had to keep it going. I'm going to put an edition together, see if The Professor's got time to help me, maybe knows a couple of kids who want to work, get some journalist experience."

"That's good, Carrie. I'm glad to hear it."

"I'll write something down for you, Nate, I promise. I'll think back and I'll try to remember. I know you wanted to go through his papers and such. I haven't been back there yet."

She didn't have to look at the back office for Nate to know she meant the room where Max had been found.

"You can, if you want."

The State cops had been through that room, Nate thought. He still wanted his pass at it, but not now. Not when anyone walking by would see he was inside and wonder why.

"I'll come back for that. He kept an office at home?"

"A little one. I haven't been through his things. I keep putting it off."

"Anybody at your place now?"

"No. Kids are in school."

"Is it all right with you if I go in now, look around? If I need to take anything, I'll write you up a receipt."

“You go ahead.” She went to her purse, fished out keys and took one off a ring. “This is to the back door. You keep it as long as you need it.”

HE DIDN'T WANT TO PARK in front of the Hawbaker house. Too many people talked about something just that small.

Instead, he parked by a bend in the river. He didn't notice any cracks in the ice and wondered if he'd jumped the gun on the ones in town. He hiked the back way, through a patch of woods. Colder here, he thought, colder under the trees where the sun couldn't fight through. There were tracks—snowmobile, skis. Cross-country team, he decided, from the high school. He spotted other tracks that weren't human and hoped he wasn't going to come face-to-face with the moose he'd run off.

He didn't know enough about them to be sure they didn't hold grudges.

The snow was deeper than he'd anticipated and made him curse himself for not slapping on his snowshoes. So he did what he could to use the tracks.

He saw a streak he thought might be a fox and, when he stopped to catch his breath, spotted a herd of shaggy-coated deer. They trudged along, no more than fifteen feet to his north. He could only assume he was downwind as they didn't so much as give him a glance. So he stood watching them until they wound their way out of sight.

He worked his way to Carrie's back door, past what he assumed was a garden or toolshed, around the building on stilts that would be their cache. Someone had cleared the back stoop, and there was a stack of firewood, covered with a tarp, by the door.

He used the key and stepped inside a combination mudroom and laundry area. Since his boots were wet and caked with snow, he took them off, leaving them and his coat.

The kitchen was clean, almost to a gleam. Maybe that's what women did, or some women, when they were coping with grief. They got out the cleanser and the mop. And the polishing cloth, he thought as he continued through the house, the vacuum cleaner. There wasn't a speck of dust to be found. Nor any of the usual clutter of living.

Maybe that was the point. She wasn't ready to live again yet.

He went up, identified the kids' room by the posters on the walls, the disorder on the floor. For now, at least, he bypassed the master bedroom where the bed was carefully made and a patchwork throw was draped over the back of a chair.

Did she sleep there now, unwilling, unable to lie down on the bed she'd shared with her husband?

Beside the bedroom was Max's office. And here was the clutter, the dust and debris of normal living. The desk chair had a strip of duct tape along one of the seams—the everyman's repair job. The desk itself was scarred and battered, an obvious second- or thirdhand purchase. But the computer on it looked new or very well tended.

There was a desk calendar, one of those cubes that followed a theme and gave you a picture and a saying each day. Max's was a fishing theme, and it had a cartoon man holding up a minnow-sized fish and claiming it was bigger when he'd hooked it.

The date was January nineteenth. Max hadn't made it back home to rip it off to reveal the next day's joke.

There was no message written on it, no handy clue such as: Meet [insert name of killer] at midnight.

Nate bent to go through the trash can under the desk. He found several other pages of the cube, some with notes.

IDITAROD ART—POV DOG?

BATHROOM TAP DRIPPING. CARRIE PISSED. FIX!

And the one from the day before his death, the one covered with scribbles of one word: PAT.

Nate took it out, placed it on the desk.

He found several envelopes indicating Max had sat there, paying bills on one of the days shortly before he died, a couple of candy wrappers.

He went through the desk drawers, found a checkbook—\$250.06 on the balance after the bill-paying stint—two days before he died. Three passbooks for savings accounts. One for each of his children, one joint for him and his wife. He and Carrie had a \$6,010 nest egg.

There were envelopes, return address labels. Rubber bands, paper clips, a box of staples. Nothing out of the ordinary.

In the bottom drawer he found four chapters of a manuscript. The top page indentified it as:

COLD SNAP

A Novel

by Maxwell T. Harbaker

Nate put it on the desk and got up to search the shelf unit running along one wall. To his pile, Nate added a box of floppy disks and a scrapbook holding newspaper articles.

Then he sat down to test his computer skills.

It wasn't password-protected, which told him Max hadn't thought he had anything to hide. A run through the documents netted him a spreadsheet on which Max had carefully listed mortgage and time payments. Family man, Nate thought, responsible with his money.

Nothing he could find on finances showed any large sums, anything out of the ordinary. If Max had been blackmailing his killer, he hadn't recorded the income alongside his monthly debits.

He found more of the novel and the start of two more. A check through the floppies showed that Max had conscientiously backed them up. There were a few bookmarked sites—fishing for the most part.

He found some saved e-mail: fishing buddies, responses from a couple of people regarding sled dogs. Follow-ups, Nate assumed, on the planned Iditarod article.

He spent an hour threading through, but nothing jumped out and yelled *clue!*

Gathering up what he had, he carted it down to the mudroom where he confiscated an empty box to dump it all into.

He wandered back into the kitchen. The kitchen calendar had a bird theme. No one had thought or bothered to turn it over to February much less March.

More than half the little squares had notes. PTA meeting, hockey practice, book report due, dentist appointment. Normal family routine. The dentist appointment had been Max's, Nate noted, and he'd been due for it two days after his death.

He flipped it up, glanced over February, at March. A lot of notes there, too, with GONE FISHING in large capital letters over the second weekend in March.

Nate let the page fall again. Routine, normal, ordinary.

But there was that single calendar page from the trash can upstairs, covered with the name Pat.

Four pairs of snowshoes hung in the mudroom.

Studying them, he put on his boots, his coat, hefted the box and started out again.

He was back in the woods again, up to mid-shin in snow, when the gunshot blasted through the quiet. Instinctively, he dropped the box, dug under the coat for his own weapon. Even as he gripped it, there was

a thunder in the woods. A single deer, a thick-bodied, heavily antlered buck leaped into view and continued its leaping gallop.

With his heart thudding, Nate started moving in the direction it had come from. He'd made it about twenty yards when he saw the figure melt out of the trees—and the long gun it carried.

They stood for a moment in the echoing stillness, each with a weapon in his hand. Then the figure lifted his left hand, shoved back his hood.

"He scented you," Jacob said. "Spooked and ran even as I fired. So I missed."

"Missed," Nate repeated.

"I'd hoped to take some venison to Rose. David hasn't been able to hunt lately." He lowered his gaze, slow and deliberate, to Nate's sidearm. "Do you hunt, Chief Burke?"

"No. But when I hear a gunshot, I don't go looking for who fired it unarmed."

Jacob made an obvious business of clicking on the safety. "You found him, and I go home without meat."

"Sorry."

"It was the deer's day, not mine. Do you know your way out?"

"I can find it."

"Well, then." Jacob nodded, turned and moving with grace and ease in his snowshoes, melted back into the trees.

Nate kept his weapon out as he walked back, as he picked up the box he'd dropped. He didn't holster it again until he was back in his car.

He drove to Meg's to push the box into the back of a closet. It was something he had to pursue on his own time. Since his pants were wet to the knees, he changed, then went down to the lake with the dogs to check for any sign of breakup before he drove back into town.

. . .

"SIGNS ARE UP," Otto told him.

"So I see."

"We've gotten two complaints already, about minding our own business."

"Anybody I need to talk to?"

"Nope."

"You got two calls, chief, from reporters." Peach tapped the pink *While You Were Out* notes on her counter. "About Pat Galloway and Max. Follow-up, they said."

"They have to catch me first. Peter still on patrol?"

"We sent him out for lunch. It was his turn." Otto scratched his chin. "Ordered you an Italian sub."

"That's fine, thanks. Would a man go hunting two, three miles from his own place, when he's got acres of hunting ground where he lives?"

"Depends, wouldn't it?"

"On what?"

"What he was hunting, for one."

"Yeah. I guess it would depend on that."

THE CRACKS IN THE RIVER lengthened and widened as the temperatures held above freezing. From the banks, Nate saw his first sight of the cold, deep blue shimmer between the gleam of white. Fascinated, he watched it spread and heard what sounded like artillery fire. Or the crashing fist of God.

Plates of ice heaved up, swamped and surrounded by that blue, then floated placidly, like a newborn island.

“Something almost religious about your first breakup,” Hopp commented as she walked up beside him.

“My first breakup was with Pixie Newburry, and it was more traumatic than religious.”

Hopp stood in silence as ice crackled and boomed. “Pixie?”

“Yeah. She had these big almond-shaped eyes, so everybody called her Pixie. She dumped me for this kid whose father had a boat. It was the first wave in a sea of broken hearts for me.”

“Sounds shallow to me. You were better off without her.”

“Didn’t seem like it at twelve. I didn’t think this would happen so fast.”

“Once nature decides to move, there’s no stopping her. And you can bet she’ll slap us back with a few more licks of winter before she’s done. But breakup’s a time for celebration around here. We’re having an informal breakup party at The Lodge tonight. You’ll want to put in an appearance.”

“Okay.”

“You’ve been spending more time at Meg’s than The Lodge, sleeping arrangement-wise.” She smiled when he merely looked at her. “It’s been mentioned, here and there.”

“Is my choice of sleeping arrangements a problem—official-wise?”

“No, indeed.” She cupped her hand around a cigarette, used a thick silver Zippo to light it. “And on a personal front, I’d estimate that Meg Galloway’s no Pixie Newburry. It’s been mentioned, too, here and there, that there are lights on at Meg’s pretty late at night.”

“Maybe we have insomnia.” She was the mayor, Nate reminded himself. And Galloway’s journal hadn’t referred to a woman on the mountain. “I’m spending some of my off time on the Galloway matter.”

“I see.” She stared out at the river as the blue and the white battled. “Most people go fishing, read a juicy book or watch TV on their off time.”

"Cops aren't most people."

"You do what pleases you, Ignatious. I know Charlene's planning to bring Pat back here, soon as she's able, and bury him. Wants a full-fledged funeral. The ground ought to be thawed enough soon to manage it by June, unless we get another long freeze."

She drew in smoke, sighed it out again. "Part of me wishes that would be that. The dead are buried, and the living have to live. It's hard on Carrie, I know, but you keeping this going won't bring her husband back."

"I don't believe he killed Galloway. And I don't believe he killed himself."

Her face stayed perfectly still, her eyes stayed on the busy river. "That's not what I want to hear. God's pity on Carrie, but that's not what I want to hear."

"Nobody wants to hear they may be living next door to someone who's killed twice."

She shuddered now, once and violently, and drew on the cigarette. She puffed at it hard, expelling smoke in bursts. "I know the people who live next door to me and a mile away and three miles from that. I know them by face and name and habits. I don't know a murderer, Ignatious."

"You knew Max."

"Oh God."

"You climbed with Galloway."

Her eyes sharpened now and focused on his face. "Is this an interrogation?"

"No. Just a comment."

She breathed in and out while the ice cracked. "Yes, I did. My man and I did. I enjoyed it, too, the challenge of it, the thrill of it, in my younger days. Bo and I settled for hiking, a night of camping in good weather the last few years he was alive. That Bo was alive," she said.

"Who'd he trust most when he was on the mountain? Who did Galloway trust up there?"

"Himself. That'd be the first rule of climbing. You'd better trust yourself first and last."

"Your husband was mayor back then."

"It was more honorary than official in those days."

"Even so, he knew the people around here. Paid attention. I bet you did, too."

"And?"

"If you put your mind to it, thought back to February of '88, you might remember who, besides Galloway, wasn't in Lunacy. Who was away for a week or more."

She tossed the cigarette down where it sizzled against the snow. Then she kicked snow over it to bury it from view. "You're giving a lot of credit to my memory, Ignatious. I'll think about it."

"Good. If you remember anything, come to me. Just me, Hopp."

"Spring's coming," Hopp said. "And spring can be a bitch."

She walked away, leaving him by the river. He stood in the chilly wind, watching that river come back to life.

TWENTY-TWO

IT WASN'T JUST river ice that cracked and heaved during breakup. Streets, frozen through the long winter burst with fissures the size of canyons and potholes wide enough to swallow a truck.

It didn't surprise Nate that Bing had the contract for road repair and maintenance. What did surprise him was that no one seemed to give much of a damn that the repair and maintenance moved at the pace of a lame snail.

He had other things to worry about.

People, he discovered, cracked, too. Some who had held onto their sanity through the dark, relentless winter appeared to think the tease of spring was a good time to let it go.

His cells were revolving doors for the drunk, the disorderly, the domestic disturbances and the just plain dopey.

The sound of horns tooting and catcalls brought him to the bedroom window just after dawn. A light snow had fallen during the night, hardly more than a dusting that lay thin and sparkling on the streets and sidewalks under the rising sun.

The lights on the barricades around the two-foot pothole he'd named

Lunatic Crater blinked red and yellow. Around those blinking lights he saw a man dancing what appeared to be a jig. That might have been surprising enough for sunrise entertainment, but the fact that the man was buck-assed naked added a certain panache.

A crowd was gathering already. Some were clapping—maybe keeping time, Nate speculated. Others were shouting—encouragement or derision in equal measures.

With a sigh, Nate towed off his half-shaven face, grabbed a shirt and shoes and headed down.

The dining room was deserted, with a few plates of half-eaten breakfast as testament to the draw of a naked guy dancing on Lunatic Street.

Nate grabbed a jacket off a hook and walked out in his shirtsleeves.

There were whistles and stomping feet—and a dawn temperature Nate judged hadn't quite come up to the freezing mark as yet. He nudged his way through the gathered crowd. He recognized the dancer now. Tobias Simpsky, part-time clerk at The Corner Store, part-time dishwasher at The Lodge, part-time disc jockey at Lunacy Radio.

He'd changed the jig to some kind of western-movie Indian war dance.

"Chief." Rose, with Jesse's hand in hers and the baby snuggled in a pack at her breast, smiled serenely. "Nice morning."

"Right. Is today some particular event? A pagan ritual I might've missed hearing about?"

"No. Just Wednesday."

"Okay." He passed through the onlookers. "Hey, Toby? Forget your hat this morning?"

Still dancing, Toby tossed back his long, brown hair and threw out his arms. "Clothes are only a symbol of man's denial of nature, of his ac-

ceptance of restrictions and loss of innocence. Today, I merge with nature! Today I embrace my innocence. I am *man!*”

“Just barely,” someone called out, giving the crowd a good laugh.

“Why don’t we go talk about that?” Nate took his arm and managed to flap the jacket over his hips.

“Man is a child, and a child comes naked into the world.”

“I’ve heard that. Show’s over,” Nate called out. He tried to arrange the jacket while guiding Toby across the street. The man had grapefruit-sized goose bumps on every inch of exposed skin. “Nothing much to see here anyway,” he muttered under his breath.

“I drink only water,” Toby told him. “I eat only what I gather with my own hands.”

“Got it. No coffee and doughnuts for you.”

“If we don’t dance, the dark will come back, and the cold winter. The snow.” He looked around, wildly now. “It’s everywhere. It’s everywhere.”

“I know.” He got him inside, into a cell. Figuring Ken was the closest he had to a shrink, he contacted him to request a house call.

In the next cell Drunk Mike snored away, sleeping off a toot that had had him wandering into a neighbor’s house instead of his own the night before.

Including Drunk Mike, he’d had six calls between eleven and two. Slashed tires on Hawley’s truck, a portable radio turned up to full blast and left on Sarrie Parker’s doorstep, broken windows at the school, more yellow graffiti on Tim Bower’s new Ski-doo and on Charlene’s Ford Bronco.

Apparently even the thought of spring stirred up the natives.

He was thinking about coffee, about his missed breakfast, about what drove a man to dancing naked on a snowy street when Bing

came slamming in. He was big as a tank and looked ready to commit murder.

“Found these in my gear.” He slapped two fishing rods onto the counter, then jabbed the auger, which looked like a curly sword, before slamming it down as well. “I ain’t no thief, and you better find out who stowed them there so I’d look like one.”

“Would these belong to Ed Woolcott?”

“Got his name engraved on the damn rods, doesn’t he? Just like that prissy gnat-ass to have his name plated on overpriced fishing rods. I’m telling you right now, I’m not having him say I took them. Clean his clock good and proper if he does.”

“Where did you find them?”

He worked his hands into fists. “You try to say I took ’em, I’ll clean your clock, too.”

“I didn’t say you took them, I asked where you found them.”

“In my shack. Went out last night. Gonna tow my shack in for the season. Found them then. Mulled over what to do about it, and this is what I’m doing.” He jabbed a finger at Nate. “Now you do what you’re supposed to do.”

“When’s the last time you were in your shack before last night?”

“Been busy, haven’t I? Couple of weeks, maybe. If they’d been there, I’d have spotted them right off, just like I did. I don’t use that prissy-assed gear.”

“Why don’t you come back to my office, Bing, and sit down.”

He readied meat-slab fists again, bared his teeth. “What for?”

“You’re going to make an official statement. Details like if you noticed if anything else was disturbed, added or subtracted, if your shack was locked, who might want to get your non-prissy ass in hot water.”

Bing scowled. "You're gonna have to take my word on it?"

"That's right."

Bing jutted his bearded chin. "All right, then. But it's gonna have to be quick. I got work to do, don't I?"

"We'll make it quick. You get that crater fixed on Lunatic before it swallows a family of five."

Since Bing was a man of few words, the statement took under ten minutes.

"Do you and Ed have a history I should know about?"

"I put my money in his bank, take it out as I need it."

"You two socialize?"

Bing's answer was a snort. "I don't get invites to dinner at his place and wouldn't go if I did."

"Why's that? His wife a lousy cook?"

"Likes to put on airs—both of them—like they were better than the rest of us. He's an asshole, but so's better than half the world's population." He shrugged his massive shoulders. It was like watching a mountain stretch. "I got nothing against him, particularly."

"Can you think of anyone who'd have something against you? Enough to want to cause you trouble?"

"I mind my own and expect people to do the same. Anybody's got a problem with that, I'll—"

"Clean their clock," Nate finished. "I'll see Ed gets his property back. Appreciate you bringing it in."

Bing sat another moment, drumming his thick fingers against his wide thighs. "I don't hold with stealing."

"Me, either."

"Don't see why you're so fired up to lock up a man who's had a few drinks or punches somebody who gets in his face, but a thief's different."

Nate believed he spoke his own truth. There'd been violence on Bing's record, but no theft. "And?"

"Somebody took my buck knife and my spare gloves out of my rig."

Nate pulled up another form. "Give me a description."

"It's a goddamn buck knife." He hissed through his teeth when Nate simply waited. "Got a five-inch blade, closed-lock back, wood handle. Hunting knife."

"And the gloves?" Nate prompted as he keyed in the description.

"Work gloves, for Christ's sake. Cowhide, fleece lining. Black."

"When did you notice them missing?"

"Last week."

"And you're reporting it now because?"

Bing didn't speak for a minute, then moved those mountainous shoulders again. "Maybe you're not a complete asshole."

"I'm touched. Let me blink these sentimental tears out of my eyes. You lock your rig?"

"No. Nobody's been stupid enough to mess with my stuff."

"Always a first time," Nate said.

When he was alone, and waiting for the town doctor to come give Toby some sort of psych eval, Nate studied the reports on his desk. A decent stack of reports, he thought. Maybe not the sort of load he'd been accustomed to in Baltimore, but a definite stack. With petty theft and petty vandalism leading the pack.

Enough so, he mused, that he'd been kept busy the last couple of weeks. So busy he'd had little time to spare for his unofficial investigation.

Maybe it wasn't coincidence. Maybe it wasn't some cosmic reminder that he wasn't Homicide any longer.

Maybe somebody was nervous.

. . .

HE CALLED ED IN, and watched the man's face light up when he saw the rods and auger.

"I take it those are yours."

"They sure are. I'd given up on them, certain they'd made their way to some pawnshop in Anchorage. Good work, Chief Burke! You've made an arrest?"

"There's no arrest. Bing found them mixed in with his gear in his ice shack last night. He brought them in to me first thing this morning."

"But—"

"Is there any reason you can think of why Bing would have broken into your shack, defaced it, taken those, then brought them in to me today?"

"No." Ed stroked a hand over each rod in turn. "No, I guess not, but the fact remains he had them."

"The only facts are he found them and returned them. Do you want to pursue this?"

Ed blew out a breath, stood for a moment with his face reflecting a man struggling with some inner war. "Well . . . I honestly can't see why Bing would've taken them, much less turned them in if he had. I have them back, and that's the important thing. But it doesn't address the vandalism or the theft of nearly a full quart of scotch."

"I'll keep the case open."

"Good. Good, then." He nodded toward the window, to beyond where ice floes floated on the deep, dark blue. "You survived your first winter."

"Looks like."

"There are some who don't expect you to put yourself through the experience a second time. I've wondered myself if you plan to go back to the Lower 48 after your contract."

"I suppose that depends on whether or not the town council offers to renew my contract."

"I haven't heard any complaints. Well, nothing major in any case." He picked up the rods, the auger. "I should get these stowed."

"I need you to sign for them." Nate nudged a form across his desk. "Let's keep it official."

"Oh. Absolutely." He looped his signature on the proper lines. "Thank you, chief. I'm glad to have my property back."

Nate noticed him glance at the draped blanket, as he had twice before. But there were no questions or comments about it.

Nate rose to shut the door himself, then he walked to the board, uncovered it. On a list of names, he penciled a line, connecting Bing to Ed. And added a question mark.

THE CLOUDS ROLLED BACK in by afternoon and, through them, Nate spotted the red slash of Meg's plane. He was on his way back from investigating a call reporting a dead body by the stream in Rancor Woods. It turned out to be an old pair of boots stuck in the snow, which the holidaying bird-watchers renting the cabin had spotted through their field glasses.

Tourists, Nate thought, as he tossed the boots—likely abandoned by other tourists—in the back of his car.

Then he heard the familiar thunder of the bush plane and watched Meg slide out of the clouds.

By the time he got to the skinny dock on the river, she'd already landed. The floats on her plane were another sign of spring, he thought. He walked over, feeling the dock sway under him, while she and Jacob unloaded the supplies.

“Hey, cutie.” She dropped a box on the dock and made it shudder. “Saw you out by Rancor Woods. My heart went pitty-pat, didn’t it, Jacob?”

He chuckled under his breath and carried a large box down the dock to his truck.

“Bought you a present.”

“Yeah? Give it up.”

She reached into another box, pushed the contents around and pulled out a box of condoms. “Thought you might be shy about buying your supply at The Corner Store.”

“Whereas I wouldn’t be shy about having you wave them around on a public dock.” He grabbed them out of her hand, stuffed them in his jacket pocket.

“I got you three boxes, but I’ll keep the other two in a safe place.” She winked, then bent to pick up a carton. He lifted it first. “I’ll carry it.”

“Careful with it. It’s an antique tea set. Joanna’s grandmother wanted her to have it for her thirtieth birthday.” She hauled out another box, walked with him. “What are you doing hanging around the docks, chief? Looking for loose women?”

“Found one, didn’t I?”

She laughed, gave him a little elbow jab. “We’ll see if you can make me looser later.”

“It’s movie night.”

“Movie night’s Saturday.”

“No, they moved it, remember? Conflict with the high school Spring Fling.”

“Right, right. I’ve got a couple of dresses in this load for that. What’s the movie?”

“Double feature. *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*.”

"I'll bring the popcorn."

She loaded the box in the truck, studied him as he loaded his. "You look tired, chief."

"A lot of people seem to have spring fever. It's keeping me busy. Busy enough I haven't been able to give certain areas as much time or attention as I'd like."

"You're not just talking about my naked body." She looked back to her plane where Jacob was getting the last of the cargo. "My father's been dead for sixteen years. Time's relative."

"I want to close this down for you. For him. For myself, too."

She twined a lock of his hair around her finger. He'd let her trim it for him. A sign, she thought, of a courageous man. Or one loopily in love.

"Tell you what. Let's take the night off from all of it. Just go to the movies, eat popcorn and fool around."

"I've got more questions than I have answers. I'm going to have to ask you some of them. You may not like them."

"Then let's definitely take the night off. We've got to deliver this stuff. I'll see you later."

She hopped in the cab of the truck and sent Nate a quick wave as Jacob pulled out. But she watched him in the side-view mirror until they'd turned.

"He looks worried," Jacob commented.

"His kind always worries. Why do I find that so attractive?"

"He'd like to shield you. No one else ever did." He smiled a little when she turned to stare at him. "I taught you, listened to you, cared for you. But I never shielded you."

"I don't need to be shielded. Or want to be."

"No, but knowing he would attracts you."

“Maybe. Maybe.” She’d have to think about that one. “But his wants and mine are bound to ram headlong into each other before long. Then what?”

“That depends on which one’s still standing after the collision.”

With a half laugh she stretched out her legs. “He doesn’t stand a chance.”

SHE’D HOPED TO HAVE TIME to get home, clean herself up, polish herself up, and set the stage for a night of marathon sex. It was a way to keep things interesting and basic and, she admitted, thoughtless. But she believed it wouldn’t hurt him to be thoughtless for a little while.

He thought entirely too much, and it was contagious.

But she didn’t have time, not after delivering all the cargo, collecting her fees. She had to settle for popping the corn in The Lodge’s kitchen while Big Mike serenaded her with show tunes.

It wasn’t a hardship to listen to Big Mike sing as he worked. She caught up on the news as Rose passed in and out of the kitchen, and she cooed over pictures of Willow and new shots of Big Mike’s toddler.

It was, she thought, almost like being home in the warmth of the active kitchen, listening to chatter and music. And there was the added benefit of being able to pilfer a slice of Big Mike’s applesauce cake.

“Got yourself a movie date,” Big Mike said between tunes. “Romantic.”

Meg ate the cake with her hands, standing beside the stove. “Could be, unless he hogs the popcorn.”

“Got little stars in your eyes, little stars and hearts.”

“Uh-uh,” she managed with her mouth full.

“Sure do. Him, too.” He made kissy noises—an odd sound, Meg

thought with a laugh, coming out of a buff, bald black man. "I got them in my eyes the first time I saw my Julia. Still do."

"So here you are, baking great applesauce cake for a bunch of sourdoughs."

"I like baking cake." He plated fried fish, red potatoes and French-cut green beans. "But for Julia and my little Princess Annie, I'd do just about anything. This is a good place to live, a good place to work, but if you got love, any place is."

He segued from show tunes to the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love," while Meg polished off the cake and Rose came in for orders.

It was a good place to live, Meg mused as she filled a paper bag with the popcorn, shook it to distribute butter and salt. She was just going to have to figure out what to do about the love.

She walked over to Town Hall in a chilly damp that promised rain.

Nate was late, which surprised her. He hustled in just as the lights dimmed.

"Sorry. Had a call. Porcupine. Tell you later."

He tried to settle into the movie, to the mood, to the moment. But his thoughts kept circling around. He'd connected Ed and Bing on his board that morning. Drawn together by stolen fishing gear. Something that had all the earmarks of a prank or a kid's adventure. There were dozens of other connections, linking person to person.

They were all around him, sitting in the dark, watching Jimmy Stewart play a cop after a breakdown.

Been there, done that, Nate mused. Stewart would spiral down, too. He'd suffer and he'd sweat his way into an obsession.

And he'd get the girl, lose the girl, get the girl, lose the girl. A merry-go-round of pain and pleasure.

The girl was the key.

Was Meg? As Patrick Galloway's only child, wasn't she the living symbol of him? If not the key, another link?

"How long are you going to circle before you land?"

"What?"

"Looks like a holding pattern to me." Meg angled her head, and he realized the lights were back on for intermission between the features.

"Sorry. Zoned out."

"I'll say. You didn't get close to your share of the popcorn." She rolled up the bag, left it on the seat. "Let's get some air before the second feature."

They had to take it in the open doorway, like most of the movie crowd. The clouds that had rolled in had burst open sometime during Kim Novak's transformation. The rain Meg had scented gushed out of the sky, pummelled the ground.

"We'll have some flooding," Meg said, frowned through the clouds of smoke from those brave and drenched souls who stood just outside with cigarettes cupped in umbrellaed palms. "And black ice on the roads when the temperature drops a little more."

"If you want to get home now, I'll take you. I'll need to come back, keep an eye on this."

"No, I'll stay for the second feature, see how it goes. Just as easy turn to snow again."

"Let me check on a couple of things. I'll meet you back inside."

"There's a cop for you, ever vigilant." She saw his face change, rolled her eyes. "Not a complaint, Burke. Jesus. I'm not going to whine and go pouty if I end up watching a movie by myself. And I can get myself home if I need to. I can even handle the rest of tonight's planned entertainment on my own if you're not around to service me. I have fresh batteries. You look at me and see her, it's going to piss me off."

He started to say he hadn't, but she was already walking away. And it would've been a lie anyway. Conditioned response, he thought, and tried to roll the weight of it off his shoulders.

Still carrying it, he picked Peter, Hopp, Bing, The Professor, out of the crowd.

He spent intermission, and a little beyond it, coordinating and confirming procedure for flooding.

By the time he rejoined Meg, Grace Kelly was trying to convince Jimmy Stewart to pay more attention to her than the people in the apartment he could see from his rear window.

He took Meg's hand, linked fingers. "Knee jerk," he murmured in her ear. "Sorry."

"Leave off the knee and you've got it right." But she turned her head, brushed her lips over his. "Watch the movie this time."

He did or tried to. But just as Raymond Burr caught Grace Kelly snooping around his apartment, the door banged open behind them.

Light ran in behind Otto, causing most of the audience to boo and shout at him to close the damn door. He came in fast and wet, ignoring the curses as he zeroed in on Nate.

Nate was already up and moving toward him.

"You need to come outside, chief."

For the second time that day, Nate went out in his shirtsleeves, this time to the sizzle of sleet on pavement and the icy sting of it on his skin.

He saw the body immediately and, dragging the hair out of his face, moved through the wet to the curb.

He thought at first it was Rock or Bull, and his heart went thick in his throat. But the dog that lay in blood and freezing rain was older than Meg's, with more white in his coloring.

The knife that had been used to slash his throat lay buried in his chest.

He heard someone scream from behind him. "Get them back inside," he ordered Otto. "Control the situation."

"I know this dog, Nate. It's Joe and Lara's old dog, Yukon. Harmless. Barely got a tooth left in his head."

"Get these people back inside. Either you or Peter bring me out something to cover him up with."

Peter came on the run moments after Otto went in. "Jacob gave me his slicker. God, chief, it's Yukon. It's Steven's dog, Yukon. This isn't right. This just isn't right."

"Do you recognize the knife? Look at the handle, Peter."

"I don't know. There's a lot of blood, and . . . I don't know."

But Nate knew. His gut told him it was going to be a buck knife. It was going to be Bing's missing buck knife. "We're going to take this dog down to the clinic. You're going to help me load him in the back of my car. But you're going to go over and get the camera first so we can record this scene."

"He's dead."

"That's right, he's dead. We're going to examine him at the clinic, after we record the scene here. Once we have him loaded, I need you to go back inside, tell Joe and Lara their dog's with me, and where. Go get the camera now."

He looked up, caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. When he straightened, he saw Meg on the sidewalk, holding his jacket.

"You forgot this."

"I don't want you out here."

"I've already seen what somebody did to that poor dog. Poor old Yukon. It's going to break Lara's heart."

"Go back inside."

"I'm going home. I'm going home to my own dogs."

He grabbed her arm. "You're going back inside, and when I've cleared it, you're going to The Lodge."

"This isn't a police state, Burke. I can go where I want to go."

"You're going to do what the hell I tell you. I'm going to know exactly where you are, and it's not going to be alone, five miles out of town. There's ice on the roads, hazardous conditions, flash flooding, and somebody who'd be cold enough to cut this dog's throat from ear to ear. So you get your ass back inside until I tell you otherwise."

"I'm not leaving my dogs out—"

"I'll get your dogs. Get inside, Meg. Get inside, or I'll haul you in and lock you in a cell."

He waited five thrumming seconds with nothing but the crackling hiss of sleet striking the ground. She spun around, stormed back in.

He waited where he was, outside in the rain, beside a dead dog until Peter came roaring back.

He took the camera, took several Polaroids, tucking them into the pocket of his jacket.

"Help me load this dog, Peter. Then you go in, follow the orders I gave you. I want you to tell Otto to escort Meg to The Lodge and see that she stays there until I say different. Is that clear?"

Peter nodded. His Adam's apple bobbed, but he nodded. "Ah, Ken's inside, chief. I was sitting just behind him during the movie. Do you want him out here now?"

"Yeah. Yeah, send him out. He can ride with me."

He shoved his dripping hair out of his eyes while thin fog twined around his ankles. "I'm going to count on you to keep order, Peter. I want you to disperse the crowd inside, send everyone on their way. Advise them to go home, let them know we're taking care of things."

"They're going to want to know what—what happened."

“We don’t know what happened yet, do we?” He looked back at the dog. “Keep everyone calm. You’re good at talking to people. You go in there and talk to your people. And, Peter, pay attention to who’s in there. I want you and Otto to make a list of everyone who’s inside.”

And, Nate thought, I’ll know everyone who isn’t.

They loaded the dog into the vehicle. As Peter hurried back into Town Hall, Nate crouched down by his right rear tire. Beside it, just under the axle, was a pair of bloody gloves.

He opened the door, dug out an evidence bag. Lifting the gloves by the cuffs, he sealed them.

They would be Bing’s, he thought. As the knife would be.

A knife and gloves Bing had reported stolen only hours before.

TWENTY-THREE

“IT WOULD’VE BEEN QUICK.” Ken stood over the dog. And scrubbed his hands over his face.

“The neck wound did it,” Nate prompted.

“Yeah. Yeah. Jesus, what kind of sick son of a bitch does this to a dog? You said, ah, you said the chest wound didn’t show much blood. He was gone when whoever did this rammed the knife into the chest. You slice the neck like that, sever the jugular, that’s game point.”

“Bloody. Blood would’ve gushed.”

“Yeah. God.”

“Rain washed away some of it—most of it—but not all. And he was still a little warm when we found him. He’d been dead, what, maybe an hour, if that?”

“Nate.” Shaking his head, Ken took off his glasses, polished them on the tail of his shirt. “This is way out of my league. Your guess on that would be as good, if not better, than mine. But yeah, an hour’s about right.”

“Intermission’d been over around an hour. He wasn’t there when we went out between movies. And there was too much blood left for him to have been killed somewhere else and dumped. You knew this dog?”

“Sure. Old Yukon.” His eyes went shiny, and he rubbed them dry. “Sure.”

“He give anybody any trouble? Snap at somebody that you know of? Bite anyone?”

“Yukon? Barely got enough teeth left to gum up his own food. Friendly dog. Harmless. Maybe that’s why I’m having a hard time keeping it together.” He turned away for a moment, struggling for control. “Max . . . well, Max was horrible. A human being, for God’s sake. But this dog . . . This dog was *old* and sweet. And defenseless.”

“Sit down for a minute if you need to.” But Nate stood where he was, looking down at the dog. At the fur matted with blood and still dripping with rain.

“Sorry, Nate. You’d think a doctor could handle himself better than this.” He sucked in air, pushed it back out of his lungs. “What do you want me to do?”

“Joe and Lara are going to be coming along in a minute. I need you to keep them out of here until I finish.”

“What are you going to do?”

“My job. Just keep them out until I’m done.”

He lifted his camera, took more pictures. He wasn’t a coroner, but he’d stood over enough dead bodies, witnessed enough autopsies to guess that the knife strike had been executed from over the dog’s head, a little behind. A left-to-right stroke. Straddled him, lifted his head up, sliced.

Blood jets out, coats the gloves, maybe the sleeves, maybe even splashes back some. Dog goes down, bury the knife in him. Ditch the gloves, walk away.

A couple of minutes, with the rain giving cover, with a couple hundred people—maybe a little more—inside the building, focused on Jimmy Stewart.

Risky, he thought as he dusted the handle of the knife for prints, but calculated. Cold.

There was nothing on the knife but blood. He bagged it, then dug up a plastic sack. He put the knife and the photographs inside. And went out to speak to the Wisers.

The rain had turned to a thin, wet snow by the time Nate tracked down Bing. He found him in his enormous garage by his log house. His weather radio was on as he tinkered under the hood of his truck.

There were a couple of other vehicles inside and what looked like a small engine or a motor up on blocks. One of the drawers on a huge, rusted, red toolbox was open. Above a long counter was a peg-board holding more tools, with a calendar beside it featuring a mostly naked blonde with enormous breasts.

A muscular-looking sewing machine—sewing machine?—sat on a wood table in the far corner. And over that was a moose head.

The place smelled like beer stirred with smoke and grease.

Bing squinted over at Nate, one eye closed against the smoke that drifted up from the cigarette clamped in his lips. “We get more rain tomorrow, the river’s going to come up and kiss Lunatic Street. Gonna need the sandbags I got back of the truck.”

Sandbags, Nate thought with a glance at the sewing machine. He couldn’t quite picture Bing sewing up sandbags, but he supposed there were bigger wonders in the world.

“You left the movie early.”

“Seen enough. Gonna be busy by morning. What’s it to you?”

Nate stepped forward, held out the bagged knife. “Yours?”

Bing drew the cigarette out of his mouth as he turned. He’d have to have been blinded by more than a little smoke to miss the blood on handle and blade.

“Looks like it.” He tossed the cigarette down, heeled it to pulp on the oil-stained concrete. “Yeah, it’s my knife. Looks like it’s been used some, too. Where’d you find it?”

“In Joe and Lara’s dog, Yukon.”

Bing took one step back. Nate saw it, the quick, jerking step of a man who’d been sucker punched. “What the hell you talking about?”

“Somebody used this to slit that dog’s throat, then jammed it in his chest so I wouldn’t have any trouble finding it. What time did you leave the movie, Bing?”

“Somebody killed that dog? Somebody killed that dog?” Awareness slid over the shock in his eyes. “You’re saying I killed that dog?” His fist tightened over the wrench still in his hand. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“You take a swing at me with that, I’ll take you out. You want to spare yourself that humiliation, because believe me, I can do it. Put it down. Now.”

Rage trembled over his face, quaked visibly through his body. “You’ve got yourself a big, bad temper, don’t you, Bing?” Nate said softly. “The kind that’s earned you some assaults on your record, had you spending a few nights here and there behind bars. The kind that’s pushing you right now to crack my skull like an egg with that wrench. Go ahead, try it.”

Bing heaved the wrench across the room where it smashed a chip out of the cinder-block wall. He was breathing like a steam engine, and his face was red as brick.

“Fuck you. Sure I punched a few faces, cracked a few heads, but I’m no goddamn dog killer. And if you say I am, I don’t need a wrench to bust your head open.”

“I asked you what time you left the movie.”

“I went out to catch a smoke at intermission. You saw me. You started

in on how we had to prep for possible flooding. I came back here. Loaded those damn sandbags." He jerked a thumb toward the bed of his truck where at least a hundred sandbags were stacked. "Figured I'd tune up the engine while I was at it. I've been here ever since. Somebody went to Joe's place and killed that dog, it wasn't me. I liked that dog."

Nate took out the bagged gloves. "Are these yours?"

Staring at them, Bing rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. The red was dying out of his cheek, with clammy white rising. "What the hell's going on here?"

"Is that a yes?"

"Yeah, they're mine, I'm not denying it. I told you somebody took 'em, took my spare gloves and my buck knife. I reported it."

"Just this morning, too. A cynical person might wonder if you were covering yourself."

"Why the hell would I kill a dog? Damn, stupid old dog?" Bing scrubbed at his face, then shook another cigarette out of the pack in his breast pocket. His hands shook visibly.

"You don't have a dog, do you, Bing?"

"So that makes me a dog hater? Christ. I had a dog. He died two years ago this June. Got cancer." Bing cleared his throat, drew hard on his cigarette. "Cancer took him."

"Somebody kills a dog, you have to wonder if he had problems with the dog or the people who owned it."

"I didn't have any problem with that dog. I got no problem with Joe or Lara or that college boy of theirs. You ask them. You ask them if we had any problems. But somebody's got problems with me, that's for damn sure."

"Any idea why that might be?"

He shrugged, jerkily. "Only thing I know is I didn't kill that dog."

“Keep available, Bing. If you plan on leaving town for any reason, I want to know about it.”

“I ain’t going to stand by while people point the finger at me.”

“Stay available,” Nate repeated, and went out the way he’d come in.

MEG NURSED A BEER and her temper as she waited. She didn’t like waiting, and Nate was going to hear about it when he got back. He’d snapped orders at her like she was some sort of half-wit, green recruit and he was the general.

She didn’t like orders, and he was going to hear about that, too.

He was going to get both ears full when he got back.

Where the hell was he?

She was worried sick about her dogs—no matter how the sensible part of her insisted they were fine, that Nate would keep his word and get them for her. She should have been allowed to get them herself instead of being under some sort of half-assed house arrest.

She didn’t want to be here, worrying, helpless, sipping beer and playing poker with Otto, Skinny Jim and The Professor to pass the time.

She was up twenty-two dollars and change, and she didn’t give a damn.

Where the hell was he?

And who the hell did he think he was, telling her what to do, threatening to lock her in jail? He’d have done it, too, she thought as she drew the eight of clubs to fill out a very pretty full house.

He hadn’t been sweet, sad-eyed Nate when he’d stood out in the rain beside that dog. Beside poor, dead Yukon. He’d been something else, someone else. Someone she imagined he’d been back in Baltimore before circumstances had cut him off at the knees. Cut him off at the heart.

She didn't give a damn about that either. She wouldn't give a damn. "See your two dollars," she said to Jim. "Raise it two." And tossed her money into the pot.

Her mother had given Jim an hour break and was working the bar. Not that there was a lot of business, Meg thought as The Professor folded and Otto bumped her raise another two. Other than their table, there was a booth of four—Outsiders. Climbers waiting out the weather. The two old farts, Hans and Dex, had another booth, whiling away a rainy evening with beer and checkers.

And waiting, she knew, for whatever gossip might come in the door. There'd be more in and out if the river rose. People coming in for a few minutes of dry and warm, ordering up coffee before they went out to sandbag again. When it was done, there'd be more. Piling in, wet and tired and hungry, but not ready to go home alone, not ready to break the camaraderie of bucking nature.

They'd want coffee and alcohol and whatever hot meal was put in front of them. Charlene would see they got it; she'd work until the last of them were gone. Meg had seen it before.

She tossed in two dollars to call when Jim folded.

"Two pair," Otto announced. "Kings over fives."

"Your kings are going to have to bow to my ladies." She set down two queens. "Seeing as they're cozied up with three eights."

"Son of a bitch!" Otto watched the nice little pile of bills and coins as Meg swept them away. Then he lifted his chin, pushed back his chair as Nate stepped in from the lobby. "Chief?"

Meg jerked around. She'd sat facing the outside door, waiting to pounce the minute he opened it. Instead, she thought sourly, he'd snuck in behind her.

"Could use some coffee, Charlene."

"It's good and hot." She filled a large mug. "I can fix you a meal. That'd be good and hot, too."

"No, thanks."

"Where are my dogs?" Meg demanded.

"In the lobby. Otto, I ran into Hopp and some others outside. Consensus is the river looks like it's going to hold, but we'll need to keep an eye on it. No more than a light snow coming down now. Forecasters say this system's going to head west, so we're probably in the clear."

He drank down half the coffee, held the mug out to Charlene for a refill. "It's flooded over on Lake Shore. Peter and I put hazard markers up there and across from the east edge of Rancor Woods."

"Those two spots are a problem if too many people piss on the side of the road," Otto told him. "The system goes west, we won't have a problem in town."

"We'll keep an eye," Nate repeated and turned toward the stairs.

"Just one damn minute. *Chief*." Meg stood in the doorway, a dog on either side. "I've got some things to say to you."

"I need a shower. You can say them while I'm cleaning up, or you can wait."

Her lips peeled back into a snarl as he carried his coffee up the steps. "Wait, my ass."

She stomped up behind him, the dogs in her wake.

"Who do you think you are?"

"I think I'm chief of police."

"I don't care if you're chief of the known universe, you don't get off snapping at me, ordering me, threatening me."

"I did get off. But I wouldn't have had to do any of those things if you'd just done what I told you."

"What you *told* me?" She shoved into the room behind him. You

don't *tell* me. You're not my boss or my father. Just because I've slept with you doesn't give you the right to tell me what to do."

He yanked off his soaked jacket, then tugged the badge on his shirt. "No, but this does." He peeled off the shirt on the way to the bathroom.

He was still someone else, she thought. The someone else who'd lived behind those sad eyes, just waiting to muscle his way out. That someone was hard and cold. Dangerous.

She heard the shower start up. Both dogs continued to stand, their heads cocked at they looked up at her.

"Lie down," she murmured.

She marched into the bathroom. Nate was sitting on the toilet lid, fighting off wet boots.

"You sic Otto on me like some sort of guard dog and leave me waiting damn near three hours. Three hours where I don't know what's going on."

He looked at her, dead in the face, with eyes like flint. "I had work and more important things to do than keep you updated. You want the news?" He set the boots aside, rose to strip off his pants. "Turn on the radio."

"Don't you talk to me like I'm some sort of whiny, irritating female."

He stepped into the shower, ripped the curtain shut after him. "Then stop acting like one."

God, he needed the heat. Nate pressed his hands to the tile, dipped his head and let the hot water pour over him. An hour or two of it, he estimated, it might just reach his tired, frozen bones. A bottle or two of aspirin, parts of him might stop aching. Three or four days of sleep might just counteract the fatigue that trudging through icy flood water, hauling barricades, watching a grown man and woman weep over their murdered dog had drenched him with.

Part of him wanted the quiet, the quiet dark that he could sink into

where none of it really mattered. And part of him was afraid he'd find his way back there, all too easily.

When he heard the curtain draw back again, he stayed as he was, arms braced, head down, eyes shut. "You don't want to fight with me now, Meg. You'll lose."

"I'll tell you something, Burke, I don't like being shuffled off like a petty annoyance. I don't like being ignored. Ordered around. I'm not sure I like the way you looked outside Town Hall tonight. So I couldn't see anything I recognized on your face, in your eyes. It pisses me off. And . . ."

She slid her arms around him, pressed her naked body to his so that he jerked straight. "It stirs me up."

"Don't." He clasped his hands over hers, prying hers apart before he turned to hold her at arm's length. "Just don't."

Deliberately she looked down. Deliberately she smiled as she looked up again. "Seems to be a contradiction here."

"I don't want to hurt you, and I would, the way I'm feeling right now."

"You don't scare me. You got me all churned up, spoiling for a fight. All of a sudden, I'm spoiling for something else. Give me something else." She reached up, ran her hand down his chest. "We'll finish fighting after."

"I'm not feeling friendly."

"Me, either. Nate, sometimes you just need something else. Just need to go somewhere else and forget for a little while. Burn up some of the mad or the hurt or the scared. Burn me up," she murmured. She gripped his hips now, squeezed.

She'd have been better off if he'd pushed her away. He was sure of it. But he yanked her toward him, so that warm, wet body collided with his, so he could find her mouth, ravage it.

She clamped around him, hooking her arms up his back so her fingers could dig into his shoulders. Nails biting flesh. The heat pumped out of her, and it reached his bones, seared through them, scoring away the tired and the cold line of anger.

Her hands streaked down him again, wet against wet, and her head dropped back to invite him to feast on her throat, her shoulders, anywhere he could find that soft, warm flesh.

The sound she made, the sound that simmered against his lips was one of erotic triumph.

“Here.” She slid the soap out of the slot. “Let’s clean you up. I like the feel of a man’s back under my hands. Especially when it’s all wet and slippery.”

She had a voice like a siren. He let her use it on him, use her hands on him, let her think she was guiding him. When he pushed her back to the shower wall, the sleepy look in her eyes sharpened with surprise.

When she started to smile, he crushed his mouth to hers.

She’d been right, she thought dimly. He was someone else, someone who took control, ruthlessly. Who took away choice, who could make her surrender it.

Even as his mouth took possession of hers, he twisted the soap from her hand. He ran it over her breasts, long, teasing strokes that had her nipples aching. Her breath trembled out in a sigh.

The tickle low in her belly told her she was ready. That she wanted. She needed. Rubbing her lips down the side of his neck, she murmured to him. “It’s good with you. It’s good. Be inside me now. Come inside me.”

“You’ll scream first.”

She laughed, nipped—not so gently. “No, I won’t.”

“Yes.” He hauled her arms over her head, cuffed her wrists with one hand. Pinned them there. “You will.”

He slid the soap between her legs, rubbing it, sliding it, watching her as her body shuddered to orgasm.

“Nate.”

“I warned you.”

Something like panic lit inside her, panic quickly tangled with razor-edged pleasure as his fingers dipped inside her. She twisted, looking for freedom, for more. For him. But he drove her, past the point she could hold it, past the point she thought she could bear it. Her breath sobbed out, half-mad pleas as the water poured hot over her shaking body, as the steam blurred her vision.

When it burst in her, ripping a line between sanity and madness, he muffled her scream with his mouth.

“Say my name.” He had to hear it, had to know she knew who had her. “Say my name,” he ordered as he hoisted her by the hips and buried himself inside her.

“Nate.”

“Again. Say it again.” His breath was raw in his throat. “Look at me, and say my name.”

“Nate.” She fisted a hand in his hair, dug her fingers into his shoulder. She looked at his face, looked into his eyes. And saw him, saw herself. “Nate.”

He took her, took her, took her until he was empty, until she was limp as water, her head dropped on his shoulder.

He had to brace a hand on the wet wall to catch his breath, to catch himself. He fumbled for the tap to shut off the shower.

“I need to sit down,” she managed. “I really need to sit down.”

“Hold on a minute.” Because he wasn’t sure she would, he boosted her up, half slinging her over his shoulder as he levered them out of the shower.

He grabbed a couple of towels, though he imagined with the heat they'd generated, the water would steam off them in a matter of minutes.

The dogs got to their feet when he walked into the bedroom with her. "Better tell your pals you're okay."

"What?"

"The dogs, Meg. Reassure your dogs before they decide I've knocked you unconscious."

"Rock, Bull, relax." She all but dripped out of his arms when he laid her on the bed. "My head's buzzing."

"Better try to dry off." He dropped one of the towels on her belly. "I'll get you a shirt or something."

She didn't bother to dry off, but only lay there enjoying the used, lax sensation weighting her body. "You looked tired when you came in. Tired and mean, with a thin coat of ice over it all. Same look you had outside Town Hall. I've seen it a couple of other times—a quick glimpse of it. Cop face."

He said nothing, only pulled on an old pair of sweats, tossed her a flannel shirt.

"It's one of the things that stirred me up. Weird."

"The road's dicey out to your place. You're going to need to stay here."

She waited a moment, letting her thoughts coalesce again. "You shrugged me off. Before. Before when we were outside." She could still see Yukon, the slash in his throat, the knife buried to the hilt in his chest. "You shrugged me off, and you gave me orders, a kind of verbal strong-arming. I didn't like it."

Again, he said nothing, but picked up the towel to dry his hair.

"You're not going to apologize."

"No."

She sat up to draw on the borrowed shirt. "I knew that dog since he

was a puppy.” Because her voice wanted to break, she pressed her lips together. Controlled it. “I had a right to be upset.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t.” He walked to the window. The snow was barely a mist now. Maybe the forecaster was right.

“And I had a right to be worried about my own dogs, Nate. A right to go see to them myself.”

“Partways there.” He stepped away from the window but left the curtains open. “Natural enough to worry, but there was nothing to worry about.”

“They weren’t hurt, but they might’ve been.”

“No. Whoever did this went for a solo dog, an old dog. Yours are young and strong and have two sets of healthy teeth. They’re practically joined at the hip.”

“I don’t see—”

“Think for two seconds instead of just reacting.” Impatience snapped in his voice as he tossed the towel aside. “Say somebody wanted to hurt them. Say somebody—even somebody they knew and let get close—tried to hurt one of them. Even managed to do it. The other’d be on him like God’s own fury and tear him to pieces. And anybody who knows them enough to get close, knows that.”

She drew her knees up to her chest, pressed her face against them and began to cry. Without looking up, she waved a hand to hold him off when she heard him move toward her.

“Don’t. Don’t. Give me a minute. I can’t get the picture out of my head. It was easier when I was mad at you or turning that mad into sex. I *hated* sitting there waiting, not knowing. And I was scared for you, under it. I was scared something was going to happen to you. And *that* pissed me off.”

She lifted her head. Through the blur of tears she could see his face, and that he'd shut down again. "I've got something else to say."

"Go ahead."

"I . . . I have to figure out how to say this so it doesn't sound lame." She dragged the heels of her hands up over her cheeks to dry them. "Even being mad and being scared and wanting to plant my boot up your ass for making me both, I . . . admire what you do. How you do it. Who you are when you do. I admire the strength it takes to do it."

He sat. Not beside her, not on the bed, but on the chair so there was distance between them. "Nobody I ever cared about—nobody outside of on the job—ever said anything like that to me."

"Then I'd say you cared about the wrong people." She got up, walked to the bathroom to blow her nose. When she came out, she stood leaning on the doorjamb, watching him from across the room.

"You went out and got my dogs for me. With all that was going on, you went out and brought them back for me. You could've sent someone else or just blown it off. Road's flooded, they'll have to wait. But you didn't. I have friends who'd have done the same for me, and me for them. But I can't think of any man I've been with, any man I've slept with, who would have done it."

A ghost of a smile touched his mouth. "Then I'd say you've slept with the wrong men."

"I guess I have." She went over and picked up the shirt he'd discarded when they'd come in. With some care, she unpinned the badge, then brought it to him. "This looks good on you, by the way. Sexy."

He gripped her hand before she could step back. Still holding it, he got to his feet. "I've got an awful need for you. It's more than I've had for anyone else, and may be more than you want."

"I guess we'll find out."

"You wouldn't have admired me a year ago. Six months ago. And you need to know that there are still days it seems like too much trouble to even get out of bed."

"Why do you?"

He opened his other hand, looked down at the badge. "I guess I've got an awful need for this, too. That's not heroic."

"Oh, you're so wrong." Her heart was lost. In that one moment it simply slid out and dropped at his feet. "Heroism's just doing more than you want to do or think you can. Sometimes it's just doing the crappy things, the unhappy things other people won't do."

She stepped closer, cupped his face in her hands. "It's not just jumping out of a plane onto a glacier ten thousand feet up because there's nobody else there to do it. It's getting out of bed in the morning when it seems like too much trouble."

Emotion swirled into his eyes, and he lowered his cheek to the top of her head. "I'm so in love with you, Meg."

Then he kissed her hair, straightened. "I need to go out. I want to check the river, patrol before I turn in."

"Can a civilian and her dogs do a ride-along on that?"

"Yeah." He ruffled a hand over her damp hair. "Dry your hair first."

"Will you tell me what you know, about Yukon?"

"I'll tell you what I can."

TWENTY-FOUR

HE WENT BACK to the scene of the crime in the early morning drizzle. Ten steps from the door, Nate thought. Left in plain view of anyone who might have come in or gone out of Town Hall. Plain view of anyone driving by, walking by.

More than left, he amended. Executed in plain view.

He walked inside, through to the meeting center. He'd ordered everything left as it was. The folding chairs, the big projection screen remained in place. He brought it back, into his head, the way it had been the night before.

He'd come in a little late, just before the lights had gone down. He'd scanned the crowd as much out of habit as looking for Meg.

Rose and David had been in the last row. Her first night out since the baby. They'd been holding hands. He remembered seeing them both at intermission—with Rose on the phone, probably checking with her mother, who was home watching the kids.

Bing had been near the back. Nate had ignored the flask he'd held between his knees. Deb and Harry, The Professor. A small clump of high schoolers, the entire Riggs family, who lived in a log cabin out past Rancor Woods.

He'd estimate that half the population had been there—which meant half hadn't. Some had left at intermission. Any of those who'd stayed might have slipped out and in again.

In the dark, while attention was focused on the screen.

He walked back to the lobby when he heard the outer door open and watched Hopp shove back her hood.

"Saw your car parked outside. I don't know what to think about this, Ignatious. I can't put two thoughts together about it."

She lifted her hands, let them drop again. "I'm going to go over and see Lara. Don't know what I'll say. This is such a crazy thing. Mean and crazy."

"I'll go with mean."

"But not crazy? Somebody carves up a harmless dog outside Town Hall, and that's not crazy?"

"Depends on why."

Her mouth flattened at that. "I can't see any why to it. Couple of people are saying we've got a cult, high school kids experimenting or some such thing. I don't believe that for one minute."

"It wasn't ritualistic."

"Others think it's some loony, camped out near town. Maybe it's a comfort believing none of us could have done such an awful thing, but I don't know that it makes me feel any better to think we've got a crazy lurking around who'd kill a dog that way."

She studied his face. "You don't think that."

"No, I don't think that."

"Are you going to tell me what you do think?"

"I think when somebody kills a local dog, in the middle of town, in front of a building where a good half of that town's sitting, he's got his reasons."

“Which are?”

“I’m working on it.”

HE DROVE ALONG THE RIVER before heading to the station. It was a sulky gray today, with those plates and chunks of floating ice dull on its surface.

Meg’s plane was gone, a clear symbol that he couldn’t box her up somewhere safe and close. Bing and a two-man crew were patching a section of road. Bing’s only acknowledgment as Nate slowed to pass was a long, steady stare.

He drove to the station to find Peach urging coffee on Joe and Lara. Peter stood by looking very much like a grown man struggling not to cry.

Lara, her eyes swollen and beet red, sprang up the instant Nate stepped into the room.

“I want to know what you’re doing about Yukon. What are you doing to find the bastard who killed my dog?”

“Now, Lara.”

“Don’t ‘Now, Lara’ me,” she said, whirling on her husband. “I want to *know*.”

“Why don’t you come back to my office. Peach, hold off anything that comes in, except an emergency, for the next few minutes.”

“All right, chief. Lara.” She gripped Lara’s hand in hers. “I couldn’t be more sorry.”

Lara managed a short bob of her head before she shot her chin into the air and sailed into Nate’s office. “I want some answers.”

“Lara, I want you to sit down.”

“I don’t want—”

“I want you to sit down.” His tone was quiet, but the authority in it had her dropping into a chair.

“The town voted for this police department. Voted to bring you in and to pay the tax that pays your salary. I want you to tell me what you’re doing. Why you’re not out there right now looking for that son of a bitch.”

“I’m doing everything I can do. Lara,” he said in that same quiet tone before she could speak again. “Don’t think for a minute that I’m taking this lightly. That any of us are. I’m pursuing it, and I’ll keep pursuing it until I can give you those answers.”

“You’ve got the knife. The knife that—” Her voice broke, and her chin bobbed, but she sucked in air, pushed back her shoulders. “You ought to be able to find out who owned that knife.”

“I can tell you that the knife was reported stolen yesterday morning, along with other items. I’ve talked to the owner, and I’m going to get statements from people who were in Town Hall last night. I can start with you.”

“You think one of us killed Yukon?”

“That’s not what I think. Sit down, Lara,” he said when she leaped to her feet. “You were both at movie night. So let’s go over what you saw, heard.”

She lowered, slowly this time. “We left him outside.” Tears swam into her eyes. “He was getting so he couldn’t hold his bladder, so we left him outside. It was only for a few hours, and he had his doghouse. If we’d left him in—”

“You don’t know if it would’ve made a difference. Whoever did this could’ve broken in, taken him out. From what I’ve heard, you gave that dog nearly fourteen good years. You’ve got nothing to blame yourself for. What time did you leave the house?”

Lara bowed her head, stared at her hands as her tears plopped onto them.

“Right after six,” Joe said, and began to rub his wife’s shoulder.

“You go straight to Town Hall?”

“Yeah. We got there about six-thirty, I guess. Early, but we like to sit close to the front. We dumped our jackets on the chairs. Three, four rows back, on . . . on the left side. And we socialized awhile.”

Nate took them through it. Who they had talked with, who had sat near them.

“Anyone ever complain to you about the dog?”

“No.” Joe sighed. “Well, maybe a few times when he was a puppy. He used to bark if a leaf stirred. And he got out once and chewed up Tim Tripp’s boots from off his back stoop. But that was years ago, and Tim got kind of a kick out of it because the damn boots were almost bigger than Yukon. He settled down, after he got out of the puppy stage, he settled down.”

“How about the two of you? Have you had a problem with anyone lately? An argument?”

“I got into it some with Skinny Jim over the Iditarod. It got pretty heated. But that sort of thing happens. People get worked up over the Iditarod, and they’ve got their favorites.”

“I had to call Ginny Mann into the school because her boy hooked twice.” Lara fumbled out a tissue. “She wasn’t happy about it or with me.”

“How old’s her boy?”

“Eight.” She blinked rapidly. “Oh God, Joshua couldn’t have done that to Yukon, Nate. He’s a good kid—just doesn’t much like school, but he wouldn’t have killed my dog because he was mad at me. And Ginny and Don, they’re good people. They couldn’t . . .”

“Okay. If you think of anything else, you let me know.”

"I want—I want to apologize for the way I jumped on you before."

"Don't worry about that, Lara."

"No, it wasn't right. It wasn't right and it wasn't . . . You saved my son's life."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"You helped save it, and that's the same thing to me. I shouldn't've come in here the way I did. Joe tried to calm me down, but I wouldn't be calmed. I loved that damn dog."

AFTER THEY'D LEFT, Nate uncovered his case board. As he pinned up the pictures he'd taken the night before, Peter came in. "Okay, chief?"

"Yeah."

"I feel like I should've been able to handle Mrs. Wise. I got twisted up. I, well, Steven and I hung out together a lot, and . . . I grew up with that dog. My dad, he has the sled dogs, and they're great. But not the same as a pet. Even when Steven went to college, I'd go over and see Yukon sometimes. I guess that's why I had some trouble with everything last night, too."

"You could've told me."

"I just . . . I was just twisted up. Um, chief? Is that going to be just an open case board now? I mean, should we put copies of notes and other case-related items on the board?"

"No."

"But . . . you've got Yukon up there now."

"That's right."

"You think what happened to Yukon's related to the others? I feel stupid, but I don't understand."

"Thinking they're related might be stupid."

Peter stepped closer. "Why do you?"

"At this point I've got no clear motive for anyone killing that dog." Nate walked around to his desk, unlocked a drawer and took out the sealed knife and gloves. "These belong to Bing. He reported them stolen yesterday morning."

"Bing?" Peter's eyes widened. "*Bing?*"

"He's got a temper on him. He's got a sheet, and most of it deals with assaults. Violent behavior."

"Yeah, but . . . God."

"We've got a few ways to look at this. Bing gets in an argument with Joe somewhere along the line. Or Joe and Lara do something that aggravates him. He stewes about it, decides to teach them a lesson. So he decides to kill the dog, reports the knife and gloves as stolen, then goes off after intermission last night, knowing the Wises are inside. He gets the dog, brings him back. Kills him, leaves the knife and gloves figuring he's covered because he'd reported them stolen. Then he goes home and works in his garage."

"If he was mad at Mr. or Mrs. Wise, why didn't he just punch Mr. Wise in the face?"

"Good question. Another way we can look at it is, somebody wanted to cause Bing some trouble. He pisses a lot of people off, so that's no stretch."

He eased a hip onto his desk, his eyes on the board. "They steal his knife and gloves. They use them to kill the dog, leave them where they'll be found. Or . . ."

He moved to the counter, started a pot of coffee. "We ask ourselves how Galloway's murder, Max's death and the killing of a dog might be connected."

"That's just it. I don't see."

"The killer left us one big clue. Cryptic or obvious, depending on which angle you look from. The dog's throat was slit. That's what killed him. But the killer doesn't toss the knife aside. He takes another minute. Had to roll the dog over to do it. To bury the knife in its chest. Why?"

"Because he's sick and he's mean and—"

"Put that aside and look at the board, Peter. Look at Galloway. Look at the dog."

He struggled with it, Nate could see. With looking close at the grisly pictures. Then he let out a little breath, as if he'd been holding it. "Chest wound. They both have a blade of some kind in the chest."

"Could be coincidence, or maybe somebody's trying to tell us something. Now, take another step. Where's the connection between Galloway, Max and the Wises?"

"Well, I don't know. Steven and his parents moved here when I was about twelve, I guess. That was after Galloway was gone. But they knew Mr. Hawbaker. Mr. Wise ran an ad in *The Lunatic* most weeks for his computer servicing. And Mrs. Wise and Mrs. Hawbaker took some classes together. The exercise class at the school and the quilting class Peach has going."

"Something else connects them. To our knowledge they didn't know Patrick Galloway, but for sixteen years everyone believes Galloway just took off. Now they don't. Why?"

"Well, because they found him when . . . Steven. Steven's the one who found him."

"Get away with murder for sixteen years, then some dumbass college boy and his idiot friends screw it up for you." Nate listened to the coffee plop into the glass pot. "A pisser, all right. If they hadn't been up there—that time, that place—odds are things would be fine. Another avalanche—nature's or one the State set off to clear the mountain—

that cave could've been buried again. For years. Maybe forever, if your luck held."

He eased a hip down on his desk while the coffee brewed. "Now you've got to go and kill again. Kill Max, or induce him to kill himself. You'll get away with that, too. You believe that. You have to believe that, but there are cops in Lunacy now. Not just state, but town cops, right underfoot. What do you do about that?"

"I . . . I can't keep up."

"You distract them. Vandalism, petty thievery. Little things that keep them occupied, just in case they're thinking about more important things. You pay that dumbass college boy back, and you give the cops something else to worry about at the same time. Two birds. But you can't resist being a little fancy, giving them an elbow in the ribs. So you mimic your first murder by shoving the knife in the dog's chest."

He got up, poured coffee for both of them. "Now, it could be you're so fucking arrogant and full of yourself that you use your own knife, your own gloves. Strong possibility when you profile Bing Karlovski. Or you're so clever, so full of yourself, you plant them so the finger points elsewhere. If that's the case, why Bing? Where's he connect?"

"I swear I don't know. I'm trying to get all this into my head. Maybe it doesn't have to connect. Bing's ornery. He irritates people. Or there was just an easy chance to steal the knife."

"None of it's chance. Not this time. We need to find out where Bing was—exactly where he was in February of 1988."

"How?"

Nate sipped his coffee. "For a start, I'm going to ask him. Meanwhile I want statements from everyone who was at movie night, and everyone who wasn't. That's going to take time. You tell Peach to make a list that divides the township and outlying into three parts. We'll each take one."

"I'll tell her right now."

"Peter?" Nate stopped him at the door. "Weren't you scheduled to work last night? To cover the desk?"

"Yeah, but Otto said he didn't feel like going to the movies so we switched. That's okay, isn't it?"

"Sure." Nate sipped his coffee again. "That's fine. Go ahead and get Peach started on that list."

Nate crossed to the board and drew lines connecting Joe and Lara Wise with Max and with Bing.

"Nate?" Peach peeked in. "You still want me to hold things out here?"

"No, whatcha got?"

"Had a report of gunfire and a bear sighting. Same people who reported the dead body that was a pair of boots. I gave both of them to Otto, since he was already out on patrol. Gunfire was Dex Trilby's truck, which is older than I am, backfiring."

"And the bear was what, a squirrel standing on a log?"

"No, the bear was a bear. Those idiot Outsiders put up a bunch of bird feeders around the cabin, draw the birds in. Well, a bear can't resist fresh bird feed. Otto ran it off, and made them take down the feeders. He's a little irritable after having to go out there twice already today. So if something else comes in, I thought I'd hand it off to you or Peter."

"You do that."

"Well, then, Carrie Hawbaker just came in and wants to see you. She wants me to give her the items for the police log."

"Good, go ahead. I guess we'll have *The Lunatic* up and running again."

"Looks that way. She says she wants the official statement on what happened last night for the paper. Do you want me to take care of it?"

"No." He flipped the blanket over his board. "Send her on back."

She looked better than the last time he'd seen her. Steadier and not quite so sunken around the eyes. "Thanks for seeing me."

"How are you doing?" he asked and closed the door.

"Getting through, getting by. It helps to have the kids—they need me—and the paper." She took the chair he offered and set the canvas briefcase she carried on her lap. "I'm not just here about the items for the police log. Though, God, it's an awful thing about Yukon."

"It is."

"Well. I know you wanted me to think about back when Pat disappeared. To write down details. I did some." She opened the bag to take sheets of paper. "I thought I'd remember it all. I thought everything would just coming flooding back. But it didn't."

Nate saw the papers were neatly typed and written in a formal outline style. "It looks like you remembered plenty."

"I put down everything. A lot of things that couldn't matter. It was long ago, and I have to admit now that I didn't pay much attention to Pat's leaving. I was teaching, and wondering how I was going to get through another winter—my second—here. I was thirty-one, and I'd missed my goal of being married by my thirtieth birthday."

She smiled a little. "That was one of the reasons I'd come to Alaska in the first place. The ratio was in my favor. I remember feeling a little desperate, a little sorry for myself. And annoyed with Max because he hadn't asked me. That's why I remember—you'll see it written there—that he was gone a couple of weeks that winter. I think it was that February, I'm not absolutely sure. Days tend to freeze together in the winter, especially if you're alone."

"Where did he tell you he was going?"

"That I do remember, because I got snippy about it. He said he was going to Anchorage, down to Homer—a few weeks in the southeast,

interviewing bush pilots and getting some of them to fly him around. For the paper, and research for the novel he was writing.”

“Did he do a lot of traveling back then?”

“He did. I put that down, too. He said he’d be gone maybe four or five weeks, and that didn’t sit well with me, especially with things still up in the air between us. I remember because he was back sooner than he said, but he didn’t even come to see me. People told me he’d holed up at the paper. Was practically living there. I was too mad to go see him either.”

“How long before you did see him?”

“It was a while. I was pretty mad. But finally I got mad enough *to* see him. I know it was the end of March or the very start of April. We had the classroom decorated for Easter. Easter hit the first Sunday in April that year. I looked it up. I remember sitting there with all those colored eggs and bunny drawings while I was stewing about Max.”

She ran her hand over her stack of papers. “This part I remember perfectly. He was at the paper, locked in. I had to bang on the door. He looked terrible. Thin and unshaven, his hair all which way. He smelled. There were papers all over his desk.”

She sighed a little. “I can’t remember what the weather was like, Nate. What it looked like in town, but I can remember exactly how he looked. I can remember exactly how it looked in his office. Coffee cups, dishes all over the place, trash cans overflowing, trash on the floor. Ashtrays full of butts. He used to smoke.

“I wrote it down,” she said, and smoothed the papers again. “He was working on his novel—that’s what I assumed—and looked like a madman. Damn if I know why I found that so appealing. But I gave him what-for. Told him I was done. If he thought he could treat me that way, he could just think again, and so on. I just raved and ranted,

and he didn't say a thing. When I'd run out of steam, he got down on one knee."

She stopped a moment, pressed her lips together. "Right there, in all that mess. He said he wanted a second chance. He needed one. And asked me to marry him. We were married that June. I wanted to be a June bride, and since I'd already missed the thirtieth-birthday deadline, a couple more months didn't matter."

"Did he ever talk about the time he was away?"

"No. And I didn't ask. It didn't seem important. All he said was that he'd learned what it was like to be alone, really alone, and he didn't want to be alone again."

Nate thought about the lines connecting the names on his list. "Did he ever have a particular run-in or a particular friendship with Bing?"

"Bing? No, not a buddy sort of thing. Max tried to stay on his good side, especially since he knew Bing had asked me out."

"Bing?"

"'Asked me out' is probably a euphemism. He wasn't interested in dining and dancing, if you follow me."

"And did you ever . . ."

"No." She laughed, cutting herself off in midstream and looking shocked at herself. "I haven't laughed, not really, since . . . It's terrible to laugh at this."

"The thought of you and Bing strikes me funny. How'd he take being turned down?"

"Oh, I don't think it was a big deal." She brushed it off with the back of her hand. "I was handy, that's all. New female in the very small pack. Men like Bing would try to cut the new one out of the herd, see if he could get some sex and maybe a couple of home-cooked meals out of it. Nothing against him, it's natural enough in a place like this. He wasn't

the only one who made moves. I went out with a few that first winter. Even The Professor and I had dinner a couple times, though it was plain as plain he had a major crush on Charlene.”

“That would be before Galloway left?”

“Before, during, after. He’s always had a thing for her. But we had dinner a couple of times, and he was a perfect gentleman. Maybe a little more gentlemanly than I was looking for, to tell the truth. But I wasn’t looking for someone like Bing.”

“Because?”

“He’s so big and crude and rough. I went out with John because I liked his looks and his intellect. And with Ed once because, well, why not? Even Otto, after his divorce. A woman—even one who’s not very pretty and past thirty—has a lot of choices in a place like this, if she’s not too picky. I chose Max.”

She smiled into middle distance. “I still would.” Then brought herself back. “I wish I could tell you more. Looking back, I guess I can see that Max was troubled. But he always seemed troubled when he worked on one of his books. He’d put them away for months and months at a time, and everything was normal. But as soon as he’d pull one out and start, he’d close in. I was happier when he’d forget the books.”

“Anyone ever make a move on you after you were married?”

“No. I recall Bing telling me, right in front of Max, that I was selling myself short or cheap or something like that.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Max made a joke out of it, bought Bing a drink. He wasn’t one for confrontations, Nate. Went miles out of the way to avoid one, which is one of the reasons, I guess, he didn’t make it on a big-city paper. You saw what he did when you brushed him off after you first got here. He went to Hopp. That was his way. He wouldn’t have come in

here for a showdown with you on his own because he just didn't have the tools for any sort of battle. He never did."

"Was Max a movie fan?"

"Just about everyone in Lunacy is. One dependable form of community entertainment. He really loved doing reviews on what we had coming up. Speaking of movie night, I really do want a statement about what happened last night."

"Peach can give you the report for the log."

"I'll see her about that, but I think, something like this, we'll want to run more than an item. Otto found him," she began as she started to dig out a notebook.

"Yes. Give us a couple days on this, Carrie. By then I should have something more cohesive to give you."

"Do you mean you expect to make an arrest shortly?"

Nate smiled. "You've got your reporter hat right back on. What I mean is I'll have my notes, statements, the incident report coordinated."

She rose. "I'm glad my kids weren't there last night. I almost insisted they go, just so they'd get out and do something normal. But they had a couple of friends over for pizza instead. I'll check back with you tomorrow."

"I was just wondering," he said as he walked her to the door, "was Max a fan of *Star Wars*?"

She stared at him. "Where did that come from?"

"Just a dot I'm trying to connect."

"He wasn't. Not just that he wasn't a particular fan, which was baffling to me because he loved that sort of thing. Big epic stories with lots of special effects. But he wouldn't watch those. We had a *Star Wars* marathon on movie night about six, seven years ago. Well, whenever the twentieth anniversary of the original was. He wouldn't go, and the kids

were mad to go. I had to take them myself. And write the reviews for the paper, now that I think about it. When the new ones came out, I ended up taking the kids all the way to Anchorage to see them for the first run. He stayed home.

“What hat did you pull that one out of?”

“Cop hat.” He gave her a little nudge to urge her out. “It’s not important. You see Peach about the log item.”

NATE TIMED IT so that he walked over to The Lodge when Bing and his crew broke for lunch. He stepped inside as Rose served Bing a beer. His eyes met Bing’s over it. He strolled over, nodded casually to the two men on the opposite side of the booth.

“You boys mind finding another table so Bing and I can have a private conversation?”

They didn’t like it, but they picked up their coffee mugs and moved to the next empty booth.

“I got lunch coming,” Bing began. “And I got a right to eat it without you sitting here spoiling my appetite.”

“See you got that pothole filled in. Thanks, Rose,” he said when she brought him his usual coffee.

“You ready for lunch, chief?”

“No. Nothing right now. River’s holding,” he continued to Bing. “Maybe we won’t need those sandbags.”

“Maybe we do, maybe we don’t.”

“February 1988. Where were you?”

“How the living fuck do I know?”

“In 1988, the Los Angeles Dodgers won the Series, the Redskins took the Super Bowl. Cher won an Oscar.”

“Lower 48 crap.”

“And in February, Susan Butcher won her third Iditarod. Hell of a feat for a girl from Boston. Finished in eleven days and just under twelve hours. Maybe that refreshes your memory.”

“It refreshes that I lost two hundred bucks on that race. Damn woman.”

“So, what were you doing a few weeks before you lost the two bills?”

“A man remembers losing two hundred because of a woman. He don’t necessarily remember every time he scratches his ass or takes a piss.”

“You take any trips?”

“I was coming and going as I damn well pleased then, same as now.”

“Maybe you went down to Anchorage, saw Galloway there.”

“I’ve been down to Anchorage more times than you can spit. Couple hundred miles doesn’t mean anything up here. I might’ve seen him there a time or two. Seen plenty of people I know there. I do my business and they do theirs.”

“You play hard-ass on this, you’ll be the one who pays for it.”

The heat burned into his eyes. “You don’t want to go threatening me.”

“You don’t want to go stonewalling me.” Nate leaned back with his coffee. “You figured you should be the one wearing this badge.”

“Better than some cheechako, one that got his own partner killed. One that woulda washed out if that thin blue line hadn’t held him up.”

It seared straight into his gut, but he drank the coffee, held Bing’s eyes. “Been doing your homework, I see. But the fact is, I’m wearing the badge. I’ve got enough right now to take you in, charge you and lock you up for what was done to that dog.”

“I never touched that dog.”

“If I were you, I’d put a little more effort into remembering where I was when Patrick Galloway left town.”

“Why do you want to beat this dead horse, Burke? Make you feel important? Max killed Galloway, and everybody knows it.”

“Then it shouldn’t bother you to verify your own whereabouts.”

Rose came over with a slab of meat loaf, a mountain of mashed potatoes and a small sea of gravy. “Anything else I can get for you, Bing?” She set a bowl of snow peas and tiny onions beside the plate.

Nate saw him struggle, watched him draw himself back. His voice was even, a shade on the gentle side when he answered. “No thanks, Rose.”

“You enjoy that. Chief, just let me know if you want anything.”

“I’m through talking to you,” Bing said, and forked up a huge bite of meat loaf.

“How about some lunchtime small talk, then? What do you think of *Star Wars*?”

“Huh?”

“You know, the movies. Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader.”

“Fucking idiot,” Bing mumbled under his breath and scooped up gravy drenched potatoes. “*Star Wars*, for Christ’s sake. Let me eat in peace.”

“Great story, memorable characters. Under all the jazz, it’s about destiny—and betrayal.”

“It’s about making a killing at the box office and merchandising.” Bing waved his fork before he dug in again. “Buncha guys flying around in spaceships, whapping each other with light swords.”

“Sabers. Light sabers. The thing is, it took some time, some sacrifice, some loss, but . . .” He slid out of the booth. “The good guys won. See you around.”

TWENTY-FIVE

THERE WERE ELEVEN SENIORS in the last-period English lit class. Nine of them were awake. John let the two snoozers catch their late-afternoon catnap while one of the more alert mangled the Bard's words in her reading of Lady Macbeth's "Out, damned spot," scene.

He had enough on his mind, and supervising the discussion on *Macbeth* was only a small part of it.

He'd been leading discussions like this for twenty-five years, since the first time he stepped nervously in front of a classroom of students.

He'd been only a few years older than those he'd taught back then. And perhaps more innocent and eager than the majority of his students.

He'd wanted to write great and awesome novels, filled with allegories on the human condition.

He hadn't wanted to starve in a garret, so he'd taught.

He'd written, and though the novels were never as great or awesome as he'd hoped, he'd published a few. Without teaching he might not have starved in that garret, but he wouldn't have eaten well.

He'd felt the demands—and, God help him, the joys—of teaching overwhelming for the intellectual young man who wanted to write great novels. So he'd taken the leap, the brave and foolish leap, and had run to

Alaska. There he would experience, he'd live simply, he'd study the human condition in that primitive place, that wide-open isolation it represented to him. He'd write novels about man's courage and tenacity, his follies and his triumphs.

Then he'd come to Lunacy.

How could he have known, a young man not yet thirty, the true meaning of obsession? How could he have understood—that bright, idealistic and pathetic young man—that one place, one woman could chain him? Could keep him willingly shackled no matter how they defied and denied his needs?

He had fallen in love—become obsessed, he was no longer sure there was a difference—the moment he'd seen Charlene. Her beauty was like a golden willow, her voice a siren's song. Her reckless and joyful sexuality. Everything about her enchanted and engulfed him.

She was another man's woman, the mother of another man's child. But it made no difference. His love, if that's what it was, hadn't been the pure and romantic love of a valorous knight for a lady, but the lustful, sweaty need of a man for a woman.

Hadn't he convinced himself she would cast Galloway off? He was careless with her. Selfish. Even if he hadn't been blinded by love, John would have seen that. Resented that.

So he'd stayed and waited. Changed the course of his life and waited.

After everything he'd done, all his plans, his hopes, he was still waiting.

His students got younger and younger, and the years died behind him. He could never get back what he'd cast away, what he'd wasted.

And still, the single thing he wanted would not be his.

He glanced at the clock, saw another day had gone to dust. Then, catching a movement out of the corner of his eye, saw Nate leaning against the jamb of the open door of his classroom.

"Your papers on *Macbeth* are due next Friday," he announced to a chorus of groans. "Kevin, I'll know if Marianne writes it for you. Those of you who're on the yearbook committee, remember there's a meeting tomorrow at three-thirty. Make sure you've arranged transportation home, if necessary. Dismissed."

There was the general clatter, shuffle, chatter he was so used to he no longer noticed.

"What is it about high schools," Nate began, "that can make a grown man's palms sweat?"

"Just because we survived the hell of it once, doesn't mean we can't be thrown back into the pit."

"Guess that's it."

"You'd have done well enough, I'd wager," John said, as he packed some papers into his battered briefcase. "You've got the looks, the attitude. Decent enough student, I'd say, did well with the girls. Athletic. What did you letter in?"

"Track." Nate's lips curved. "Always could run. You?"

"Your classic nerd. The one that screwed the curve for the rest of the class."

"That was you? I hated you." With his thumbs hooked in his pockets, Nate strolled in, looked at the notes on the blackboard. "*Macbeth*, huh? I got Shakespeare okay if somebody else read it. Out loud, I mean, so I could hear the words. This guy killed for a woman, right?"

"No, for ambition at the *urging* of a woman. With the seeds for it all planted by three more."

"He didn't get away with it."

"He paid, with his honor, with the loss of the woman he loved to madness, with his life."

"What goes around."

John nodded, lifted an eyebrow. "Did you drop by to discuss Shakespeare, Nate?"

"Nope. We're investigating the incident last night. I need to ask you some questions."

"About Yukon? I was in Town Hall when it happened."

"What time did you get there?"

"A few minutes before seven." He glanced over absently as some of the liberated students raced laughing down the hall. "Actually, I'm doing an extracurricular group on Hitchcockian storytelling for the tenth-through twelfth-graders. Gets some of the kids involved, earns them extra credit. A dozen of my students signed up for it."

"Did you go out between seven and ten?"

"I went out at intermission, had a smoke, got some of the punch the elementary school committee was selling. Which was more palatable when I doctored it."

"Where were you sitting?"

"Toward the back, opposite side from my students. I didn't want to inhibit them or be barraged with questions. I was taking notes on the movies."

"In the dark?"

"Yes, that's right. Just a few key points I wanted to make sure to bring forward in discussion. I'd like to help you on this, but I don't see how I can."

He walked over to lower the blinds on the room's single window. "After Otto came in, after we knew what had happened, I went back to The Lodge. I was upset. We all were. Charlene, Skinny Jim and Big Mike were running the place."

"Who was there?"

"Ah, Mitch Dauber and Cliff Treat, Drunk Mike. A couple of hik-

ers." As he spoke, he policed the room, gathering up dropped pencils, crumpled balls of paper, a hair clip.

"I got a drink. Meg and Otto came in shortly, and after things settled down a little, we played some poker. We were still playing when you got there."

Nate nodded and put away the notebook he'd pulled out.

John tossed the paper in the trash, put the other items in a shoe box on his desk. "I don't know anybody who'd do that to a dog. Especially Yukon."

"Nobody else seems to either." Nate glanced around the classroom. It smelled like chalk, he thought. And that teenage perfume of gum, lip gloss and hair gel. "Do you ever take time off during the school year? Give yourself a break and just head out?"

"I've been known to. Mental-health breaks, I'd call them. Why?"

"I'm wondering if you took a mental-health break back in February of 1988."

Behind his lenses, John's eyes went cool. "It would be hard to say."

"Try."

"Should I be talking to a lawyer, Chief Burke?"

"That would be up to you. I'm just trying to get a picture of where everyone was, what everyone was up to when Patrick Galloway was killed."

"Shouldn't the State Police be the ones trying to get that picture? And if I'm not mistaken, haven't they drawn their conclusions?"

"I like my own drawings. You wouldn't say it was a secret that you've been, let's say, partial to Charlene for a long time."

"No." After taking off his glasses, John began to polish them, slowly, thoroughly, with a handkerchief from his jacket pocket. "I wouldn't say it's a secret."

“And were partial to her when she was with Galloway.”

“I had feelings, strong feelings for her, yes. They hardly did me any good as she married someone else less than a year after Galloway left.”

“Was murdered,” Nate corrected.

“Yes.” He replaced his glasses. “Was murdered.”

“Did you ask her?”

“She said no. She’s said no every time I’ve asked her.”

“But she slept with you.”

“You’re treading on very personal ground now.”

“She slept with you,” Nate continued, “but she married someone else. Slept with you while she was married to someone else. And not just you.”

“That’s private. As much as anything can be in a place like this. I’m not going to discuss it with you.”

“Love’s a kind of ambition, isn’t it.” Nate tapped a finger on the copy of *Macbeth* still sitting on John’s desk. “Men kill for it.”

“Men kill. Half the time they don’t need any excuse.”

“Can’t argue with that. Sometimes they get away with it. More often they don’t. I’d appreciate it if you’d think back, and when you remember where you were that February, you let me know.”

He started for the door, turned back. “Oh, I wondered, did you ever read any of the books Max Hawbaker started?”

“No.” Though his voice was calm, a dull anger still rode in his eyes. “He was secretive about them. A lot of aspiring writers are. I had the impression he talked about writing a book more than he actually wrote.”

“Turns out he started a few. I’ve got the copies. They all sort of circle around to the same thing. A theme, I guess you’d call it.”

“That’s not atypical for a fledgling writer either. Even an experienced one will explore a theme from several angles.”

“His seems to be about men surviving nature—and each other. Or

not surviving. Always ends up being three men, no matter how many it starts out with, it comes down to three. The one he did the most on is about three men climbing a mountain, in the winter.”

Nate jingled loose change in his pocket when John remained silent.

“He only had a few chapters complete, but he had notes on the rest, like an outline or scattered scenes he was going to plug in. Three men go up the mountain. Only two come back.” Nate paused a moment. “A lot of novels are autobiographical, aren’t they?”

“Some,” John said evenly. “It’s often a device used for a first novel.”

“Interesting, isn’t it? It’d be even more interesting to find out who that third man was. Well, I’ll be around. You let me know if you recall where you were that February.”

John stood where he was until Nate’s footsteps stopped echoing down the hall. Then he sat, slowly, at his desk. And saw his hands were shaking.

NATE WALKED IN on an informal meeting at Town Hall. He did so deliberately and wasn’t surprised when conversation snapped off when he came in the door.

“Sorry to interrupt.” He scanned the faces of the town council, faces he’d come to know. More than one of them registered embarrassment. “I can wait until you’re finished if you want.”

“I think we’re about wrapped up here,” Hopp said.

“I disagree.” Ed planted his Vasque Sundowners on the floor, folded his arms over his chest. “I don’t think we’ve resolved anything—and I think this meeting should continue—and, I’m sorry, chief, remain closed until things are resolved.”

“Ed.” Deb leaned forward. “We’ve hashed this around six dozen ways. Let’s give it a rest.”

"I move we continue."

"Oh, move it up your ass, Ed." Joe Wise got to his feet.

"Joe." Hopp jabbed a finger at him. "We're informal here, but that doesn't mean we're going to start a rumble. Since Ignatious is here, and his name's come up in this meeting, let's get his input."

"I agree." Ken rose, dragged another chair into the circle they'd formed. "Have a seat, Nate. Listen," he said before anyone could object, "this is our chief of police. He should be a part of this."

"The fact is, Ignatious, we're discussing recent events. And your handling of them."

"Okay. I take it some aren't satisfied with my handling of them."

"Well, the fact is . . ." Harry scratched his head. "There've been some rumblings around town that we've had more trouble here since we hired you than before. Seems like we have—not that I see how that's your fault—but it seems we have."

"It might have been a mistake." Ed firmed his jaw. "I'll say that right to your face. It might have been a mistake to hire you, anyone for that matter, from Outside."

"The reasons for going Outside were valid," Walter Notti reminded him. "Chief Burke has done, is doing, the job he was hired to do."

"That may be, Walter, that may be. But—" Ed held up his hands. "It could be some of the less lawful elements of this town look at that as a kind of dare. So they're more active, you could say. People around here don't like being told what to do."

"We voted to have a police force," Hopp reminded him.

"I know that, Hopp, and I was one who voted aye, right here in this room. I'm not saying Nate's to blame for the way it's worked out. I'm saying it was a mistake. Our mistake."

"I'm stitching up the Mackies less often since Nate got here," Ken

put in. "I had less patients coming in than usual for treatment after fights, less domestic violence. Last year Drunk Mike was brought in twice with frostbite after somebody found him passed out on the side of the road. This year he's still going on benders, but he's sleeping them off safe in a cell."

"I don't think we can blame having a police force for you getting your equipment stolen, Ed, or your shack graffitied." Deb spread her hands. "We can't blame having law for Hawley getting his tires slashed, or for windows being broke at the school or any of that stuff. I say we blame it on parents not sitting hard enough on their kids."

"A kid didn't kill my dog." Joe looked apologetically at Nate. "I agree with what Deb said, and with what Walter and Ken said before that, but a kid didn't do that to Yukon."

"No," Nate said. "It wasn't a kid."

"I don't think hiring you was a mistake, Nate," Deb continued, "but I think we've all got a responsibility to this town, and we ought to know how you're handling it. What you're doing to find out who's doing these things and who did that to Yukon."

"That's fair. Some of the incidents mentioned may very well have been kids. The broken windows at the school certainly were, and since one of them was careless enough to drop his penknife, they've been identified. I talked to them and their parents yesterday. Restitution will be made, and both of them will get a three-day suspension—during which time, I doubt they're going to have a real good time."

"You didn't charge them?" Ed demanded.

"They were nine and ten, Ed. I didn't think locking them in a cell was the answer. A lot of us," he said remembering the sealed juvenile file on Ed's record, "do stupid things, get in trouble with the law when we're kids."

"If they did that, maybe they did the other things," Deb suggested.

"They didn't. They got set down in school by their teacher, broke a couple of windows. They sure as hell didn't hike all the way out to Ed's ice shack or sneak out of the house at night and walk the two miles to Hawley's to slash his tires and spray paint all over his truck. You want my input? Your trouble didn't start since you hired me. Your trouble started sixteen years ago when somebody killed Patrick Galloway."

"That's something that's shaken everybody up," Harry said, nodding to the others around the room. "Even those of us who didn't know him. But I don't see what it has to do with what we're discussing here."

"I think it does. So that's how I'm handling it."

"I don't follow you," Deb said.

"Whoever killed Galloway is still here. Whoever killed Galloway," Nate continued as everyone began talking at once, "killed Max Hawbaker."

"Max killed himself," Ed interrupted. "He killed himself because *he* killed Pat."

"Someone wants you to believe that. I don't."

"That's just crazy talk, Nate." Harry pushed back air with both hands. "Just crazy talk."

"Crazier than Max killing Pat?" Deb rubbed her fingers over her throat. "Crazier than Max killing himself? I don't know."

"Quiet!" Hopp held up both hands and shouted over the noise. "Just quiet down a damn minute. Ignatious." She drew a breath. "You're saying that someone we know has killed twice."

"Three times." His gaze was flinty as it scanned the room. "Two men and an old dog. My department is investigating, and will continue to investigate, until this individual is identified and arrested."

"The State Police—" Joe began.

"Whatever the findings and the opinion of the State authorities, my

department will investigate. I swore to protect and serve this town, and I will. Part of that investigation will require each one of you to account for your whereabouts and activities last night between nine and ten P.M.”

“Us?” Ed bellowed it. “You’re going to question us?”

“That’s right. In addition, I’m going to be looking for the whereabouts and activities of everyone during the month of February 1988.”

“You—you—” Ed blustered to a halt, then, gripping the edge of his chair, pushed himself forward. “You intend to question us, as *suspects*? This is over the top. This is beyond belief. I’m not going to be subjected to this or have my family and my neighbors subjected to this. You’re exceeding your authority.”

“I don’t think so. But you guys can vote to cancel my contract, pay me off. I’ll still investigate. I’ll still find the person responsible. That’s what I do.” He rose. “I find the people responsible. So you can have your meetings, your votes, your discussions. You can take my badge. I’ll still find the one responsible. That’s the only person who has to worry about me.”

He strode out, leaving the raised voices and insulted faces behind.

Hopp caught up with him on the sidewalk. “Ignatious, wait a minute. Wait just a minute,” she snapped when he kept walking. “Damn it!”

He stopped, jiggling the keys in his pocket.

She scowled up at him as she finished pulling on her coat. “You sure know how to liven up a town council meeting.”

“Am I fired?”

“Not yet, but I sure don’t think you won any popularity votes in there.” She tugged the hip-length coat, the color of a Concord grape, closed. “You might’ve been a little more tactful about it.”

“Murder’s one of those things that short circuits all my tact switches. Then there’s the matter of walking in on a meeting where my professional status is being questioned.”

"All right, all right, maybe that was poorly done."

"If you or anyone else has a problem with how I'm doing the job, you should've come to me with it."

"You're right." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "We're all upset, we're all on edge. And now you've dumped this in our laps. Nobody liked thinking Max had done what it seemed clear he'd done, but it was a hell of a lot easier to think that than what you're suggesting."

"I'm not suggesting it. I'm saying it, flat out. I'm going to find out what I need to know, however long it takes, and whoever I have to step on along the way."

She pulled her cigarettes and lighter out of her coat pocket. "I can see that plain enough."

"Where were you sixteen years ago, Hopp?"

"Me?" Her eyes popped wide. "For Christ's sake, Ignatious, you don't honestly think I climbed up No Name with Pat and stuck an ice ax in him. He was twice my size."

"But not your husband's. You're a tough-minded woman, Hopp. You've done a lot around here to preserve your husband's vision. You might do a lot to protect his name."

"That's a filthy thing to say to me. A filthy thing to say about a man you didn't even know."

"I didn't know Galloway either. You did."

Fury covered her face as she took a step back. She turned away, marched back into Town Hall. The door slammed like a cannon shot behind her.

HE KNEW MURMURS AND MUTTERS would be going around, so Nate decided to stay visible. He had his dinner at The Lodge. From the

glances tossed his way, he imagined the statements he'd made at the meeting were making their way around Lunacy's frosty grapevine.

And that was fine. It was time to shake things up.

Charlene brought his salmon special to the booth herself, then slid in across from him. "You've sure got people wondering and worried."

"Do I?"

"I'm one of them." She picked up his coffee, sipped, then wrinkled her nose. "I don't know how anybody can drink this without sweetening it up some."

He pushed the dispenser of sugar packets over. "Help yourself if you want it."

"I will." She tore open two packets of Sweet'N Low, poured it in and stirred it up.

She was wearing a shimmery gray shirt, the sort that clung to a woman's curves, and had scooped back her hair to show off dangling silver earrings. After tapping the spoon on the side of the mug, she sampled.

"That's better." Then she kept both hands around the mug, as she leaned intimately toward Nate. "When I first found out about Pat, I went a little crazy inside. I'd have been ready to believe you if you'd told me Skinny Jim had put that ax in him—and he didn't come along until five or six years after Pat had been gone. But I've calmed down some."

"That's good," Nate said, and continued to eat.

"Maybe knowing I can bring him back here and bury him when the ground's ready helped. I like you, Nate, even though you wouldn't give me a tumble. I like you well enough to tell you you're not doing anybody any good with all this."

Nate slathered butter on a roll. "And what would 'all this' consist of, Charlene?"

"You know what I'm saying—this talk about us having a murderer

running around. Something like that gets whispered about enough, people might start to believe it. It's bad for business. The tourists aren't going to come here if they think they could get murdered in their beds."

"Cissy?" he called with his eyes still on Charlene's. "Can I get another cup of coffee here? Is that what it comes down to, Charlene? It comes down to money. To your profit-and-loss statement."

"We've got to make a living here. We've got—"

She broke off as Cissy set another mug on the table, filled it with coffee. "You need anything else, Nate?"

"No, thanks."

"We do a lot of business here over the summer. We've got to if we don't want to live on the PFD all winter, and winter's long. I've got to be practical, Nate. Pat's gone. Max killed him. I'm not letting myself hold that against Carrie. I wanted to, but I'm not letting myself. She's lost her man, too. But Max killed Pat. God knows why, but he did."

She picked up her coffee again, sipped it while she gazed out the dark window. "Pat took him up there, some wild hair, I expect. Max looking for a story or article or some shit, and Pat figuring he could have an adventure and make a few dollars. The mountain can make you crazy. That's what happened."

When he said nothing, she touched a hand to his. "I've thought about it, like you asked me to. And I remember that Max didn't come in here for damn near a month that winter. Maybe more. Back then, this was the only place for miles in any direction you could get a hot meal, and he was a regular. I used to wait on him almost every night. But he didn't come in."

Absently, she reached over, broke a small chunk off Nate's dinner roll. "He called in orders a few times," she said as she nibbled on bread. "We didn't do deliveries, still don't, but Karl, he was soft-hearted. He

ran the food over to the paper himself. He told me Max looked sick and a little crazy. I didn't pay any attention. I was brooding over Pat and busy trying to make ends meet. But you told me to think back, and I did, and I remember that."

"All right."

"You aren't paying attention to me."

"I heard everything you said." He met her eyes. "Who else didn't come in much that February?"

She let out an impatient breath. "I don't know, Nate. I only thought about Max because he's dead. And because I was remembering, all of a sudden, that Carrie and I both got married that summer. The summer after Pat was gone. That's what made me think of it."

"Okay. Now think about people who are still alive."

"I think about you." She laughed, waved a hand. "Oh, don't get all tight-assed. A woman's got a right to think about a good-looking man."

"Not when he's in love with her daughter."

"Love?" She began to drum her fingers on the table. "Well, you are just out for all sorts of trouble, aren't you? Taking on the town council so everybody's looking at you sideways, getting Ed and Hopp all pissed off, now talking about loving Meg. She hasn't kept a man more than a month since she figured out what to do with one."

"I guess that means I hold the current record."

"She'll chomp a piece out of your heart then spit it right in your face."

"My heart, my face. Why does it bother you, Charlene?"

"I've got bigger needs than she does. Bigger, stronger needs." Her earrings spun and glinted when she tossed her head. "Meg doesn't need anything or anyone. She never did. She made it clear a long time ago she didn't need me. She'll make it clear soon enough that she doesn't need you."

“That may be. Or it may end up I make her happy. Maybe that’s what bothers you. The idea she might end up happy, and you can’t quite get there.”

His hand snaked out, gripped her wrist before she could hurl the coffee in his face. “Think again,” he said quietly. “A scene’s going to embarrass you a lot more than me.”

She jumped violently out of the booth and stalked across the room, up the stairs.

For the second time that day, Nate heard the bullet shot of a slammed door.

And in its echo, he finished his dinner.

HE DROVE OUT TO MEG’S, hoping his blood would cool and his brain clear by the time he got there. The gloom of the past few days had lifted, leaving brilliant stars in a black-glass sky. A slice of moon rode over the trees, and a shimmery fog slithered low to the ground. Bare branches on the trees, Nate noticed. The snow was still thick on the ground, but the branches had shaken off the snow.

A part of the road was still flooded so he had to ease his way around the barricade and through the foot of standing water.

He heard a wolf call, lonely and insistent. It might be hunting, he thought, for food. For a mate. When it killed, it killed for purpose. Not for greed, not for sport.

When it mated, he’d read, it mated for life.

The sound died off as he drove through the night.

He could see the smoke rise from Meg’s chimney, hear the soar of her music. Lenny Kravitz this time, he thought. Rocking on mists of doom and fields of pain.

He parked behind her, then just sat. He wanted this, he realized, wanted it maybe more than he should. To come home. To deal with the day, then shake it off and come home to music and light, to a woman.

The woman.

Hearth and home, Meg had said. Well, she'd nailed him. So if he ended up with that chunk of his heart spat in his face, he had no one to blame but himself.

She opened the door as he walked up, and the dogs rushed out to dance around him. "Hi. Wondered if you'd find your way to my door tonight." She cocked her head. "You look a little rough around the edges, chief. What've you been up to?"

"Winning friends, influencing people."

"Well, come on inside, cutie, have a drink, and tell me about it."

"Don't mind if I do."

LIGHT

Is it so small a thing
To have enjoy'd the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done;
To have advanced true friends, and beat
down baffling foes . . . ?

MATTHEW ARNOLD

We burn daylight.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

TWENTY-SIX

“CHIEF.” PEACH OFFERED HIM a sticky bun and a cup of coffee almost before he got in the door.

“You know, you keep baking these things, I’m not going to be able to sit in my desk chair.”

“It’d take more than a few sticky buns to pork up that cute little behind. Besides, it’s a bribe. I need to ask if I can take an extra hour for lunch tomorrow. I’m on the May Day planning committee. We’re going to meet tomorrow and try to finish coordinating the parade.”

“Parade?”

“May Day parade, Nate. It’s on your calendar and not that far off.”

May, he thought. He’d played with the dogs a bit that morning in Meg’s yard. In snow up to the tops of his boots. “That’d be May first?”

“Come hell or high water, and we’ve had the parade in both. School band marches. The Natives wear their traditional dress and play traditional instruments. All the sports teams are in it, and Dolly Manners’s dance classes. More people who live here participate in it than watch it, but we get tourists and Outside folk come in from all over.”

She fussed with the vase of plastic daffodils on her counter. “It’s a good time, and the past couple years we’ve done some advertising. We

did even more this year, drumming up media interest and whatnot. Charlene puts it on The Lodge's web page and does package deals. And Hopp pushed and got us included in the events page of a couple of magazines."

"No kidding. Pretty hot stuff."

"Well, it *is*. It's a full-day event. We have a bonfire and more music that night. Weather's too bad, we move that to The Lodge."

"You have a bonfire in The Lodge."

She punched his arm playfully. "Just the music."

"Take whatever time you need."

Big parade, Nate thought. Bookings at The Lodge, meals served, customers in The Corner Store, browsing the local artists and craftsmen's work. More money, more business at the bank, the gas station. More business period.

That could be cut considerably by too much talk of murder.

He glanced over when Otto came in. "Isn't it your day off?"

"Yeah."

Nate could see something in his eye, but played it light. "You come by for the sticky buns?"

"No." Otto held out a manila envelope. "I wrote up where I was, what I was doing and so forth in February of '88. On the night Max died, and when Yukon got killed. Thought it'd be better all around if I put it down before you had to ask me."

"Why don't you come back to my office?"

"Don't need to. I got no problem with this." He puffed out his cheeks. "A little problem, maybe, but less doing it like this than having you ask. I don't have much of an alibi for any of the three situations, but I wrote it down."

Nate set down the bun to take the envelope. "I appreciate it, Otto."

“Well, I’m going fishing.”

He left, passing Peter on the way out.

“Hell,” Nate muttered.

“You’re in a tight spot.” Peach gave him a little rub on the arm. “You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do, even if it means hurting feelings and getting danders up.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Um.” Peter looked back and forth between them. “Something wrong with Otto?”

“I hope not.”

Peter started to follow up, but Peach gave a quick shake of her head. “Well, the reason I’m late is my uncle came by this morning. He wanted to tell me there’s a guy squatting north of town by Hopeless Creek. There’s an old cabin there. It looks like he’s moved in. Nobody’d care much except my uncle thinks he may have broken into his work shed, and my aunt says there’s food missing from the cache.”

He grabbed a sticky bun, bit in. “He—my uncle—went by to check it out this morning before he came to see me, and he says the guy came out with a shotgun and ordered him off his property. Since he had my cousin Mary with him—taking her into school—he didn’t hang around to reason with the guy.”

“All right. We’ll go reason with him.” Nate set his untouched coffee and Otto’s envelope on the counter. Then went to the weapon cabinet and got two shotguns and ammo. “Just in case reason doesn’t work,” he told Peter.

The sun was bright and hard. It seemed impossible that only a few weeks before, he’d have made this trip in the dark. The river wound beside the road, cold blue, forming a keen edge of color against the snow that still lined its banks. The mountains stood, clear as monuments carved in glass, against the sky.

He saw an eagle perched on a mile marker post, like a golden guard to the forest behind him.

“How long’s this cabin been empty?”

“Nobody’s lived in it, officially, as long as I can remember. It’s run-down and built too close to the creek so it floods out every spring. Hikers might use it for a night now and then, and ah, kids might use it for . . . you know. Chimney’s still standing, so it’ll hold a fire. Smokes something awful though.”

“Meaning you’ve used it for . . . you know.”

Even as he smiled, color edged Peter’s cheekbones. “Maybe once or twice. What I heard was a couple of cheechakos built it way back. Going to live off the land, pan the creek for gold. Figured they’d get by on subsistence, and after a year start collecting their PFD. Didn’t know squat. One of them froze to death, the other went crazy with cabin fever. Maybe ate some of the dead guy.”

“Lovely.”

“Probably just bullshit. But it adds to it when you’re taking a girl there.”

“Yeah, pretty romantic stuff.”

“You want to turn off up there.” Peter pointed. “It’s a little rough going.”

After about three yards bumping and grinding his way along the narrow, snow-packed rut, Nate decided Peter was the master of understatement.

The trees were thick and smote out the sun, so it was like driving through a tunnel paved by sadistic ice demons.

He rolled his tongue back, so it wouldn’t get in the way of his teeth when they snapped together, and muscled the wheel.

He wouldn’t have called it a clearing. The dilapidated square of logs hunched in a hacked-out square of trash willows and spindly evergreen

on the icy bank of the spit of creek. It huddled there in the shadows, one window boarded, the other crisscrossed with duct tape. A sagging length of porch sat over a few stacked cinder blocks.

A filthy Lexus four-wheel-drive with California tags stood in front. "Call Peach, have her run those tags, Peter."

While Peter used the radio, Nate debated. There was smoke puffing sluggishly out of the tilted chimney. And a dead mammal of some sort hung nastily over a post by the door.

Nate unsnapped his weapon but left it holstered as he eased out of the car.

"That's far enough!" The cabin door swung open.

In the dimness Nate could see the man and the shotgun.

"I'm Chief Burke, Lunacy Police. I'm going to ask you to lower that weapon."

"I don't care who you say you are or what you say you want. I'm onto your tricks, you alien bastards. I'm not going back up there."

Aliens, Nate thought. Perfect. "The alien forces in this sector have been defeated. You're safe here now, but I need you to lower your weapon."

"So you say." But he eased out another foot. "How do I know you're not one of them?"

Early thirties, Nate estimated. Five-ten, a hundred and fifty. Brown hair. Wild eyes, color undetermined. "I have my ID, stamped and certified after testing. You lower that weapon so I can approach, I'll show it to you."

"ID?" He looked confused now, and the shotgun lowered an inch.

"Underground Earth Forces certified." Nate tried a sober nod. "Can't be too careful these days."

"They bleed blue, you know. I got two of them the last time they took me."

“Two?” Nate lifted his eyebrows as if duly impressed, and watched the gun lower another inch. “You’re going to need to be debriefed. We’ll get you back to control, get your statement on record.”

“We can’t let them win.”

“We won’t.”

The gun barrel angled toward the ground, and Nate stepped forward.

It happened too fast. It always happened too fast. He heard Peter open the car door, say his name. He was watching the man’s face, his eyes—and he saw it come into them. Panic, rage, terror all at once.

He was already cursing, already ordering Peter to get down. Get down! as he cleared his weapon from the holster.

The shotgun blast shook the air, sent some bird screaming in the trees. A second pumped out as Nate dived for cover under the car.

He was set to roll out the other side when he saw the blood on the snow.

“Oh, God. Oh, Jesus Christ. Peter.”

His body went to lead, and for an endless moment he shook under the weight of it. He could smell the alley—the rain, over-ripe garbage. Blood.

His breath came too fast, the high edge of panic making his head light, the bitter wash of despair turning his throat to dust. He carried it all with him as he crawled through the snow.

Peter was sprawled behind the open door of the car, his eyes wide and glassy. “I think . . . I think I’m shot.”

“Hold on.” Nate clamped a hand over Peter’s arm where his jacket was torn and bloody. He could feel the warm flow—and the anvil slam of his own heart in his chest. With one eye cocked toward the cabin, he dug out a bandanna.

If there were prayers running inside his head, he didn't recognize them.

"It's not too bad, is it?" Peter moistened his lips, angled his head down to look. And went white as bone. "Man."

"Listen to me. Listen." Nate tied the bandanna tight over the wound, tapped Peter's cheek to keep him from passing out. "You stay down. You're going to be all right."

Not going to bleed out on me. Not going to die in my arms. Not again. Please God.

He pulled Peter's weapon out of the holster. Closed Peter's hand around it. "You got this?"

"I . . . I'm right-handed. He shot me."

"You can use your left. He gets by me, you don't hesitate. Listen to me, Peter. He comes out here, you shoot. Aim for body mass. And you shoot until he's down."

"Chief—"

"Just do it."

Nate bellied back to the rear of the car, opened the door and slid in. He slid out again with both shotguns. He could hear the man inside the house, raving. The occasional blast of fire.

He could hear the sounds of the alley merging with it. The rain, the shouts, the running footsteps.

He bellied back to Peter, laid one of the shotguns over his lap. "You don't pass out. Hear me? You stay awake."

"Yes, sir."

There was no one to call for backup. This wasn't Baltimore, and he was on his own.

Crouched, the shotgun in one hand, his service revolver in the

other, he dashed across the icy stream and into the trees. Bark exploded. He felt a knife-splice of a flying splinter hit his face just under his left eye.

That meant the shooter's attention was on him now, and away from Peter.

In the cover of trees, he plowed through the snow.

His partner was shot. His partner was down.

His breath whistled out as he tried to run through knee-deep snow, circling the cabin.

Braced behind a tree, he studied the layout. No back door, he noted, but another window on the side. He could see the shadow of the shooter on the glass, knew he was waiting there, watching for movement.

Nate pumped the shotgun one-handed and fired.

Glass exploded, and with that sound, the screams, the return fire filling his ears, he used his own tracks to run back toward the front of the cabin.

Shouts and shots sounded behind him as he cracked through the ice of the stream, scrambled through the frigid water and leaped toward the front of the house.

He barreled onto the sagging porch and kicked open the door.

He had both weapons pointed at his man—and part of him, most of him, wanted to cut loose with them. Drop him, drop him cold, as he had the murdering bastard in Baltimore. The murdering bastard who'd killed his partner and ripped his own life to pieces.

"Red." In the shambles of the cabin, the man looked at him. His lips trembled into a smile. "Your blood's red." And dropping the gun, he fell to the filthy cabin floor and wept.

. . .

HIS NAME WAS Robert Joseph Spinnaker—a financial consultant from L.A., and a recent psychiatric patient. He had claimed multiple alien abductions over the past eighteen months, stated that his wife was a reproduction, and attacked two of his clients during a meeting.

He'd been listed as missing for nearly three months.

Now he slept peacefully in a cell, reassured by the color of the blood on Nate's face and Peter's arm.

Nate had done little more than lock him up before he'd rushed back to the clinic so he could pace the waiting room.

He went over the entire event a hundred times, and each time he saw himself doing something different, just a little different that kept Peter from being hurt.

When Ken came out, Nate was sitting, his head in his hands.

He jerked up immediately. "How bad?"

"Getting shot's never good, but it could've been a hell of a lot worse. He'll be wearing a sling for a while. He's lucky it was bird shot. He's a little weak, a little groggy. I'm going to keep him a couple more hours. But he's good."

"Okay." Nate let his knees give way and lowered to the chair again. "Okay."

"Why don't you come back, let me clean those cuts on your face."

"Just some scratches."

"The one under your eye's more of a gash. Come on, don't argue with the doctor."

"Can I see him?"

“Nita’s with him now. You can see him after I treat you.” Ken led the way, gestured for Nate to get on an exam table. “You know,” he said as he cleaned the cuts, “it’d be stupid for you to blame yourself.”

“He’s green. He’s grass, and I took him into an unstable situation.”

“That’s not showing much respect for him or the job he signed on to do.”

Nate hissed in a breath at the sting under his eye. “He’s a baby.”

“He’s not. He’s a man. A good man. And you taking on the weight lessens what happened to him today—and what he did.”

“He got up, broke cover and got to the door after me. He could barely keep his feet, but he came to back me up.”

Nate met Ken’s eyes as Ken fixed on a butterfly bandage. “His blood was on my hands but he came through the door to back me up. So maybe I’m the one who can’t handle himself.”

“You did handle yourself. I got most of it from Peter. He thinks you’re a hero. If you want to pay him back for what happened, don’t disillusion him. There.” Ken stepped back. “You’ll live.”

HOPP WAS IN THE WAITING ROOM when Nate came out, along with Peter’s parents and Rose. They all stood, began talking at once.

“He’s resting. He’s fine,” Ken assured them. And Nate kept walking.

“Ignatious.” Hopp hurried out after him. “I’d like to know what happened.”

“I’m walking back.”

“Then I’ll walk with you, and you can tell me. I’d like to get it straight from you rather than the various accounts blowing around town at this point.”

He told her, briefly.

“Would you slow down? Your legs are longer than my whole body. How’d your face get hurt?”

“Tree shrapnel. Flying bark, that’s all.”

“Flying because he was shooting at you. For God’s sake.”

“The fact my face got cut up is probably why both Spinnaker and I are still standing. Fortunately I bleed red.”

So does Peter, he thought. He’d bled plenty of red today.

“The State Police coming to get him?”

“Peach is contacting them.”

“Well.” She drew a breath. “He’s been out and about being crazy for three months. Squatting out there God knows how long. He could be the one who killed poor Yukon. He could be the one who did that.”

Nate found his sunglasses in his pocket and put them on. “He could be, but he’s not.”

“Man’s crazy, and it was a crazy thing. He could’ve thought Yukon was some alien in a dog suit. It makes sense, Ignatious.”

“Only if you believe this guy happened to sneak into town, hunt up an old dog, brought the dog outside Town Hall and sliced his throat—having previously stolen the buck knife. That’s a little too broad for me, Hopp.”

She took his arm so he’d stop. “Maybe because you’d rather believe otherwise. Maybe because believing otherwise is giving you something to get your teeth into. More than breaking up a few fights or keeping Drunk Mike from freezing his sorry ass. Did it ever occur to you that you’re tying all this together, looking for a killer among us because you want it to be so?”

“I don’t want it to be so. It is so.”

“Damn stubborn . . .” She set her teeth, turned to the side until she controlled her temper. “Things won’t settle down around here if you keep stirring them up.”

“Things shouldn’t settle down around here until they’re resolved. I’ve got to go write up my report on this.”

NATE SPENT THE NIGHT in the station, most of it listening to Spinnaker’s earnest reports of his alien experiences. To keep him calm, if not quiet, Nate sat outside the cell, making notes.

And was deeply thrilled to see the State Police arrive the next morning to relieve him of his prisoner.

He was also surprised to see Coben on the detail.

“Maybe you should consider renting a room down here, Sergeant.”

“I figured this would be an opportunity to touch base on other matters. If we could take a minute in your office.”

“Sure. I’ve got the paperwork on Spinnaker for you.”

He walked into his office, picked up the paperwork. “Assault with deadly on police officers, et cetera. The shrinks will soften that up, but it won’t make my deputy any less shot.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s okay. He’s young, resilient. It caught him mostly in the meaty part of the arm.”

“Any time you walk away, it’s a good day.”

“There’s that.”

Coben walked over to the board. “Still pursuing this?”

“Looks like.”

“Making any headway?”

“Depends on where you’re standing.”

Lips pursed, Coben rocked back on his heels. “Dead dog? You’re linking that?”

“Man’s gotta have a hobby.”

“Look, I’m not fully satisfied with the resolution of my case, but I’ve got restrictions on me. A lot of it does depend on where you’re standing. We can agree there was an unidentified third man on that mountain when Galloway was killed. Doesn’t mean he killed Galloway or had knowledge thereof. Doesn’t mean he’s still alive, for that matter, as it’s more logical that the individual who killed Galloway also disposed of this third man.”

“Not if the third man was Hawbaker.”

“We don’t believe it was. But *if* it was,” Coben continued, “it sure as hell doesn’t mean this unidentified third man had anything to do with Hawbaker’s death—or the death of some dog. I’ve got a little wiggle room, unofficially, to confirm the identity of the third man, but it’s not taking me anywhere.”

“The pilot who took them up was killed in unexplained circumstances.”

“There’s no proof of that. I’ve looked into it. Kijinski paid off some debts and made more during the period between Galloway’s death and his own. So that’s hinky, I’ll give you that. But there’s no one to confirm he took them up.”

“Because all but one of them’s dead.”

“There are no records, no flight logs. No nothing. And nobody who knew Kijinski, or will admit to it, who remembers him booking that flight. He may very well have been the pilot, and if so, it’s just as logical to assume Hawbaker disposed of him as well.”

“Might be logical. Except Max Hawbaker didn’t kill three men. And he didn’t come back from the grave and slit that dog’s throat.”

“It doesn’t matter what your gut tells you. I need something solid.”

“Give me time,” Nate said.

. . .

TWO DAYS LATER, Meg strolled into the station, flipped a wave at Peach and went straight back to Nate's office.

A glance at his board barely broke her stride. "Okay, cutie, I'm springing you."

"Sorry?"

"Even thoughtful, dedicated, hardworking cops get a day off. You're due."

"Peter's on inactive. We're a man short."

"And you're sitting here brooding about that and everything else. You need head-clearing time, Burke. If something comes up, we'll head back."

"From where?"

"It's a surprise. Peach," she called as she started back out. "Your boss is taking the rest of the day off. What do they call it on *NYPD Blue*? Personal time."

"He could use some."

"You can cover it, can't you, Otto?"

"Meg—" Nate began.

"Peach, when's the last time the chief took a day off?"

"Three weeks, a little more, by my recollection."

"Head-clearing time, chief." Meg grabbed his jacket off the hook herself. "We've got a clear day for it."

He took one of the two-ways. "An hour."

She smiled. "We'll start with that."

When he spotted her plane at the dock, he stopped dead. "You didn't say this head-clearing time involved flying."

"It's the best method. Guaranteed."

“Couldn’t we just take a drive, have sex in the backseat of the car? I find that’s a really good method.”

“Trust me.” She kept his hand firmly in hers and used her other to brush the cut under his eye. “How’s that feeling?”

“Now that you mention it, I probably shouldn’t fly with a wound like this.”

She cupped his face, leaned in and kissed him, long, slow and deep. “Come with me, Nate. I have something I want to share with you.”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

He got in the plane, strapped in. “You know, I’ve never taken off from the water. Not when the water was . . . wet. There’s still some ice. It wouldn’t be good to run into the ice, right?”

“A man who faces down an armed mental patient shouldn’t be so jittery about flying.” She kissed her fingers, tapped them on Buddy Holly’s lips and began to glide over the water.

“Sort of like water skiing, but not,” Nate managed, then held his breath as she gained speed, kept holding it as the plane lifted off the water.

“I thought you were working today,” he said when he decided it was safe to breathe again.

“I passed it to Jerk. He’ll be dropping off supplies later. We’ve got parade stuff coming in, including a whole case of bug dope.”

“You and Jerk run drugs for insects.”

She slid her eyes in his direction. “Insect repellent, cutie. You survived your first Alaska winter. Now we’ll see how you fare in the summer. With mosquitoes as big as B-52s. You won’t want to walk three feet out of the house without your bug dope.”

“Roger on the bug dope, but I’m not eating Eskimo ice cream. Jesse says it’s made from whipped seals.”

“Oil,” she said on a laugh. “Seal oil or moose tallow. And it’s not bad if you mix in some berries and sugar.”

“I’ll take your word because I’m not eating moose tallow. I don’t even know what the hell it is.”

She smiled again because his shoulders had relaxed, and he was actually looking down. “Pretty from here, isn’t it, with the river, the ice, and the town all lined up behind it?”

“It looks quiet and simple.”

“But it’s not. It’s not really either of those. The bush looks quiet, too, from the air. Peaceful and serene. A harsh kind of beauty. But it’s not serene. Nature will kill you without a minute’s thought, and in nastier ways than a crazy guy with a gun. It doesn’t make her any less beautiful. I couldn’t live anywhere else. I couldn’t be anywhere else.”

She soared over river and lake, and he could see the progress of breakup, the steady march of spring. Patches of green spread as the sun worked on the snow. A waterfall rushed down a cliff side with the sparkle of ice gleaming out of deep shadows.

Below them, a small herd of moose lumbered across a field. Above, the sky curved like a wild, blue ribbon.

“Jacob was here that February.” Meg glanced at him. “I wanted to get that out of the way—maybe off both our minds. He came to see me a lot when my father was gone. I don’t know if my father asked him to, or if it was just Jacob’s way. There might’ve been a couple days here and there I didn’t see him. But not as much as a week at a stretch, not a long enough time for him to have climbed with my father. I wanted you to know that, for certain, in case you needed to ask him to help you.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, and I was a kid. But I remember that. Once I thought back on

it, I remembered. I saw more of him than I did of Charlene in those first few weeks after my father left. He took me ice fishing and hunting, and when we had a storm come in, I stayed at his place for a couple of days. I'm telling you that you can trust him, that's all."

"All right."

"Now, look to starboard."

He glanced right and watched them fly off the edge of the world, over a channel of blue water that seemed entirely too close for comfort. Before he could object, he saw an enormous chunk of that blue-white world crack off and tumble into the water.

"My God."

"This is an active tidewater glacier. And what you're watching is called calving," she said as other boulders of ice broke and fell. "I guess because in the cycle, it's more a kind of birth than death."

"It's beautiful." He was all but plastered against the windscreen now. "It's amazing. Jesus, some of them are the size of a house." He let out a laugh as another shot off into the air and barely registered the shimmy of the plane in a pocket of turbulence.

"People pay me good money to fly them over here to see this, then spend most of their time with their eyes glued to the lens of a video camera. Seems like a waste to me. If they want to see this on a movie, they should rent one."

It wasn't just the show, Nate thought, the spectacle of it. It was that cycle—violent, inevitable, somehow mythic. The sights—jagged boulders of blue ice heaving themselves into the air. The sounds of it, creaks, the thunder and the cannon shots. The gushing up of the water on impact, the rising of the white into a shimmering island that streamed along on the churning fjord.

"I have to stay here."

She guided the plane up, circling so he could watch from another angle. "Here, in the air?"

"No." He turned his head, grinned at her in a way she rarely saw. Easy and relaxed and happy. "Here. I can't be anyplace else either. It's good to know that."

"Here's something else that might be good to know. I'm in love with you."

She laughed as the plane shuddered through rough air; then she punched it through, and bulleted up the channel while ice fell around them.



TWENTY-SEVEN

CHARLENE HAD ALWAYS LOVED what passed for spring in Alaska. She loved the way the days kept stretching out, longer and longer until there was nothing but light.

In her office she stood at the window, her work neglected on her desk, and stared out at the street. Busy. People walking, driving, going, coming. Townspeople and tourists, country dwellers in for supplies or company. Fourteen of her twenty rooms were booked, and she'd be at capacity for three days the following week. After that, the strong, almost endless light would draw people in like flies to honey.

She'd work like a dog through most of April, into May and straight through until freeze-up.

She *liked* to work, to have her place crowded with people, the noise and the mess they made. The money they spent.

She'd built something here, hadn't she? She'd found what she wanted—or most of what she wanted. She looked out to the river. Boats were on it now, slipping their way through the melting islands of ice.

She looked beyond the river, beyond to the mountains. White and blue, with green beginning to spread slowly, very slowly at their feet. White at their peaks, forever white in that frozen, foreign world.

She'd never climbed. She never would.

The mountains had never called to her. But other things had. Pat had. She'd felt that call blow through her, a thousand trumpets, when he'd roared into her life. Not yet seventeen, she remembered, and still a virgin. Stuck, hadn't she been stuck, in those flat Iowa fields just waiting for someone to pluck her out?

The original midwestern farm girl, she thought now, desperate for any escape. Then he'd come, churning up all that dull air on his motorcycle, looking so dangerous and exotic and . . . *different*.

Oh, he'd called to her, Charlene remembered, and she'd answered that call. Sneaking out of the house on those chilly spring nights to run to him, to roll naked with him on the soft green grass, free and careless as a puppy. And so desperately in love. That burning, blistering love maybe you could only feel at seventeen.

When he'd gone, she'd gone with him, walking out on home, family, friends, speeding away from the world she knew, and into another—on the back of a Harley.

To be seventeen, she thought, and that daring again.

They'd lived. How they'd *lived*. Going wherever they wanted, doing whatever they liked. Through farmland and desert, through city and tiny town.

And all the roads they'd wandered had led here.

Things had changed. When had they changed? she wondered. When she realized she was pregnant? They'd been so thrilled, so stupidly thrilled about the baby. But things had changed when they'd come here with that seed planted inside her. When she'd told him she'd wanted to stay.

Sure, Charley, no problem. We can stick around awhile.

A while had become a year, then two, then a decade, and God, *God*, she'd been the one to change. To push and prod at that wonderful, reck-

less boy, to nag and hound him to be a man, to be what he'd run from. Responsible, settled. Ordinary.

He'd stayed, more for Meg, she knew, more for the daughter who was the image of him than for the woman who'd given him that child. He'd stayed, but he'd never settled.

She'd resented him for that. Resented Meg. How could she do otherwise? She wasn't *built* to do otherwise. She'd been the one to work, hadn't she? To make sure there was food on the table and a roof over their heads.

And she knew, when he'd gone off, to pick up jobs, to take a break, to climb his damn mountains, that he'd gone to whores.

Men wanted her. She could make any man want her. And the only one she really wanted had gone to whores.

What were his mountains but other whores? Cold, white whores that had seduced him away from her? Until he'd stayed inside one and left her alone.

But she'd survived, hadn't she? She'd done better than survive. She'd found what she wanted here. Most of what she wanted.

She had money now. She had her place. She had men, young, hard bodies in the night.

So why was she so unhappy?

She didn't like to think long thoughts, to look inside herself and worry about what she'd find there. She liked to *live*. To move, to keep in motion. You didn't have to think when you were dancing.

She turned, vaguely irritated by the knock on her door. "Come on in."

She smoothed her face out, and the sultry smile was automatic when she saw John. "Well, hi there, good-looking. School out? It's that late already?" She patted her hair as she looked at her desk. "And here I've been daydreaming, wasting the day away. I'm going to have to get out there and see what Big Mike's whipping up for tonight's special."

"I need to talk to you, Charlene."

"Sure, honey. I've always got time for you. I'll make us some tea, and we'll get all cozy."

"No, don't."

"Baby, you look all frowny and serious." She crossed to him and skimmed a finger down each of his cheeks. "Of course you know I love when you're serious. It's so sexy."

"Don't," he said again and took her hands.

"Is something wrong?" Her fingers tightened on his like wires. "Oh God, is someone—something else—dead around here? I don't think I can take it. I don't think I can *stand* it."

"No. It's nothing like that." He let go of her hands, eased back a step. "I wanted to tell you, I'll be leaving at the end of the semester."

"You're taking a vacation? You're going to be taking a trip just when Lunacy's at its best?"

"I'm not taking a vacation. I'm leaving."

"What're you talking about? Leave? For good? That's just nonsense, John." The flirty smile faded, and something hot and sharp stabbed in her belly. "Where would you go? What would you do?"

"There are a lot of places I haven't seen, a lot of things I haven't done. I'll see them. I'll do them."

She felt her heart sink as she looked up into his dependable face. The ones who matter, her mind whispered, leave you. "John, you live here. You work here."

"I'll live and I'll work somewhere else."

"You can't just . . . why? Why are you doing this?"

"I should've done it years ago, but you get into the drift. Float your life away. Nate came to see me at school last week. Some of the things he said made me think, made me look back over . . . too many years."

She wanted to find her anger, the sort that pushed her to shout, to break things. The sort that swept her clean. But there was only dull worry. "What does Nate have to do with this?"

"He's the change. Or the rock in the stream that caused the change. You drift, Charlene, like water in a stream, and maybe you don't notice as much as you should what's going by."

He touched her hair, then dropped his hand again. "Then a stone drops into the stream, and it disrupts. It changes things. Maybe a little, maybe a lot. But nothing's quite the same again."

"I never know what you're talking about when you go on like that." She pouted as she turned around and kicked at her desk, and the gesture made him smile. "Water and rocks and streams. What does that have to do with you coming in here like this and telling me you're leaving. You're going away. Don't you even care how I feel?"

"Entirely too much for my own good. I loved you the first minute I saw you. You knew it."

"But not anymore."

"Yes, then, now, all the years between. I loved you when you were with another man. And when he was gone, I thought, Now, she'll come to me. And you did. To my bed, at least. You let me have your body, but you married someone else. Even knowing I loved you, you married someone else."

"I had to do what was right for me. I had to be practical." She did throw something now—a little crystal swan. But its destruction gave her no satisfaction. "I had a right to look out for my future."

"I would've been good to you, and for you. I'd have been good to Meg. But you chose differently. You chose this." He spread his hands to indicate The Lodge. "You earned it. You worked hard. You built it up. And while Karl was alive, you still came to me. And I let you. To me and to others."

“Karl wasn’t after sex, or hardly. He wanted a partner, someone to take care of him and this place. I kept my end,” she said passionately. “We had an understanding.”

“You took care of him and this place. And when he died, you kept taking care. I’ve lost track of the times I’ve asked you to marry me, Charlene, the number of times you’ve said no. The number of times I’ve watched you go off with someone else or slide into my bed when there wasn’t someone else. I’m done with it.”

“I don’t want to get married, so you’re just going to take off?”

“You slept with that man the other night. Part of the hunting group. The tall one with dark hair.”

She jerked up her chin. “So what?”

“What was his name?”

She opened her mouth, realized her mind was blank. She couldn’t remember a face, much less a name, and barely remembered the groping in the dark. “What do I care,” she snapped out. “It was just sex.”

“You’re not going to find what you’re looking for, not with nameless men nearly half your age. But if you have to keep looking, I can’t stop you. That’s been clear enough right from the start of this. But I can stop being your fallback position.”

“Go on, then.” She scooped up a pile of paperwork from her desk, threw it into the air. “I won’t care.”

“I know. If you did, really did, I wouldn’t go.”

He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him.

HE WAS DAZZLED BY THE LIGHT. Nate couldn’t get enough of it, no matter how long the day lasted, he wanted more. He could feel it penetrating flesh and bone, charging him.

He hadn't woken from a nightmare in days.

He woke to light, worked and walked through it in the day. He thought in it and ate in it; he soaked in it.

And each night he watched the sun slide down behind the mountains, he knew it would rise again in a few hours.

There were still nights when he'd slip out of Meg's bed, walk out with the dogs for company to watch the lights play havoc with the night sky.

He could still feel the wound, throbbing under the scars on his body. But he thought the pain was a healing one now. He hoped to God it was. A kind of acceptance for what he'd lost and an opening to what he could have.

For the first time since he'd left Baltimore, he called Jack's wife, Beth.

"I just wanted to know how you were. You and the kids."

"We're okay. We're good. It's been a year since . . ."

He knew. A year today.

"Today's a little rough. We went out this morning, took him flowers. The firsts are the hardest. The first holiday, first birthday, first anniversary. But you get through it, and it's a little easier. I thought—hoped—you'd call today. I'm so glad you did."

"I wasn't sure you'd want to hear from me."

"We miss you, Nate. Me and the kids. I worry about you."

"I'm okay, too. Better."

"Tell me what it's like there. Is it awfully cold and quiet?"

"Actually, it's around sixty today. As for quiet . . ." He looked over at his board. "Yeah. Yeah, it's pretty quiet. We've had some flooding. Not as bad as in the southeast but enough to keep us busy. It's beautiful."

He turned to his window now. "Like nothing you can imagine. You have to see it, and even then it's hard to imagine."

"You sound good. I'm glad you sound good."

"I didn't think I'd make it here." Anywhere. "I wanted to. I didn't care so much until I got here. Until I was here, and then I wanted to. But I didn't think I would."

"Now?"

"I think I will. Beth, I met someone."

"Oh?" There was a laugh in her voice, and he closed his eyes to hear it. "Is she wonderful?"

"Spectacular, in so many ways. I think you'd like her. She's not like anybody else. She's a bush pilot."

"A bush pilot? Isn't that one of those people who fly around in those tiny planes like maniacs?"

"Pretty much. She's beautiful. Well, she's not, but she is. She's funny and tough, and she's probably crazy, but it fits her. Her name's Meg. Megan Galloway, and I'm in love with her."

"Oh, Nate. I'm so happy for you."

"Don't cry," he said when he heard the tears.

"No, it's good. Jack would find a million ways to tease you, but under it, he'd have been happy for you, too."

"Well, anyway, I just wanted to tell you. I just wanted to talk to you and tell you and say that maybe sometime you and the kids could come up. It's a great place for a summer vacation. By June it won't be dark till midnight, and then they tell me it's more like twilight than dark. And it's warmer than you think, or so they tell me. I'd like you to see it, to meet Meg. I'd like to see you and the kids."

"I can promise we'll come for the wedding."

His laugh was a little jerky. "I haven't moved in that direction."

"I know you, Nate. You will."

When he hung up, he was smiling. The last thing he'd expected. He

left the board uncovered—a kind of symbol that he was investigating in the open now—and walked out of his office.

It still gave him a jolt to see Peter with his arm in a sling. The young deputy sat at his desk, punching keys one-handed.

Desk duty. Paperwork detail. A cop—and that's what the kid was—could die of sheer boredom.

Nate walked over. "Want to get out of here?"

Peter looked up, one finger of his good hand poised over the keyboard. "Sir?"

"Want me to uncuff you from that desk for a while?"

Light came into his face. "Yes, sir!"

"Let's take a walk." He grabbed a two-way. "Peach, Deputy Notti and I are on foot patrol."

"Um. Otto's already out," Peter told him.

"Hey, crime could be rampant out there for all we know. Peach, you've got the helm."

"Aye, aye, captain," she said with a snicker. "You boys be careful."

Nate took a light jacket from a peg. "Want yours?" he asked Peter.

"Nah. Only Lower 48ers need a jacket on a day like this."

"That so? Well, then." Deliberately, Nate rehung the jacket.

Outside it was brisk enough and overcast. Rain was probably on its way, and undoubtedly, Nate thought, he'd regret the gesture of leaving the jacket before they were finished.

But he headed down the sidewalk with the damp, frisky air blowing through his hair. "How's the arm?"

"Pretty good. I don't think I need the sling, but between Peach and my mother, it's not worth the grief."

"Women get all fussy when a guy gets himself shot."

"Tell me about it. And try to be, you know, stoic about it, and they're all over you."

"I haven't talked to you too much about the incident. Initially I told myself I'd made a mistake taking you out there."

"I spooked him when I got out of the car. Incited the situation."

"A squirrel dropping an acorn would've spooked him, Peter. I said initially I told myself I'd made a mistake. The fact is, I didn't. You're a good cop. You proved it. You were down. You were hurt and dazed, but you backed me up."

"You had the situation controlled. You didn't need backup."

"I might have. That's the point. When you stand with someone in a volatile situation, you have to be able to trust him—no reservations."

The way he and Jack had trusted each other, he thought. So you'd go through the door, into the alley, no matter what waited in the dark.

"I want you to know I trust you."

"I . . . I thought you had me on the desk because you were trying to ease me out."

"I've got you on the desk because you're injured. In the line, Peter. A commendation regarding your actions during the incident is going in your file."

Peter stopped, stared. "A commendation."

"You earned it. It'll be announced at the next Town Hall meeting."

"I don't know what to say."

"Stoic works."

They crossed the street at the corner to swing up the other side. "I have something else to tell you, and it's sensitive. Regarding the investigation our department is conducting. The homicides."

He caught Peter's quick glance. "Whatever the State Police have determined, this department is treating them as homicides. I have several

statements from individuals giving their whereabouts during the times in question. Most of those statements, however, can't be corroborated, at least not to my satisfaction. That includes Otto's."

"Oh, but chief, Otto's—"

"One of us. I know. But I can't cross him off the list because he's one of us. There are a lot of people in this town, or outlying it, who had the opportunity for these three crimes. Motive's a different thing. The motive for the two subsequent arrow back to Galloway. What was the motive for his murder? Crime of passion, gain, cover-up? Drug-induced? Maybe a combination of those motives. But whoever it was, he knew."

Nate scanned the streets, the sidewalks. Sometimes it was what you knew that waited in the dark. "He knew them well enough to do that winter climb with his killer and with Max. Just the three of them. He knew his killer well enough to indulge in, I guess we'd call it role-playing while they were up there, enduring harsh conditions."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"He had a journal. It was on him—and left on him. Coben gave me a copy."

"But if he had a journal, then—"

"He never used the names of his companions. They were on some sort of lark. The kind that tells me if he hadn't been killed up there then, he'd have died on some other climb unless he'd straightened up. They were smoking grass, popping speed. Playing *Star Wars*. Galloway as Luke, Max as Han Solo, and ironically enough Galloway's killer in the Darth Vader role. The mountain became that ice world they were on."

"Hoth. I like the movies," Peter added with a little hunch to his shoulders. "I collected the action figures and stuff when I was a kid."

"Me, too. But these weren't kids. They were grown men, and some-

where along the line, the game got out of hand. Galloway wrote how Han—I believe that was Max—injured his ankle. They left him behind in a tent with some provisions and kept going.”

“That proves Max didn’t kill him.”

“Depends on how you angle it. You could speculate that Max decided to follow, caught up with them in the ice cave and went crazy. You could further speculate that Max held the Vader role and killed both his playmates. Those aren’t my personal theories, but they’re theories. And the State accepts the second one.”

“That Mr. Hawbaker killed both guys? *Then* got himself down alone? I can’t see it.”

“Why?”

“Well, I know I was just a little kid when all this happened, but Mr. Hawbaker never had a rep for being, you know, bold and, um, self-sufficient. You’d have to be both to handle that descent.”

“I agree. Later in the journal, Galloway wrote that the Darth character was showing signs of—let’s call it lunacy—anger, risk taking, accusations. A lot of drugs involved in this and, from what I’ve read, a by-product of the strain, altitude sickness, the high some climbers get from being up there.”

Nate watched Deb come out of The Corner Store to take Cecil for a walk. The dog was wearing a bright green sweater.

“Galloway was worried, worried about this guy’s state of mind,” he continued as he casually exchanged waves with Deb. “About getting them all down safe. His last journal entry was written in the ice cave. He never got out of it, so he was right to be worried. But he still wasn’t worried enough to take definite steps to protect himself. There were no defensive wounds on the body. His own ice ax was still in his belt. He knew his killer, just like Max knew his. Just like Yukon knew the man who slit his throat.

“We know him, too, Peter.” He sent another wave to Judge Royce, who strode toward KLUN with a cigar clamped between his teeth. “We just haven’t recognized him yet.”

“What do we do?”

“We keep going through what we know. We keep working with the layers until we know more. I’m not telling Otto about the journal. Not yet.”

“God.”

“This is tougher on you. These are people you’ve known all your life, or a good part of it.”

He nodded down the street where Harry stood on the sidewalk outside The Corner Store catching a smoke and talking to Jim Mackie. Across from them Ed walked briskly in the direction of the bank but stopped to exchange a word with the post mistress who was out sweeping her stoop.

Big Mike came out of The Lodge and jogged, undoubtedly heading for The Italian Place and his daily bout of shoptalk with Johnny Trivani. His little girl let out belly laughs as she rode his shoulders.

“Just people. But one of them, out here on the street, inside one of these buildings or houses, in a cabin outside of town, is a killer. If he has to, he’ll kill again.”

HE WENT TO MEG’S every evening. She wasn’t always there. Jobs were picking up as the weather warmed. But they had an unspoken agreement that he would come and stay. He’d tend the dogs, see to some of the chores.

He was leaving his things there, such as they were, little by little. Another unspoken agreement. He kept his room at The Lodge, but it was more a storage area for his heavy winter gear at this point.

He could've moved that to Meg's, too. But that would've been the line. The official we're-living-together line.

He saw the smoke from her chimney before he made the turn, and his mood cranked up another notch. But there was no plane on the lake, and it was Jacob's truck in her drive.

The dogs bolted out of the woods to greet him, with Rock carting one of the mastodon bones they liked to gnaw on. It looked fresh to Nate, and he left the dogs playing an energetic tug-of-war with it as he went inside.

Nate could smell blood before he was halfway to the kitchen. Instinctively his hand went to the butt of his weapon.

"I brought meat," Jacob said without turning around.

There were a couple of thick planks of something bloody on the counter. Nate relaxed his hand.

"She doesn't have much time to hunt these days. Bear are awake. It's good meat for stew, meat loaf."

Bear meat loaf, Nate thought. What a world. "I'm sure she'll appreciate it."

"We share what we have." Jacob continued calmly wrapping bear meat in thick white paper. "She told you I was with her most days during the time her father was taken."

"Was taken? That's an interesting way to put it."

"His life was taken from him, wasn't it?" Jacob finished wrapping the meat, then picked up a black marker and wrote a date on the packages. It was such a housewifely gesture that Nate blinked.

"She told you this, but you don't trust her memory, or her heart."

"I trust her."

"She was a child." Jacob washed his hands in the sink. "She could be mistaken, or could, because she loves me, by protecting me."

"She could."

Jacob dried his hands, picked up the packages of meat. When he turned, Nate saw he wore an amulet around his neck. A dark blue stone over a faded denim shirt.

"I've talked to people." He walked into the little mudroom where Meg kept a small chest freezer. "People who aren't so willing to talk to police. People who knew Pat and Two-Toes." He began to stack packages in the freezer. "I'm told, by these people who will talk to me and not the police, that when Pat was in Anchorage, he had money. More money than was usual for him."

He closed the freezer, walked back into the kitchen. "I'm having a whiskey now."

"Where'd he get the money?"

"He worked a few days at a cannery, took an advance on his pay, I'm told. He used it to play poker." Jacob poured three fingers of whiskey into a glass. Held a second glass up, with a question on his face.

"No, thanks."

"I believe this may be true, because he liked to play, and though he often lost, he would consider it . . . payment for the entertainment. It seems this time he didn't lose. He played two nights, and most of one day. Those who talk to me say his winnings were big. Some say ten thousand, others twenty, others more. It may be like a fish and grows bigger with the telling. But there's agreement that he played and won and had money."

"What did he do with the money?"

"That, no one knows, or admits to knowing. But some say they saw him last drinking with other men. This isn't unusual, so no one can say who the men were. And why should they remember such a thing over so long a time?"

“There was a whore.”

Jacob’s lips curved, just a little. “There always is.”

“Kate. I haven’t been able to locate her.”

“Whoring Kate. She died, maybe five years ago. Heart attack,” Jacob added. “She was a very large woman and smoked two, maybe three, packs of Camels a day. Her death wasn’t much of a surprise.”

Another dead end, Nate thought.

“Did these people who talk to you but not to cops tell you anything else?”

“Some say Two-Toes flew Pat and two others, or three others, no more than that, to climb. Some say to climb Denali, some say No Name, some say Deborah. The details aren’t clear, but there’s memory of the money, the pilot, the climb and two or three companions.”

Jacob sipped his whiskey. “Or I could be lying and be the one who climbed with him.”

“You could,” Nate acknowledged. “It’d be ballsy. A man who hunts down a bear’s got balls.”

Jacob smiled. “A man who hunts down a bear eats well.”

“I believe you. But I could be lying.”

This time Jacob laughed and downed the rest of the whiskey. “You could. But since we’re in Meg’s kitchen, and she has love for us both, we can pretend to believe each other. She has more light now. She’s always been bright, but now she’s brighter, and she burns off the shadows in you. She can take care of herself. But . . .”

He took the glass to the sink, rinsed it, set it to drain, then turned back. “Take care with her, Chief Burke. Or I’ll hunt you down.”

“Noted,” Nate replied when Jacob walked out.

TWENTY-EIGHT

NATE BIDED HIS TIME. It seemed he had plenty of it. Since he made it a point to stop by The Lodge restaurant and see Jesse daily, it wasn't a problem to find an opportunity for a private word with Charlene.

He found Rose taking advantage of a mid-morning lull by sitting down in a booth refilling condiment dispensers.

"Don't get up," he said when she started to slide out. "Where's my buddy today?"

"We have cousins down from Nome, so Jesse has playmates for a few days. He's been showing off his uncle, the deputy," she said with a smile. "But he wants to bring them all into town to meet his good friend, Chief Nate."

"Really?" He could feel his own grin spreading from ear to ear. "Tell him to bring them on, and we'll give them a tour of the station." And he'd radio Meg, see if she could find him a bunch of toy badges when she picked up supplies.

"You wouldn't mind?"

"I'd get a kick out of it."

He leaned over to take a peek at Willow in her carrier. "She's awfully pretty."

He could say it with truth now. Her cheeks had grown plump and sort of pinchable. And her eyes, so dark, seemed to latch on to his as if she knew things he didn't.

He held out a finger. Willow wrapped hers around it, shook it.

"Is Charlene in her office?"

"No, in the storeroom off the kitchen. Doing inventory."

"Okay if I go back?"

"You'll want a flak jacket," Rose warned as she dumped ketchup into a bright red squeeze bottle. "She's been in a mood the last few days."

"I'll risk it."

"Nate. Peter told us about the commendation. He's so proud. We're so proud. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything. He did."

Since her eyes filled, he made his escape quickly.

Big Mike was at the counter making what looked like enough salad to feed an army of rabbits. He had the radio on to local, and Yo-Yo Ma's deep and passionate cello streamed out.

"Crab Florentine à la Mike's the lunch special," he called out. "Buffalo salad for the heartier appetites."

"Yum."

"You going in there?" Mike asked when Nate turned toward the storeroom. "Better take a sword and shield."

"So I hear." But Nate opened the door, and since you could never tell with Charlene, left it open for safety's sake.

It was a large, chilly room lined with metal shelves that were loaded with canned and dry goods. A couple of tall coolers held tubs of perishables, with a chest freezer squeezed in between them.

Charlene stood among them, briskly scribbling on a clipboard.

"Well, I know where to head in case of thermonuclear war."

She flipped him a glance, one that held none of her usual steamy come-on. "I'm busy."

"I can see that. I just want to ask you a question."

"Nothing but questions out of you," she muttered, then raised her voice to a shout. "I'd like to know why we're down to two cans of kidney beans."

Big Mike's answer was to turn the radio up.

"Charlene, give me a couple of minutes and I'll be out of your way."

"Fine, fine, *fine!*" She slapped the clipboard against a shelf, hard enough that Nate heard the wood crack. "I'm just trying to run a business here. Why should that matter to anybody?"

"I'm sorry about whatever's bothering you, and I'll make this as quick as I can. Do you know anything about Galloway having substantial poker winnings between the time he left here and when he went up the mountain?"

She made a sound of derision. "As if." Then her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, *substantial?*"

"A few thousand anyway. I've got a source that says he might've played a couple of nights and hit."

"If there was a game, he probably played. He hardly ever won, though, and hardly ever won more than a couple hundred if he got lucky. There was that one time in Portland. He won about three thousand. And we blew it on a fancy hotel room, a big steak dinner, a couple bottles of champagne from room service. He bought me an outfit for it. A dress and shoes, and a pair of little sapphire earrings."

Her eyes went shiny. But she shook her head and shoulders briskly and dried the tears up on her own. "Stupid. I had to sell the earrings in Prince William to pay for motorcycle repairs and supplies. Lot of good they did me."

"If he had won money, what would he have done with it?"

"Pissed it away. No." She laid her forehead on one of the shelf posts, and looked so tired, so lost, so sad that he risked rubbing her shoulder.

"No, not right then. He knew I was on a tear about money. If he'd gotten his hands on some, he'd have played a little maybe, but he'd have held on to the bulk of it, so he could bring it home and shut me up."

"Would he have banked it? In Anchorage?"

"We didn't have a bank in Anchorage. He'd've stuffed it in his pack and hauled it home for me to deal with. He didn't have any respect for money. A lot of people that come from it don't."

She lifted her head. "Are you saying there was money?"

"I'm saying there's a possibility."

"He never sent any home that time. He never sent home a dime."

"If he had money and was going on a climb?"

"He'd have left it stuffed in a drawer, if he kept his room. Or if he didn't keep his room, he'd have taken it with him. The State Police didn't say anything about money."

"He didn't have any on him."

None, Nate thought as he went out again. No wallet, no ID, no cash. No pack. Just matches and the journal, zipped into the pocket of his parka.

On the sidewalk, he took out his notebook. He wrote down **MONEY**, circled it.

The saying was "Follow the woman," he thought, but a cop knew if money was around murder, you always, always followed the money.

He wondered how he could find out if anyone in Lunacy had come into a tidy little windfall sixteen years before.

Of course, it was just as likely Galloway kept a room, left the money

in it. And the maid, the owner or the next person to occupy it just got really lucky.

Or he'd taken it with him in his pack. His killer hadn't opened it up before he'd tossed it into a handy crevice.

But why should the killer take the pack at all if not for a reason? For supplies—and woo-hoo, look what else we've got here. Or just to dump it in a panic, thinking if the body was found it wouldn't be identifiable.

But if there had been money, Nate was willing to bet the killer had known it was there and had helped himself. Who—?

"People might wonder why they're paying taxes so the chief of police can daydream out on the street."

He shook himself back, looked down at Hopp. "Are you everywhere?"

"As often as possible. I'm on my way in to get a cup of coffee and brood. And plot." She wore irritation on her face as visibly as she wore her green-checked shirt.

"What's up?"

"John Malmont just tendered his resignation. Says he's leaving at the end of the school year."

"Leaving teaching?"

"Leaving Lunacy. We can't afford to lose him."

She took out her Zippo, but only stood snapping the top open and shut. Talk around town was she was wearing the patch.

"He's a superior teacher, and added to that, he's helping Carrie with *The Lunatic*, he runs all the school plays, heads up the yearbook committee, puts us on the tourist map with articles he gets published in magazines. I've got to sit down and figure out how to keep him."

"Did he say why he decided to leave? All of a sudden?"

“Just that it was time for a change. One minute we’re planning our summer book club, which he heads up, and the next he’s packing. Son of a bitch!”

She rolled her shoulders. “I’m having coffee *and* pie. Pie à la mode.” She snapped the lighter violently. “That’ll get the brain cells working. He’s not leaving without a fight.”

Interesting, Nate thought. Interesting timing.

BURKE HAD TO GO. That was the bottom line now. Poking and prodding into matters that were *none of his business*.

Well, there was more than one way to run a pain-in-the-ass cheechako out of town. There were those who said Burke had risen above that status now that he’d survived his first winter.

But he knew some remained cheechakos no matter what they survived.

Galloway had been one. When push came to shove, he’d been gutless and mewling and sneaky. Most of all sneaky.

The man had been an asshole, pure and simple. Why should anyone give a *damn* that he was dead?

Done what had to be done, he told himself as he carried the heavy plastic bags through the woods. Just like he was doing what had to be done now.

Burke would be dealt with. Another gutless, mewling, sneaky asshole. Oh, my wife left me for another man. Woe is me. Oh, I got my partner killed. Boo hoo. I have to run away where nobody knows me so I can wallow in my own muck of self-pity.

But that wasn’t good enough. Had to try to be a big shot. To take *over* what wasn’t his. Could never be his.

Yeah, he’d be dealt with, and life would get back to normal.

He hung the plastic bags in the trees closest to the house while the dogs whined and batted their tails.

"Not this time, boys," he said aloud and hung another from the eave by the back door, just out of sight of the doorway. "Not this time, fellas."

He gave the dogs a brisk rub, but they were more interested in sniffing at and licking his hands.

He liked the dogs. He'd liked Yukon. But that old dog had been half blind, arthritic and damn near deaf on top of it. Putting him down had been a mercy, really. And had made a point.

He walked back toward the woods, stopping at the edge to look back. There were some patches of earth where the snow was busily melting in the sun, where the rains had washed it clear. A few sprigs of green were rising out of it.

Spring, he thought. And once the ground thoroughly warmed, they'd bring Pat Galloway home for the last time.

He planned to stand at the grave site, with his head respectfully bowed.

IT WAS JUST SOFTENING to twilight when Nate got home. He waited by the side of the road while Meg walked over from the lake, over boggy green with thinning patches of snow, he noted.

She carried a box of supplies and wore a bright red shirt that made him think of some flashy tropical bird.

"Wanna trade?"

She looked at the pizza box he held, sniffed at it. "No, I got it *and* your toy badges. But I like a man who brings dinner. How'd you know for sure I'd be back for dinner, or were you planning on eating all that yourself?"

"I heard your plane. Finished up what I was doing, walked up to The Italian Place and got this. Figured you'd have to off-load your cargo, and the timing would be pretty close."

"Close to perfect. I'm starved." She carted the supplies into the house and straight back to the kitchen. "And it so happens one of the things I picked up today is what's billed as an exceptional cabernet."

She pulled out the bottle. "You game?"

"Sure. In a minute." He set the pizza aside, laid his hands on her shoulders and kissed her. "Hi."

"Hi, cutie." Grinning, she grabbed his hair, yanked him down for a harder, longer kiss. "Hello, boys." She crouched down for a quick rub and wrestle with her dogs. "Didja miss me, huh, didja?"

"We all did. Last night we consoled ourselves with a bear bone and mac and cheese. Jacob supplied the bone, and the bear meat that's in your freezer."

"Umm, good." She pulled out a plastic bag, shook it so the contents jingled, then tossed it to him.

Inside he found silver pin-on stars. "Cool."

"You said seven, but I got you a dozen. You can have some on hand if you want to deputize more kids."

"Thanks. What do I owe you?"

"You're running a tab. We'll catch up. Open that bottle, will you, chief?" She slid her hand in the pizza box and tore off a slice. "Missed lunch," she said with her mouth full. "Had to set down—a little engine trouble—and it cost me a couple of hours."

"What kind of engine trouble?"

"Nothing dire. All fixed now, but I could use pizza and wine, a hot shower, and a man who knows how to rub me in all the right places."

"Looks like we can handle all of that."

"You keep getting this half-smile going on. What's that about?"

"Things. You want to sit down and eat, or are you just going to stand there and stuff it in your face?"

"Stand here." She took another huge bite. "Stuff."

"Okay. Should this breathe or something?"

"Not when I'm washing down pizza with it. Gimme."

He poured her a glass and another for himself. Then he pulled out a slice and leaned back on the counter to eat it. "You know the day Peter was shot."

"Hard to forget. He used to follow me and Rose around like a puppy. He's doing okay, right?"

"He's fine. But that day, when I saw the blood on the snow, when I got to him and had his blood on my hands, part of my mind wiped out. No, more rolled back. To Jack. I was back in that alley again. I could see it, hear it, smell it. And I wanted to sink away somehow. Just go away."

"That's not the way I heard it."

"That's what was going on, inside." He'd get this out first, Nate thought. Make sure she saw him as he'd been, as he was, and as he hoped to be. "It seemed like a long time. A long time crouched there in the snow, with him bleeding on me. But it wasn't. And I didn't sink away."

"No, you didn't. You drew his fire away from Peter."

"That's not the point."

"Cutie." She moved forward, gave him a light kiss, moved back again to lean on the counter. "You're such a cop."

"I controlled the situation. Did the job and got everybody out of it alive. I could've killed him. Spinnaker."

He saw her take that in, just a slight angling of her head.

"I could've done it, and for an instant I considered it. Nobody would've questioned it. He'd shot my deputy, shot at me. He was armed

and dangerous. It wasn't like in the alley with Jack. Then my partner was down—my partner was dying," he corrected, "and I was down, and that son of a bitch kept coming."

He looked down at his wine while she listened, while she waited. He set it on the counter. "There was no choice, and here I had one. And I considered blowing him to hell. You should know that. You should know it was in me to do that."

"Do you expect me to care if you had? He tried to kill my friend, tried to kill you. I wouldn't have cared, Nate. I guess you should know that's in me."

"It would've been . . ."

"Wrong," she finished. "For you. For the man you are, for the kind of cop you are. So I'm glad you didn't. Your right and wrong are more defined than mine. That's just the way it is."

"It was a year ago that Jack died."

Sympathy swam into her eyes. "Oh boy, you just keep getting punched in the gut, don't you?"

"No. No, I called Beth on the day. Jack's wife. I called her, and it was good. She was good. And talking to her, I realized I wasn't going to sink again. I don't know when I got out of the pit, exactly, and sometimes the ground's still a little soft and unstable under my feet. But I'm not going back down."

"You never were." She poured more wine in her glass. "I know people who have or who probably will. The kind who fly into the side of a mountain on a clear day or go off into the bush to die. I know them. They're part of the outer world I run in away from here. Burned-out pilots or some Outsider who stumbles up here because he can't take the world anymore. Women beat down from being abused or neglected for so long they'll just lie down and let the next man kick them to death on the street."

"You were sad, Nate, and a little lost, but you were never one of them. You've got too much core to be one of them."

He said nothing for a moment, then he reached out, touched the ends of her hair. "You burned away my shadows."

"Huh?"

The half smile came back to his lips. "Marry me, Meg."

For a moment she stared at him, those crystal-blue eyes full power on his. Then she tossed the half-eaten slice of pizza into the box.

"I *knew* it!" Throwing her hands up, she spun around on her heels and clomped around the kitchen with enough violence to have the dogs leaping up to sniff at her. "I just *knew* it. Give a guy some good sex, a couple of hot meals, soften up enough to say you love him and—*boom!*—next breath it's marriage talk. Didn't I tell you. Didn't I tell you?" She whirled around to jab a finger at him. "Hearth and home, tattooed on your butt."

"Looks like you nailed me."

"Don't you smirk at me."

"A minute ago it was a half-smile, and you thought it was kind of cute."

"I changed my mind. What do you want to get married for?"

"I love you. You love me."

"So? *So?*" Her arms were still flapping around, and now the dogs figured it was a game and made playful little lunges at her. "Why do you want to screw that up?"

"Just crazy, I guess. What are you, chicken?"

She sucked air in her nose, and her eyes went to cold fire. "Don't you play that crap on me."

"You got marriage fear?" He leaned back on the counter, picked up his glass again and sipped his wine. "The brave little bush pilot gets shaky in the knees when the M word comes up. Interesting."

"My knees are not shaking, you jerk."

"Marry me, Meg." His half-smile went full blown. "See, you went pale."

"I did not. I did not."

"I love you."

"You bastard."

"I want to spend my life with you."

"Goddamn it."

"I want to have babies with you."

"Oh." She gripped her hair and pulled as an indescribable sound ground out of her throat. "Cut it out."

"See?" He contemplated another slice of pizza. "Chicken."

Her right hand closed into a fist. "Don't think I can't take you down, Burke."

"You already did, first time I saw you."

"Oh, man." The fist dropped to her side. "You think you're cute, you think you're smart, but what you are is stupid and simple. You've already been through this marriage thing, got the shit kicked out of you, and here you are asking for more."

"She wasn't you. I wasn't me."

"What the holy hell does that mean?"

"First part's easy. There's nobody else like you. I'm not who I was when I was with her. Different people make, well, different people. I'm a better man with you, Meg. You make me want to be a better man."

"Oh God, don't say things like that." She could feel her eyes burn. The tears rising up from her heart were hot and strong. "You're the man you always were. Maybe you were shaky for a while, but anybody is when they've been beaten up and tossed aside. I'm not better, Nate. I'm selfish and contrary and . . . I was going to say inconsiderate, but I don't see why it's inconsiderate to live your life the way you want. I'm mean

when I want to be, I don't care about rules unless they're mine, and I'm here, I'm still here in this place, because I'm half crazy."

"I know. Don't change."

"I knew there was going to be trouble with you, New Year's Eve, when I went with that stupid impulse and brought you out to see the northern lights."

"You wore a red dress."

"You think I'm such a girl I'll go all squishy because you remember what color dress I wore?"

"You love me."

"Yeah." She blew out a long breath, wiped her hands over her wet cheeks. "Yeah, I do. What a damn mess."

"Marry me, Meg."

"You're just going to keep saying that, aren't you?"

"Until I get an answer."

"What if the answer's no?"

"Then I'll wait, work on you a little at a time and ask you again. Giving up doesn't work for me, so I'm done with it."

"You didn't give up. You were just hibernating."

He smiled again. "Look at you, standing there. I could look at you forever."

"Jesus, Nate." Her heart ached, literally ached so she had to rub the heel of her hand over it. And that ache, she realized, sweet at the center, smothered out the panic. "You kill me."

"Marry me, Meg."

"Oh well." She sighed. Then she laughed because the sweetness spread through everything else. "What the hell. I'll give it a shot." She took a running leap that would've knocked him flat if he hadn't had his

back to the counter. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her mouth crushed down on his. "This goes south, it's on your head."

"Goes without saying."

"I'll be a terrible wife." She rained kisses over his face, his throat. "I'll irritate you and make you crazy half the time. I'll fight dirty and I'll stay pissed off when you win, which will be rarely." She leaned back, framed his face with her hands. "But I won't lie to you. I won't cheat. And I'll never let you down when it matters."

"It'll work for us." He rested his cheek on hers and just breathed her in. "We'll make it work. I don't have a ring."

"You'll need to rectify that, ASAP. And spare no expense."

"Okay."

Laughing, she leaned back, way back so he had to shift his stance to keep a hold on her. "This is just crazy enough to be right." She reared back up, locked her arms around his neck. "I think it's time we went upstairs and had insane engagement sex."

"I was counting on that." He hitched her up a bit and carried her out of the room. When she nipped her teeth into his throat, he took a shaky breath. "Does it have to be upstairs? How about on the stairs. Or just on the floor right here. Then later, we could . . . Damn it."

The dogs ran barking to the door, and an instant later, he saw the glare of headlights cross the window.

"Lock all the doors," Meg murmured dreamily, still working on his throat. "Turn out all the lights. We'll hide. We'll get naked and hide."

"Too late. But we're going to remember where we were, and after we get rid of whoever that is—even if we have to kill them—we'll pick it up again."

"Deal." She hopped down. "Hold!" she ordered the dogs, who sat, quivering at the door. She opened it, recognized the man who got out of

the car. "Friend," she told the dogs, then lifted a hand in greeting. "Hey, Steven."

"Hey, Meg." He bent to pet the dogs. "Hi, guys, hi. How's it going? Ah, I saw Peter, and he said Chief Burke was out here. I wanted to see him a minute, if that's okay."

"Sure. Come on in. Outside, boys, time for a run."

"Hi, Steven, how're you doing?"

"Chief." He shook hands with Nate. "A lot better than the last time you saw me. I wanted to thank you again, in person and when I was a little more with it, for what you did for me. For us. You, too, Meg."

"Heard you kept all your digits."

"Ten fingers, ten toes. Well, nine and a half toes. Really lucky. All of us were. I'm sorry to bother you at home . . . I mean when you're off duty."

"It's no problem."

"Go ahead and sit down," Meg invited. "You want some wine? A beer?"

"He's underage," Nate said even as Steven started to accept. "And he's driving."

"Cops," Meg grumbled. "Always pooping on the party."

"Maybe a Coke or something if you've got it handy."

"Sure."

Steven sat, drummed his fingers on his knees. "I'm home for a couple of days. Spring break. I wanted to come sooner, but I've got a lot of stuff to catch up on. Missed a lot of classes when I was out, you know."

"You making them up?"

"Yeah, putting in a lot of long nights, but I'm making up time. I wanted to come when I heard about Yukon." His voice trembled, and the fingers on his knees dug in.

"I'm sorry."

"I remember when we got him. I was just a kid, and he was this goofy

ball of fluff. It's hard. Hardest on my mom. He was like her baby or something."

"I don't know what I'd do if anyone hurt my dogs," Meg said as she came back into the room. She handed Nate one of the glasses of wine she had in each hand, then took the can of Coke under her arm and gave it to Steven.

"I know you're doing all you can. Somebody told me you had some crazy guy around—Jesus, he shot Peter." He shook his head as he opened the can. "And some think maybe this guy did that to Yukon. But . . ."

"You don't think so," Nate prompted.

"Yukon was friendly, but he wouldn't have gone with a stranger. I just don't think he'd have gone with somebody he didn't know. Not without a fight. He was old, and mostly blind, but he wouldn't have left the yard with somebody he didn't know."

He drank deep. "Anyway, that's not why I came by. I just wanted to get that out. It's about this."

He hitched up his hips as he dug in the front pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a small silver earring in the shape of a Maltese cross. "It was in the cave," he said.

Nate took it. "You found this in the cave, with Galloway?"

"Scott did, actually. I forgot about it. I guess we all did. He saw this about a foot from . . ." He glanced at Meg. "From the body. Sorry."

"It's okay."

"He chipped it out. I don't know why, something to do. He put it in his pack. By the time we all got off the mountain, the shape we were in, the hospital and shit, he just forgot about it. He found it in his stuff and remembered and gave it to me because I was coming home. We thought it was probably your father's, Meg, so you should have it. Then I thought how it should probably go through the cops first, so I figured I should bring it to Chief Burke."

“Did you show this to Sergeant Coben?” Nate asked.

“No. Scott passed it to me right before I left to come home, and I wanted to get home. I thought it was all right to do it through you.”

“That’s fine. Thanks for bringing it by.”

“I DON’T KNOW if it was his,” Meg said when she was alone with Nate. “It could’ve been. He wore an earring. He had a few. I can’t remember exactly. A couple of studs, a gold hoop. But it might’ve been his. It could’ve been something he bought in Anchorage while he was gone. It might have been . . .”

“His killer’s,” Nate finished, studying the earring in his palm.

“Are you going to give it to Coben?”

“I’m going to think about it awhile.”

“Put it away, will you? Can we put it away for tonight? I don’t want to be sad.”

Nate slipped it into the breast pocket of his shirt, buttoned it closed. “Okay?”

“Okay.” She laid her head on his shoulder, laid a hand over the pocket. “You can show it to Charlene tomorrow. Maybe she’d know. But for now—” She set her hands on his shoulders, boosted herself up again.

“Where were we?”

“I think we were over there.”

“And now we’re here. And look! There’s a nice comfy couch behind you. How quick can you get me naked on it?”

“Let’s find out.”

He dropped backward, pulling her around at the last minute, so she fell, laughing, under him. Her legs were still hooked around him as she tugged his shirt out of his pants, scraped her nails up his back.

"I expect you to ring the big bell tonight, since I'm an engagement-sex virgin."

"I'm going to work my way up to the big bell." He unbuttoned her shirt, taking his lips on a trail down the opening to the button of her jeans. "Ring all the little ones on the way up."

"I admire a man with ambition."

She felt his tongue slide over her, his teeth scrape over exposed flesh as he peeled the jeans down her legs.

She was going to marry this man. Imagine that? Ignatious Burke, with his big, sad eyes and strong hands. A man just packed with patience and needs and courage. And honor.

She brushed a hand through his hair. She'd done nothing in her life to deserve him. And somehow that made it all that much more wonderful.

Then his teeth nibbled along her inner thigh, her system shuddered and she stopped thinking altogether.

He worked his way up her and down her, over her, around her, washed through with the knowledge that she belonged to him now. To cherish and protect, to hold up and to lean on. Love for her was like a sun inside him, shining strong and white.

He found her lips again, sank into them, into all that heat and power.

In some part of his brain, he heard the dogs barking, a frenzied cacophony that cut through the sexual buzz. Even as he lifted his head to tune into the sound, Meg was shoving him away.

"Something's at my dogs."

She sprinted out of the room even as he rolled off the couch. "Meg! Wait a minute. Wait a damn minute."

He heard something, something that wasn't a dog, sound outside the house, and he ran after her.

TWENTY-NINE

SHE HAD A RIFLE and was yanking open the back door by the time he caught her. He made a leap, slapped the door closed.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Protecting my dogs. They’re going to get mauled out there. Back off, Burke, I know what I’m doing.”

Too rushed for niceties, she rapped the butt of the rifle into his belly and was both furious and astonished when instead of buckling, he stood his ground and shoved her back.

“Give me the gun.”

“You’ve got your own. They’re my dogs.” A pulsing, clacking roar cut through the frenzied barks. “It’ll kill my dogs!”

“No, it won’t.” He didn’t know what *it* was, but from the sound of it, it was bigger than any dog. He slapped on the outside lights, then picked up the gun he’d laid on her counter, pulled it out of the holster. “Stay here.”

Later, he would wonder why he’d thought she’d listen to him, listen to reason. Be safe. But when he opened the door, his gun lifted, held in combat stance, she bolted out, ducking under his arm, whirling her body and the barrel of the rifle toward the sounds of vicious war.

There was an instant of wonder struck into him, tangled with fear and a terrible respect. The bear was massive, a great hulk of black against the patchy snow. Its teeth gleamed sharp and deadly in the light as its jaws opened, and it bellowed viciously at the dogs.

They went at it, short, testing lunges, snapping, snarling. He saw blood splattered over the ground, a pool of it soaking into the thawing ground. The raw smell of it, and the pungent odor of wild animal, stung the air.

“Rock, Bull! Here! Come here, now!”

Too far gone, was Nate’s only thought as Meg called out. Too far gone to listen even to her. They’d already made their choice between fight or flight, and the blood lust was on them.

The bear dropped onto all fours, its back hunched, and the sound it made was nothing like the growls Hollywood assigned to its breed. It was more. More savage, more chilling. More real.

It swiped out, razor claws sweeping, and sent one of the dogs tumbling off into the snow on a high-pitched yelp. Then it rose up on its hind legs. Taller than a man, wide as the moon. Blood on its fangs and its eyes mad with battle.

He fired as it charged, fired again as it got down on all fours to rush them. He heard the explosion of Meg’s rifle, once, twice, booming through his own fire. It screamed, it seemed like a scream to him, as blood flew, as it matted its fur.

It fell less than three feet from where they stood, and it shook the ground under Nate’s feet.

Meg shoved the rifle at Nate and jumped down to run to the dog who limped toward her. “You’re all right, you’re okay. Let me see. Just grazed you, didn’t he? You stupid, *stupid* dog. Didn’t I tell you to come?”

Nate stayed where he was a moment, making certain the bear was down for good while Rock sniffed around the body, nosed into the blood.

Then he walked down to where Meg knelt in nothing but a pair of panties and an open shirt. "Get inside, Meg."

"It's not too bad." She was crooning to Bull. "I can fix it. Baited. Baited the house, do you see? Bloody meat." Her eyes were hard stones as she gestured to the chunks of half-eaten meat near the back of the house. "Hung meat, fresh meat at the house, probably at the edge of the woods. Lure the bear in. Bastard. That's what the bastard did."

"Get inside, Meg. You're cold." He pulled her to her feet, felt her trembling. "Take these. I'll get the dog."

She took the guns, whistled for Rock. Inside, she laid the guns on the counter and dashed for a blanket and first-aid supplies. "Lay him on that," she called out when Nate carried the dog in. "Get down with him, keep him quiet. He's not going to like this."

He did as she asked, held the dog's head and said nothing while she cleaned the cuts.

"Not deep, not too deep. Probably scar. War wounds, that's okay. Rock, sit!" she snapped out when he tried to wiggle under her arm to sniff at his companion.

"I'm going to give him a couple of shots here." She took out a hypo, tapped it with a steady hand, squirted out a small stream. "Hold him still."

"We can take him in to Ken."

"It's not that bad. He wouldn't do any more than I can do here. Going to give him this, make him groggy so I can stitch up the deeper cuts. We'll give him an antibiotic after, wrap him up, let him sleep it off."

She pinched a hunk of fur, then slid the needle in. Bull whimpered and rolled his eyes pitifully up at Nate. "Just relax, big guy, you're going to feel better in a minute."

He stroked the dog while Meg started to suture. "You keep all that stuff around the house?"

“Out here, you never know. Maybe you slice your leg or whatever cutting wood, power’s out, roads are blocked, what are you going to do?”

Her brows were knitted as she worked, her voice calm and matter-of-fact. “Can’t depend on getting to a doctor for every damn thing. There now, baby doll, nearly done. We’re going to keep you nice and warm. I’ve got this salve here. It’ll help it heal and keep him from gnawing at it ’cause it tastes foul. Gonna bandage him up. Take him in tomorrow, have him looked at, but it’s not too bad.”

When the dog was sleeping under a blanket with Rock curled beside him, she picked up the wine bottle and drank from it. Now her hands shook violently. “Jesus Christ.”

Nate took the bottle from her, set it carefully aside. Then he gripped her elbows and jerked her an inch off the floor. “Don’t you ever, *ever* do anything like that again.”

“Hey!”

“Look at me. Listen to me.”

She hardly had a choice as his voice was booming, and his face, rigid with fury, engulfed her vision.

“Don’t you ever take a risk like that again.”

“I had to—”

“No, you didn’t. I was here. You didn’t have to go running out of the house, half naked, to take on a grizzly.”

“It wasn’t a grizzly,” she shouted back at him. “It was a black bear.”

He dropped her back on her feet. “Damn it, Meg.”

“I can take care of myself and what’s mine.”

He spun back around, his face so full of rage, she backed up a step. This wasn’t the patient lover; it wasn’t the cold-eyed cop. This was a furious man with enough heat blasting out to boil her alive.

“You’re mine now, so get used to it.”

"I'm not going to stand around and act helpless because—"

"Helpless, my ass. Who wants you to act helpless? There's a big fucking difference between acting helpless and running out of the house in your underwear when you don't know the situation. There's a big damn difference, Meg, when you try to shove me aside by ramming the butt of a rifle in my gut."

"I didn't . . . did I?" Oddly enough it was his full-blown temper that cut hers down to manageable, that allowed her to think again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That was wrong."

She pressed her hands to her face, took several deep breaths until the fear, the anger, the shaky aftermath of both eased.

"Some of the other stuff was probably wrong, but I just reacted. I . . ." She held out a hand, palm out for peace, then picked up her wine again. She sipped slowly to soothe her raw throat.

"My dogs are my partners. You understand you don't hesitate when your partner's in trouble. And I did know the situation. There wasn't time to explain it. And I haven't taken time to tell you it felt . . . all kinds of good and different things to know you were beside me out there. Even if I didn't act like it, I knew you were there, and it mattered."

Her voice thickened so she pressed the fingers of her free hand to her eyes until she had it under control. "You want to be mad, I won't hold it against you. But maybe you could wait to finish yelling at me until I get some clothes on. I'm cold."

"I guess I'm finished." He stepped toward her, pulled her into his arms and held on like fury.

"Look at that. I'm shaking." She burrowed into him. "I wouldn't be if you weren't here to hang on to."

"Let's get you dressed." He kept an arm around her until they were in the living room, then he walked over to put another log on the fire.

"I've got a need to take care of you," he said quietly. "I'm not going to drown you in it."

"I know. I've got a need to take care of myself, but I'll try not to shove you away with it."

"Okay. Now, explain about the baiting."

"Bears like to eat. That's why you bury or seal your scraps when you're camping, why you carry any food supplies in sealed containers and hang them up, away from camp. That's why you build a cache for supplies and have it on stilts, and the ladder you use to get up to them comes down every time you do."

She pulled on her pants, scooped a hand through her hair. "Bears get a scent of something to eat, they mosey on over to snack, and they can climb a ladder. You'd be surprised what can climb a ladder. They'll even wander into town, a populated area, to get into garbage cans, bird feeders, and so on. You might have one try to get in the house, just to see if there's something more interesting to eat inside. Mostly you can scare them off. Sometimes you can't."

She buttoned up her shirt, edged closer to the fire. "There's meat on the ground out there, and I bet we'll find some shreds of the plastic it was in. Somebody put it there, hoping to bring a bear in toward the house, and you can be pretty confident that kind of baiting will work this time of year. Bears are just waking up. They're hungry."

"Someone laid the bait, hoping you'd step into the trap."

"No, not me. You." And that had her stomach churning. "Think about it. Had to be baited sometime today, before I got back. If someone'd tried that while we were here, we'd have heard the dogs carrying on. Say you were out here alone tonight, like you were last night, what would you have done if you'd heard the dogs start up like we did?"

"I'd've gone out to see why, but I'd have gone out armed."

“With your handgun,” she said with a nod. “Maybe you can take down a bear with a handgun, or scare it off with one—if you’re lucky enough and get off enough shots before it takes it out of your hand and eats it. Mostly, you’re just going to make it mad. And a bear who’s busy chowing down or fighting a couple of angry huskies? He’d have gotten through my dogs, Nate. Odds are they’d have done some damage before it ripped them to pieces. And if you’d been out there alone with that 9mm, you might have been ripped to pieces, too. Odds are. Wounded bear, enraged bear, he’d come right through the door after you, too. That’s what someone was counting on.”

“If so, I must be making someone very nervous.”

“That’s what cops do, don’t they?” She rubbed a hand over his knee when he sat beside her. “Whoever it was wanted you dead or in a world of hurt. And didn’t mind sacrificing my dogs to do it.”

“Or you, if things had gone differently.”

“Or me. Well, he’s got me pissed off now.” She patted his knee before she rose to pace. “Killing my father, that hurt me. But he’d been gone a long time, and I could deal. Tracking him down, tossing him in a cell, that’d be enough. But nobody comes after my dogs.”

She turned and saw that half smile was back. “Or after the guy I’m going to marry, especially before he’s bought me a really expensive ring. You still mad at me?”

“Not so much. I will always have that image of you standing out there in your red panties with that red shirt open and blowing back in the wind while you held a rifle. But after a while, it’s going to be erotic instead of terrifying.”

“I really do love you. It’s the damndest thing. Okay.” She scrubbed her hands hard over her face. “We can’t leave that carcass out there. It’ll bring all kinds of other interested visitors, and the dogs will be rolling

over it in the morning. I'm going to call Jacob, have him help me deal with it, and he can see if he can find any signs from whoever left the bait."

She saw his face, stepped forward.

"I can see your brain working. Jacob was here today and with bear meat. He wouldn't have done this, Nate. I can give you several specific reasons why, over and above the fact that he's a good man who loves me. First, he'd never put my dogs in jeopardy. He loves them and respects them too much. Second, he knew I was coming home tonight. I touched base with him after I did the engine work. Third, if he wanted you dead, he'd just jam a knife in your heart and bury you somewhere you'd never be found. Simple, clean, straightforward. This? This was sneaky and cowardly and not a little desperate."

"I agree with you. Call him."

IN HIS OFFICE THE NEXT MORNING, Nate studied his most recently collected evidence. Some scraps of white plastic, which looked like the same material used at The Corner Store to bag produce, some scraps of meat he'd sealed in an evidence bag.

And a silver earring.

Had he seen it before? That earring? There was something on the fringes of his memory, a finger tap on the brain, trying to wake it up.

A single silver earring. Men wore them more now than they once had. Fashions changed and evolved, and even a suit wouldn't be smirked at for sporting an earring these days.

But sixteen years ago? Not as mainstream, not as common for a man. More a hippy sort of thing or a musician, an artist, a biker, a rebel. And this wasn't a discreet little stud or a tiny sporty hoop, not with that cross dangling.

It made more of a statement.

It wasn't Galloway's. He'd checked the photographs, and Galloway had died with a hoop in his ear. Best he could tell, using a magnifying glass, Galloway's other ear had been unpierced.

He'd check with the ME to be sure.

But he knew what he was looking at belonged to the murderer.

The little back piece—what the hell did they call that—was missing. He could see, in his mind's eye, that faceless figure, rearing back with the ax, and the little earring falling off, unnoticed. Bringing the ax down, bringing it home.

Had he stood there, watching Galloway's shocked face as his friend had slid bonelessly down that icy wall? Had he stood there, staring, studying? Shocked himself or pleased? Thrilled or appalled? Hardly mattered, Nate thought. The job was done.

Take the pack, check it? No point in leaving supplies *or* the money, if the money was in there. Have to be practical. Have to survive.

How long before he'd noticed the loss of the earring? Too late to go back and check, too insignificant a detail to worry about.

But it was always the details that built the case—and the cage.

"Nate?"

Still holding the earring, he reached for his intercom. "Yeah?"

"Jacob's here to see you," Peach told him.

"Send him back."

He didn't get up but instead leaned back in his chair as Jacob came in and closed the door behind him. "Expected you to come by this morning."

"There are things I want to say I didn't want to say last night in front of Meg."

Jacob wore a buckskin shirt over faded jeans, and the thin string of

beads around his neck held a polished, brown stone. His silvered hair was drawn back in a long tail. His exposed lobes sported no jewelry.

"Have a seat," Nate invited, "and say them."

"I'll stand and say them. You'll use me to finish this, or I'll do what I have to do on my own. But this will end." He stepped forward, and for the first time in their acquaintance, Nate saw undisguised rage on Jacob's face.

"She is *my* child. She's been mine more years than she was Pat's. This is my daughter. Whatever you think about me, whatever you wonder, you will *know* that. I'll be a part of finding who put her in danger last night, one way or the other."

Nate rocked forward in his chair, rocked back again. "You want a badge?"

He saw Jacob's hands ball into fists, then open again, slowly, just as slowly as the rage went under some enigmatic mask. "No. I don't think I'd like a badge. Too heavy for me."

"Okay, we'll keep my . . . use of you unofficial. That suit you better?"

"It does."

"These people you were asking questions of, ones who told you about the money? Is it possible wind of that blew back here to Lunacy?"

"More than possible. People talk, especially white people."

"And if that wind blew, it wouldn't be a stretch to conclude, due to your connection to Galloway and to Meg, that you'd pass the information to me."

Jacob shrugged.

"Why not just shut you down before you got it to me?"

And now Jacob smiled. "I've lived a very long time and am very hard to kill. You haven't and aren't. This business last night was sloppy and stupid. Why not just shoot you in the head when you're alone by the lake? Weigh you down with stones and sink you. I would."

"I appreciate that. He doesn't use the direct approach. No, not even with Galloway," Nate said as Jacob looked at the board. "That was a moment of madness, of greed, of opportunity. Maybe all three. It wasn't planned."

"No." Considering now, Jacob nodded. "There are easier ways to kill a man than climbing a mountain."

"One stroke of the ax," Nate continued. "One. Afterward, he's too . . . delicate to yank it out again, to dispose of the body. That would be too direct, too involved. Same with Max. Stage a suicide. Max was responsible as he is—he can look at it that way. The dog? Just a dog, a cover, a distraction—and an indirect slap at Steven Wise. He won't come at me face-to-face."

He pushed the earring across the desk. "Recognize that?"

Jacob frowned over it. "A bauble, a symbol. Not a Native one. We have our own."

"I think the killer lost it sixteen years ago. Long forgotten. But he'll remember it if he sees it again. I've seen it before. Somewhere." Nate picked it up, let the cross twirl. "Somewhere."

HE CARRIED IT WITH HIM. It wasn't strictly procedure, but Nate kept the earring in his pocket as he went about town business.

He said nothing to anyone about the incident at Meg's, and he asked her and Jacob to do the same. A little game with a killer, he thought.

In that burgeoning spring while the days lengthened and the green overtook the white, he went about his duties, talked with the people of his town, listened to their troubles and complaints.

And checked the earlobes of all the men he came in contact with.

"They can close up," Meg told him one night.

“What?”

“The holes in your ear—or wherever you decide to skewer yourself.” She danced her fingers lightly over his penis.

“Please.” He couldn’t quite submerge the shudder and made her laugh. Wickedly.

“I’ve heard it can really add something to the . . . thrust.”

“Don’t even think. What do you mean, close up?”

“They can heal up. If you haven’t had it for long, and you quit wearing anything in it, they”—she made a slurping sound—“close up again.”

“Son of a bitch. Are you sure?”

“I used to have four in this one.” She tugged her left ear. “Got an urge and jabbed a third and fourth hole in.”

“Yourself? You did it yourself?”

“Sure. What am I, a weenie?” She rolled over on him, and since she was naked, his mind wandered away from the conversation before he dragged it back again.

“I wore four for a few weeks, but it started to be too much trouble, so I ditched the extras. And they closed up.” She reached over to turn on the light, then angled her head. “See?”

“You could’ve told me that before I looked at earlobes all over town and made notes on who had piercings.”

She rubbed his earlobe. “You might look cute with one.”

“No.”

“I could do it for you.”

“Absolutely no. Not in the ear or anywhere else.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Yeah, that’s me. I’ve got to rethink this now, since my short list is no longer viable.”

She rose up to straddle him, to take him in. “Think later.”

. . .

HE DROPPED INTO THE LODGE and spotted Hopp and Ed having a meeting over buffalo salad. He stopped at their booth. "Can I interrupt a minute?"

"Sure, slide in." Hopp made room for him. "We're going over what you'd call fiduciary matters. Gives me a headache and perks Ed here right up. We're trying to figure out how to stretch the budget to building a library. Section off part of the proposed post office for it, at least for now. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a nice idea to me."

"We're agreed on that." Ed dabbed at his lip with a napkin. "But we need a little more elastic in the budget to make the stretch." He winked at Hopp. "I know that's not what you want to hear."

"We get people involved, get donations for materials, for labor. We get books donated or go begging for them. People pull together if you get them excited about a project."

"You can count me in," Nate told them. "If and when. Meanwhile, I got a fiduciary type of question myself. I was going to drop by to see you, Ed. Bank question, goes back a few years, so it may tax your memory."

No hole in his ear, Nate thought as Ed nodded.

"When it comes to banking, my memory's long. Hit me."

"It deals with Galloway."

"Pat?" He lowered his voice, glancing around the restaurant. "Maybe we shouldn't discuss this here. Charlene."

"It won't take long. I've got a source saying Galloway got himself a good pile of cash playing poker when he was in Anchorage."

"Pat loved to play poker," Hopp commented.

“That he did. I played with him more than once. Small stakes, though,” Ed added. “I can’t imagine him winning much.”

“Source says otherwise. So I was wondering, did he send any money back, into his account here in town, before he went on that climb?”

“Not that I recall. Not even a paycheck. We were a smaller operation in those days, as I told you before.” His eyes narrowed in thought. “Though by the time Pat left, we’d built an actual vault and had two part-time tellers. Still I was involved in nearly every transaction.”

Rubbing his chin, he sat back. “Pat didn’t bother with the finances. He wasn’t one to come into the bank to deposit, or withdraw for that matter.”

“How about when he left town for work? Did he usually send money back?”

“Now, he did, sometimes. I do remember Charlene coming down once, even twice, every week—more than two months—checking to see if he had anything direct deposited after he left that time. If there was any big money, which I tend to doubt, he might’ve banked it there, or just as likely stuffed it in a shoe box.”

“I’ll go with Ed on the second,” Hopp said. “Pat never did think twice about money.”

“People who come from it usually don’t.” Ed gave a shrug. “Then there’s us,” he said with a wink at Hopp, “who have to do some finagling if we want to have a town library.”

“I’ll let you get back to that.” Nate scooted out. “Thanks for the time.”

“He ought to spend his time on town business.” Ed shook his head as he lifted his coffee.

“I guess he figures this is.”

“We need May Day, Hopp, if we’re going to get that library.”

“Agreed. So far he’s keeping it low-key. He’s just going to have to see

it through until he's satisfied it was Max who killed Pat. Tenacious Ignatious," she said. "That's how I'm thinking of him these days. Boy just won't let go. It's a good quality to have in your chief of police."

JACOB HAD BEEN RIGHT: Some people wouldn't talk to cops. Even with Jacob there, Nate hadn't been able to squeeze any more juice out of the trip he took to Anchorage.

Not that it was a wasted trip.

He hadn't gone to see Coben. He should have, he admitted as Jacob skimmed over the lake. He should have taken the earring in, but he hadn't.

He wanted a little more time there. A little more time to pull it together.

He let his shoulders relax when the plane was on the water. "Thanks for going with me. You want me to secure the plane? You coming in?"

"You know how?"

"It's a boat with wings at this point. I know how to secure a boat to dock."

Jacob nodded toward Meg, who walked down to meet them. "You have other business."

"Yeah, I do. See you later then."

He stepped out onto the flotation, praying he didn't lose his balance and mortify himself by pitching into the lake. But he stepped safely on one end of the dock just as Meg stepped on the other.

"Where's he going?" she called out, when Jacob glided away.

"Said there was other business." He reached for her hand. "You're back early."

"No, you're back late. It's nearly eight."

He looked up at the sky, still bright as noon. "I'm not used to it yet. Woman, where's my supper?"

"Ha ha ha. You can throw a couple of moose burgers on the grill."

"Moose burgers, a personal favorite."

"You get anything more in Anchorage?"

"No, at least not investigationaly. And how was your day?"

"Actually, I was in Anchorage briefly myself. And since I was there, I happened to wander into this shop where they happened to have wedding dresses."

"Really?"

"Stop grinning. I'm still firm on not wanting a big, fancy deal. Just a wild party right here at the house. But I decided I do want a kick-ass dress. One that'll make your eyes pop out."

"Did you find it?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out." She stepped up on the porch ahead of him, then gave him a smacking kiss. "I like my moose burger well-done and the bun lightly toasted."

"Check. But before we dine, I did a little marriage shopping today myself."

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah." He pulled the ring box out of his pocket. "Guess what this is."

"Mine. Gimme."

He flipped the top open and had the pleasure of seeing *her* eyes pop when she saw the full-cut solitaire flanked by sparkling channel cuts on a platinum band.

"Holy shit!" She grabbed it out of the box, held it aloft and jumped off the porch. She danced around the yard, crowing out sounds he took as approval.

"Does that mean you like it?"

"Sparkly!" She spun laughing circles all the way back to him. "This, Chief Burke, is a ring. How much did it set you back?"

"Jesus, Meg."

She kept laughing, like a loon. "I know, tacky. And I don't really want to know. It's a killer, Nate, an absolute killer. It's stupid and extravagant, so it's perfect. Absolutely perfect."

She held it out, then dropped it into his open palm. "Okay, put it on me, and hurry up."

"Excuse me, but can we have a little dignity for this part?"

"I think we've already crossed the point of no return on that." She wiggled her fingers. "Come on. Give it up."

"Good thing I didn't wrack my brain trying to come up with something poetic to say when I did this." He slipped it on her finger where it sparkled insanely. "Be careful you don't put your eye out with that thing."

"When do I go splat?"

"Sorry?"

"I just keep falling more and more in love with you. When do I finally hit bottom and go splat?" She framed his face in the way that always made his heart roll over in his chest. "I don't know if I'm perfect for you, Nate, but you sure as hell are for me."

He took the hand that wore the ring and kissed it. "If and when we splat, we'll do it together. Let's go make moose burgers."



THIRTY

“WHAT ARE THESE?”

Meg looked at the ring of keys in Nate’s hand, deliberately furrowed her brow. “Those would be keys.”

“Why do you need so many keys?”

“Because there are so many locks? Is this a quiz?”

He jingled them in his palm while she continued to give him a sunny, innocent smile. “Meg, you don’t even lock your doors half the time. What are all these keys about?”

“Well . . . There are times a person needs to get into a place, and hey, that place is locked. Then she would need a key.”

“And this place that, hey, is locked, wouldn’t be the property of that person. Would that be correct?”

“Technically. But no man is an island, and it takes a village, and so on. We’re all one in the Zen universe.”

“So these would be Zen keys?”

“Exactly. Give them back.”

“I don’t think so.” He closed his fist around them. “You see, even in the Zen universe I’d hate to arrest my wife for unlawful entry.”

“I’m not your wife yet, buddy. Did you have a search warrant for those?”

"They were in plain sight. No warrant necessary."

"Gestapo."

"Delinquent." He cupped her chin in his free hand and kissed her. Opening the rear hatch of his four-wheel, he called the dogs. "Come on, boys. Let's go for a ride."

She refused to leave the dogs alone at the house now. They went with her, to Jacob's, or on a day when jobs made that inconvenient, to the run at The Lodge.

He gave the still-healing Bull a little help on the jump.

"Fly safe," he said to Meg.

"Yeah, yeah."

With her hands jammed in her pockets, she headed down to the plane, then turned and walked backward. "I can get more keys, you know. I have my ways."

"You sure do," Nate murmured.

He waited, as was his habit, for her to take off. He liked to watch her glide from water to air and to stand while the stillness erupted with her engines. While he did, he let himself think of nothing but her, of them, of the life they were building.

She was already working in what he'd discovered—after the snow had melted—was a pair of flower beds flanking her porch. She talked of columbine and trollius and of the wolf urine she sprinkled around to protect them from moose.

Her delphiniums, she promised, would reach near ten feet in the long days of summer.

Imagine that, he thought. Imagine Meg Galloway, bush pilot, bear killer, illegal-entry addict, tending a garden. She claimed her dahlias were as big as hubcaps.

He wanted to see them. Wanted to sit on the porch with her on some

endless summer night with the sun ruling the sky and her flowers spread out in front of the house.

Simple, he thought. Their life could be made up of thousands of simple moments. And still never be ordinary.

Her plane rose up, and up, a little red bird in a vast, blue sky. And he smiled, felt the quick lift in his heart when she dipped her wings, right then left, in salute.

When there was stillness again, he climbed in the car with the dogs. And thought of other things.

Maybe it was foolish to pin so much on an earring, a small piece of silver, and an unsubstantiated claim that Galloway had possessed an undisclosed amount of cash.

But he'd seen that earring before, and he'd remember. Sooner or later, he'd remember. And money was no stranger to murder.

He let it sift through his head as he drove into town. Galloway had possessed ready cash and a beautiful woman. Tried-and-true motives for murder. And in a place like this, women were rare commodities.

The parade committee had already started hanging the bunting for May Day. It wasn't the red, white and blue usual for small-town parades. Why would it be usual in Lunacy? Instead banners and bunting were a rainbow of blues, yellows, greens.

He saw an eagle perched on a swag of it, as if granting his approval.

Along the main street, people were sprucing up their homes and businesses for spring. Pots and hanging baskets of pansies and curly kale—both of which he'd learned didn't mind a chill—were already set out. Porches and shutters sported fresh coats of paint. Motorcycles and scooters replaced snowmobiles.

Kids started to ride bikes to school, and he saw more Doc Martens and Timberlands than bunny boots.

And still the mountains that ringed the shimmers of spring, that rose into a sky that held the light for fourteen hours a day, clung relentlessly to winter.

Nate parked, led the dogs to the run. They gave him pitiful looks, their tails sinking between their legs as they trudged inside.

"I know, I know, it sucks." He crouched, sticking his fingers through the chain link so they could be licked. "Let me catch the bad guy, then your mom won't worry so much, and you can stay home and play."

They whined when he walked away and gave him a bellyful of guilt.

He went in through the lobby and tracked down Charlene in her office.

"I hired three college students for the summer." She gave her computer a pat. "I'm going to need them with the bookings we've got."

"That's good."

"Local guides always take on a few, too. The place'll be hopping with pretty college boys by June." There was a glitter in her eyes as she said it, but to Nate, it looked more like defiance than anticipation.

"That'll keep us all busy. Charlene . . ." He closed the door. "I'm going to ask you something, and you're not going to like it."

"Since when has that stopped you?"

No way to be delicate, he decided. "Who's the first person you slept with after Galloway left?"

"I don't kiss and tell, Nate. If you'd ever taken me up on it, you'd know that."

"This isn't gossip, Charlene, and it isn't a game. Does it matter to you who killed Pat Galloway?"

"Of course, it does. Do you know how hard it is to plan his funeral, knowing he's still in some morgue and *not* knowing exactly when I can bring him home? I ask Bing every other day when he thinks the ground'll be soft enough to dig. To dig my Pat's grave."

She snatched two tissues out of the box on her desk, sniffled into them.

"When my mother buried my father," Nate said, "she walked around the house like a ghost for a month. Longer, I guess. She did everything she had to do—like you are, but you couldn't reach her. You couldn't touch her. She went away somewhere. I was never able to reach her again."

Charlene blinked at tears, lowered the tissues. "That's so sad."

"You haven't done that. You haven't let it make a ghost out of you. Now I'm asking you to help me. Who moved on you, Charlene?"

"Who didn't? I was young and fine to look at. You should've seen me back then."

Something stirred, he reached out to grab the tail of it, when she exploded.

"And I was *alone!* I didn't know he was dead. If I'd known, I wouldn't have been so quick to . . . I was hurt and I was mad, and when the men came swarming around, why shouldn't I have taken my pick? Taken lots of picks?"

"There's no blame here."

"I slept with John first." Her shoulder jerked, and she tossed the tissue into her pink wastebasket. "I knew he had a crush on me, and he was so sweet about it. Attentive," she said, wistfully now. "So I went to him. But not only him. I filled up on it. I broke hearts and I broke up marriages. And I didn't care."

She steadied herself and, for once, looked quiet, almost thoughtful. "Nobody killed Pat because of me. Or if they did, they wasted their time. Because I never cared about any of them. I never gave them anything I didn't take back. He isn't dead because of me. If he is, I swear, I don't think I can live with it."

"He's not dead because of you." He walked around her, behind her, and laid his hands on her shoulders to rub gently. "He's not."

She lifted a hand, closed it over his. "I kept waiting for him to come back. For him to see I wasn't pining for him—and want me again. I swear to God, Nate, I think I waited for that until you and Meg went up there. Until you found him, I was waiting for him."

"He would've come back." He tightened his grip when she shook her head. "You get to know the victim when you do what I do. You get inside them and understand them better, a lot of the time better than people who knew them living. He'd have come back."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," she said after a moment. "Especially somebody who's not trying to get in my pants."

He gave her shoulders a pat, then took the earring out of his pocket. "Do you recognize this?"

"Hmm." She sniffled again, flicked her finger over her lashes to dry them. "It's sort of pretty, but I don't know, male. Not my kind of thing. I like splashier."

"Could it have been Pat's?"

"Pat's? No, he didn't have anything like that. No crosses. He didn't go for religious symbols."

"Have you ever seen it before?"

"I don't think so. Wouldn't remember if I had, I guess. It's not much of a thing."

HE DECIDED TO START showing it around, get reactions. Since Bing was having breakfast in The Lodge, Nate walked by his table, let the earring dangle from his fingers. "Lose this?"

Bing barely gave it a glance before staring back into Nate's eyes. "Last time I told you I lost something, I got nothing but grief."

"I like to get things back to their rightful owner."

"It ain't mine."

"Know whose it is?"

"Don't spend a lot of time looking at people's ears. And I don't want to spend any more time looking at your face."

"Nice to see you again, too, Bing." He put the earring away. Bing had trimmed his beard an inch or so, Nate noticed and figured it was his warm-weather look. "February 1988. I can't find anybody around who can tell me, absolutely, you were here through that month. Have found a couple who think maybe you weren't."

"People should mind their own, like I do."

"Max was gone, and I hear you had a hankering, let's say, for Carrie back then."

"No more than any other woman."

"Seems like a good time to have moved in on her some. You strike me as a man who doesn't let opportunities go to waste."

"She wasn't interested, so why waste my time? Shit. Easier to find one and pay the hourly rate. Maybe I went down to Anchorage that winter. There was a whore named Kate I had some transactions with. So'd Galloway. His business."

"Whoring Kate?"

"Yeah. Dead now. Damn shame." He shrugged it off as he ate. "Dropped dead of a heart attack between johns. They say, anyway." He leaned forward. "I didn't kill that dog."

"You say, anyway, and you seem more concerned with that than with two dead men."

"Men can take care of themselves better than an old blind dog. Maybe I was in the city some that winter. Maybe I ran into Galloway going through Kate's swinging door. Didn't mean a damn to me."

"You talk to him?"

"I had other things on my mind. So did he. Poker game."

Nate lifted his eyebrows as if mildly surprised, mildly interested. "Is that so? You're remembering a lot of details all of a sudden."

"You're in my face all the damn time, aren't you? Spoiling my appetite, so I've been thinking on it."

"You get in on the poker game?"

"I went for a whore, not to gamble."

"Did he mention plans to climb No Name?"

"He was yanking his pants up, Christ's sake, and I was about to yank mine down. We didn't chat. Said he was riding a streak, took a break to bang Kate and was heading back. Kate said something about the place being lousy with Lunatics, and that was fine with her. Business was good. Then we got down to it."

"Did you see Galloway again, after your business was concluded?"

"Don't remember seeing him." Bing stabbed at his food. "Maybe he came in the bar, maybe he didn't. I headed on up to see Ike Transky, trapper I knew used to have a place outside Skwenta, bunked with him a few days and did some hunting, little ice fishing. Came back here."

"Transky back you up on that?"

Bing's eyes went hard as agate beads. "Don't need anybody to back up what I say. Dead now, anyway. Died in '96."

Convenient, Nate thought as he walked out. The two people Bing named as potential alibis were dead or gone. Or you could turn the prism and look at it from a different facet.

Stolen gloves, a stolen knife, both left near a dead dog. Property of a man who'd seen and spoken to Galloway.

It wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine Galloway going back to that game or stopping for a drink with friends.

Guess who I just ran into on his way to bang Whoring Kate? Small

world, Nate thought. Small, old world. If Bing was telling the truth, it might be the killer was worried Galloway had mentioned who else from Lunacy was playing poker and paying for whores.

Nate decided to make a few stops, dangling his single piece of evidence, on the way to the station.

Later in the day, he showed it to Otto.

The deputy shrugged. "Doesn't mean anything to me."

A coolness had come between them, a stiff formality Nate regretted. But it couldn't be helped.

"I always thought the Maltese cross was more military than religious."

Otto never blinked. "Marines I served with didn't wear earrings."

"Well." As he had at every stop through the day, Nate put the earring back in his pocket, buttoned it.

"It's going around that you're showing that thing to everybody. People are wondering why their chief of police is spending time on a lost earring."

"Full service," Nate said easily.

"Chief," Peach said from her counter, "we've got a report of a bear in Ginny Mann's garage, off Rancor. Her husband's out with a hunting party," Peach added. "She's home alone with her two-year-old."

"Tell her we're coming. Otto?"

WHEN THEY PULLED ONTO the pitted lane a mile and a half north of town, Otto flicked a glance at Nate. "I sure hope you don't plan to have me drive this thing around like a maniac while you lean out the damn window there and shoot warning shots over some bear's idiot head."

"We'll see what we see. What the hell is a bear doing in a garage?"

"He's not fixing a carburetor." At Nate's snicker, Otto grinned. Then sobered again as he remembered what was between them.

“Somebody forgot and left the door open, most likely. They might have a can full of dog food or bird food in there. Or the dumbass bear went in to see if there was anything interesting.”

When they pulled up in front of the two-story cabin with attached garage, Nate saw the garage door was indeed open. He didn't know if the bear was responsible for the mess he could see inside or if the Manns just pitched things in there like it was the town dump.

Ginny opened the front door. Her red hair was piled up on her head, and her loose overshirt and hands were splattered with paint. “He went around back. He's been crashing around inside there for twenty minutes. I thought he'd just go on, but I was afraid he'd try to get through the door to the house.”

“Stay inside, Ginny.” Nate ordered.

“You get a look at him?” Otto called out.

“I got a look at him through the front when he lumbered up.” Behind her there was the sound of insane barking and the wail of a toddler. “I had the dog inside and was upstairs working in the studio when Roger started carrying on. Woke the baby. I'm about to go crazy from the noise. Brown bear. Didn't look full-grown but big enough.”

“Bears are curious,” Otto commented as they checked their rifles and started around the side of the garage. “If he's a young one, he was likely just poking around and he'll run off quick enough when he sees us.”

Around back, Nate could see the Manns had roped off a patch of ground for a garden. Apparently the bear had tromped through it coming or going and had spent some time beating up a plastic crate full of newspapers and mail-order catalogs.

Nate scanned and then gestured when he spotted a brown rump through the trees.

“There he goes.”

“Better give him a little scare, get him running. Discourage him from coming back.” Otto aimed the rifle skyward, fired two rounds. And Nate watched, with some amusement, as the bear hustled its fat rump and ran.

He stood watching its progress beside a man who was on his list of suspects.

“That was easy enough.”

“More often than not, it is.”

“Sometimes it’s not. Meg and I had to take one down the other night at her place.”

“Is that what got at her dog? I heard her dog got clawed up some.”

“Yeah. It would’ve gotten at us, too, if we hadn’t killed it first. Somebody baited the house.”

Otto’s eyes narrowed into slits. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about somebody hanging meat, fresh, bloody meat, in thin plastic bags, on Meg’s house.”

Otto’s mouth went tight, then he turned sharply away, paced off several steps. Nate rested his hand on the butt of his weapon. “You’re asking if it was me?” Otto strode back, stood toe-to-toe with Nate. “You want to know if I’d do something that cowardly, that vicious? If I’d do something that could get two people ripped to pieces? And one of them a woman?”

He jabbed his finger into Nate’s chest. Twice. “I’ll take you tossing my name into the hat when it comes to Galloway, even when it comes to Max. It galls me you’d toss it in there over Yukon, but I swallowed it, but I’ll be goddamned if I’ll take this. I was a Marine. I know how to kill a man if I need to. I know how to do it quick, and I know plenty of places I could get rid of a body where nobody on this earth would find it.”

“That’s what I figured. So I’m asking you, Otto, because you know the people around here, who’d stoop that low?”

He trembled. The rage was still on him, Nate could see. He had the rifle in his hand, but even in temper, it was pointed at the ground. "I don't know. But he doesn't deserve to live."

"The earring I showed you belongs to him."

Interest won over the anger in his eyes. "You found it out at Meg's?"

"No. In Galloway's cave. So here's what we're going to think about. Who did Galloway like and trust who could handle a winter climb? Who gained something by his death? Who wore this?" he added, patting his pocket. "Who considered himself a badass back then, and could leave town for a couple of weeks without anyone commenting?"

"You're letting me back in?"

"Yeah. Let's go tell Ginny the coast is clear."

IT WAS A TOSS-UP who was more surprised when Meg swung by to pick up her dogs. She herself or Charlene, who was caught red-handed feeding the dogs table scraps.

"Didn't see why it should go to waste. These dogs hate being penned up."

"It's just until Bull's fully healed."

They stood there, awkwardly, while the dogs ate.

"Do you know what got at him?" Charlene asked after a moment.

"Bear."

"Well, God. He's lucky he only got a few scrapes." Charlene crouched and made kissing noises at Bull. "Poor baby."

"I always forget you like dogs. You never keep one."

"I've got enough to look after around here." She glanced over, and Meg's ring caught the sun and shot light. "I heard about that, too."

She gripped Meg's hand, pulling it up under her nose as she rose.

“Joanna at the clinic got a load of it, told Rose and Rose told me. Seems I might have heard about it from you. He really stepped up to the plate, didn’t he?”

“Lucky me.”

“Yeah, lucky you.” Charlene let Meg’s hand go. She started to walk away, stopped. “Lucky him, too.”

Meg said nothing for a moment. “I’m waiting for the shot.”

“No shot. You look good together, better together than you look otherwise. If you’re going to go and marry somebody, it might as well be somebody you look good with.”

“How about somebody who makes me happy.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Okay. Okay,” Meg repeated.

“Um. Maybe I could give you a party. Like an engagement party.”

Meg dipped her hands into the pockets of her jean jacket. “We’re not going to wait very long. Doesn’t seem like we’d need a party when we’ll only be engaged about a month.”

“Well. Whatever.”

“Charlene,” Meg said before she could leave. “Maybe you could help with the wedding thing.” She watched pleasure, and surprise, run over Charlene’s face. “I don’t want fancy, just something out at the house, but I want a party with it. A big one. You’re good at putting those things together.”

“I could do that. Even if you don’t want fancy, you need good food, lots of liquor. And it should be pretty. Flowers and decorations. We could talk about it.”

“All right.”

“There’s . . . there’s something I have to do now. Maybe we could talk about it tomorrow.”

"Tomorrow's good. Maybe since they've just eaten, I could leave the dogs here a little while, pick up some supplies and things."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Charlene went in quickly before she could change her mind. She went straight up to John's room, knocked.

"It's open."

He sat at his cramped, little desk but stood when she came in. "Charlene. Sorry, I'm grading papers. I really need to get this done."

"Don't go." She leaned back against the door. "Please don't go."

"I can't stay, so I have to go. I've turned in my resignation. I'm helping Hopp find a replacement for me."

"There's no replacement for you, John, whatever you think about . . . about the other men. I've been bad to you. I knew you loved me, but I didn't let myself care. I liked knowing there was somebody who was there, whenever I needed him, but I didn't let myself care."

"I know. I know that all too well, Charlene. I've finally got the belly to deal with it."

"Please let me say this." Eyes pleading, she crossed her hands over her breasts. "I'm scared, and I've got to get it out before I run out of courage. I liked having men want me, seeing that look in their eyes. I liked taking them to bed, especially the young ones. So I could believe, in the dark, when their hands are on me in the dark, I haven't seen forty yet."

She touched her face now. "I hate getting older, John, seeing new lines in the mirror every day. As long as men want me, I can pretend the lines aren't there. I've been scared and angry a long time, and I'm tired."

She took a step forward. "Please don't go, John. Please don't leave me. You're the only one since Pat I could rest with, feel quiet with. I don't know if I love you, but I want to. If you stay, I'll try."

"I'm not Karl Hidel, Charlene. And I can't settle anymore. I can't

sit in here with a book for comfort when you've taken someone else to bed."

"There won't be anyone else. There won't be other men, I swear. If you'll just stay and give me a chance. I don't know if I love you," she said again, "but I know thinking about being without you's breaking my heart."

"That's the first time in more than sixteen years you've ever come in this room and talked to me. Said anything real to me. It's a long time to wait."

"Too long? Tell me it's not too long."

He crossed to her, put his arms around her, his cheek to the top of her head. "I don't know. I don't think either one of us knows. So, I guess we'll have to wait and see."

NATE PINNED HIS BADGE on a khaki shirt that carried the Lunacy PD symbol on the sleeve. He'd been informed by her honor the mayor that May Day required a more official look.

When he strapped on his gun, Meg made a long *mmmmm*. "Cops are so sexy. Why don't you come back to bed?"

"I've got to go in early. Should already be there. Including the participants, we're expecting close to two thousand in town today. Hopp and Charlene did some major PR."

"Who doesn't love a parade? All right, since you're being so official, give me ten and I'll fly you in."

"It'll take longer for you to do your system's checks and fly there than it will for me to drive it. Besides, you can't get ready in ten."

"Can too, especially if somebody goes down and makes the coffee."

Even as he looked at his watch and sighed, she dashed into the bathroom.

When he came back with two mugs, she was pulling her red shirt over a white scoop-necked tee. "Consider me amazed."

"I know how to budget time, cutie. This way we can have some wedding talk on the way in. I managed to pull the plug on Charlene's notion of renting a pergola and covering it with pink roses."

"What's a pergola?"

"Beats me, but we're not having it. She's majorly bummed because she claims it's not only romantic, but essential for the wedding photos."

"It's nice that the two of you are getting along."

"It won't last, but it makes life marginally easier for the time being." She gulped down coffee. "Two minutes for the face," she said and scooted back into the bathroom.

"She and Big Mike have their heads together on this behemoth wedding cake. I'm giving her her head there. I like cake. We're tangling about the flowers. I'm not being buried in pink roses, but we've agreed on a few things. Like getting a professional photographer. Snapshots are great, but this is a monumental deal, so we go with a pro. Oh, and she says you have to get a new suit."

"I already have a suit."

"She says you have to have a new one, and it has to be gray. Steel gray, not dove gray. Or maybe it was dove gray and not steel gray. I don't know, and I'm tossing you to the wolves on that one, Burke. You argue with her."

"I can buy a suit," he muttered. "I can buy a gray suit. Do I get to pick out my own underwear?"

"Ask Charlene. There, done. Let's go, aren't you ready yet? You're holding up the parade."

She laughed when he made a grab for her and let him chase her down the stairs.

They were at the door when he stopped, when it clicked into place

for him, when that jolt of memory became knowledge. "Snapshot. *Goddamn.*"

"What?" Meg pushed at her hair as he charged back upstairs. "You want a camera? Men. Jesus. And they're always harping about women not being on time."

She trudged back upstairs, then stared in astonishment while he dragged her albums and boxes of photos from the closet to dump them on the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"It's in here. I remember. I'm sure of it."

"What's in there? What are you doing with my pictures?"

"It's in here. Summer picnic? No, no . . . campfire shot. Or . . . damn it."

"Just a minute here. How do you know there's a campfire shot in there or summer picnics or anything else?"

"I snooped. Scold me later."

"You can count on it."

"The earring, Meg. I saw it when I was looking through here. I know I saw it."

She shoved him aside so she could grab a stack. "Who was wearing it? Who did you see?" She scanned pictures, tossed them out like toy airplanes.

"Group shot," he murmured, straining to bring it into focus. "Party shot. Holiday . . . Christmas."

He grabbed the album she reached for and flipped through to the end. "There. Bull's-eye."

"New Year's Eve. They let me stay up. I took that picture myself. I took it."

Her hand trembled as she peeled back the plastic, pulled the photo-

graph free. The edge of the tree was in the corner, the colored lights and balls blurry. She'd gone in close, so it was just the faces, nearly only the faces, though she remembered now that her father had his guitar on his lap.

He'd been laughing, with Charlene pulled tight against him so her cheek was pressed right up against his. Max had mugged his way in from behind the couch, but she'd cut off the top of his head.

But the one who sat on the other side of her father, his head turned slightly as he smiled at someone across the room, was clear.

As was the silver Maltese cross dangling from his ear.

THIRTY-ONE

“IT’S NOT PROOF, Meg, not a hundred percent.”

“Don’t give me that cop bullshit, Burke.” As he drove, she sat with her arms folded tight at her waist, as if holding in pain.

“It’s not bullshit. It’s circumstantial. It’s good, but it’s circumstantial.” His mind worked back, forward, covering the ground. “The earring was handled by at least two people before it came to me. No forensics. It’s a common design, probably thousands of them out there during that time. He could have lost it, given it away, borrowed it himself. The fact that he wore it in a photograph taken more than sixteen years ago doesn’t prove he was on that mountain. A brain-dead defense attorney could smash it in trial.”

“He killed my father.”

Ed holds a grudge. Hopp had told him that, after the run-in with Hawley.

All those connecting lines. Galloway to Max, Galloway to Bing, Galloway to Steven Wise.

You can add more. Woolcott to Max—the concerned old friend helping the widow with the memorial. Woolcott to Bing—implicating

the man who might know, who might remember a casual conversation from sixteen years before.

Hawley's slashed tires and spray-painted truck—payback for the wreck, disguised as childish vandalism.

Money. Ed Woolcott was the money man. What better way to hide a sudden cash windfall than your own bank?

"That bastard Woolcott killed my father."

"That's right. I know it. You know it. He knows it. But building a case is a different thing."

"You've been building a case since January. Piece by step by layer, when the State basically closed it up. I've watched you."

"Let me finish it."

"What do you think I'm going to do?" She squinted against the sun. She'd walked out of the house without her sunglasses, without anything but her own bubbling need to act. "Walk up to him and put a gun in his ear?"

Because he heard it in her voice, the dark grief along with the bright rage, he laid a hand over hers. Squeezed. "Wouldn't put it past you."

"I won't." It took an effort to turn her hand over, to return that connection when it would have been easy to yank it back. Stay alone with the storming emotions. "But I'm going to see his face, Nate. I'm going to be there where I can see his face when you take him in."

The main street was already lined with people staking their claim on position. Folding chairs and coolers stood on curb and sidewalk, many already occupied or in use as people sat and slurped on drinks in plastic cups.

The air was already buzzing with noise, shouts and squeals and laughter spearing up through the blast of music from KLUN.

Trucks offering snow cones, ice cream, hot dogs and other parade food were parked on corners and down side streets. Rainbow bunting waved in the breeze.

Two thousand people, Nate estimated, and a good chunk of them kids. A normal day in Lunacy, he could've walked into the bank and taken Ed quietly in his office.

It wasn't a normal day, in any stretch.

He parked at the station, pulled Meg in with him. "Otto and Peter," he demanded of Peach.

"Out with the horde where *I* should be." Irritation marred her eyes as she smoothed a flowing skirt, the color of daffodils, over her ample hips. "We thought you'd be here before—"

"Call them both in."

"Nate, we've got over a hundred people already lining up on the school grounds. We need—"

"Call them both in!" he snapped. He kept walking, one hand on Meg's arm, into his office. "I want you to stay here."

"No. It's not only stupid and wrong for you to expect that, it's disrespectful."

"He's got a concealed license."

"So do I. Give me a gun."

"Meg, he's already killed three times. He'll do whatever he can to protect himself."

"I'm not something you can bundle away safe."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are. It's your first instinct, but get over it. I won't ask you not to bring your work home or complain when it interferes with my life. I won't ask you to be what you're not. Don't ask that of me. Give me a gun.

I promise I won't use it unless I have to. I don't want him dead. I want him alive. Rotting. I want him healthy so he rots for a long, long time."

"I want to know what's going on." With her hands fisted on her hips, Peach filled the doorway. "I called those boys back, and now we've got no one out there keeping order. A bunch of high school boys have already run a tie-dyed bra up the flagpole, one of the draft horses kicked a tourist who's probably going to sue, and those lamebrain Mackie boys hauled in a keg of Budweiser and are already skunk drunk."

Frustration had the words shooting out like machine-gun fire. "They stole a bunch of balloons, too, and are, right this damn minute, marching up and down the street like fools. We've got reporters here, Nate, we've got media attention, and it just isn't the image we want to project."

"Where's Ed Woolcott?"

"With Hopp at the school by now. They're supposed to ride behind those damn horses. What is going *on*?"

"Call Sergeant Coben, in Anchorage. Tell him I'm taking a suspect in the Patrick Galloway homicide into custody."

"I DON'T WANT TO SPOOK HIM," Nate told his deputies. "I don't want violence or a panic in the kind of crowd we're dealing with. Civilian safety is first order."

"The three of us ought to be able to take him down pretty quick and simple."

"Maybe," Nate acknowledged. "But I'm not risking civilian lives on 'maybe,' Otto. He's not going anywhere. At this point, he has no reason to attempt flight. So we contain him. While we have this parade to deal with, at least one of us will have him in visual contact at all times."

He turned to the corkboard. "We've got Peach's parade route and schedule right here. He comes right after the high school band. That's position six on the program. They'll go from the school into the town proper, down Lunatic and out again. They'll stop here, at Buffalo Inlet, then turn off to come around the back way to the school to off-load. At that point, it won't be as crowded there, and we can take him quietly, with minimal civilian risk."

"One of us can go back up to the school grounds," Peter put in. "After they've gotten to the far end of town. Clear out the civilians."

"That's exactly what I want you to do. We take him quietly, at the end of the route. We bring him back here and let Coben know the suspect is in custody."

"You're just going to turn him over to the State cop?" Otto demanded. "Just here you go, pal, after you've done all the work?"

"It's Coben's case."

"Bullshit. State brushed this off. Didn't want the mess and bother and took the easy way."

"Not entirely true," Nate said. "But regardless, this is how it's done. How it's going to be done."

He didn't need collars and commendations. Not anymore. He just needed to finish the job. From dark to light, he thought. From death to justice.

"Our priorities are to maintain civilian safety and take the suspect into custody. After that, it's Coben's game."

"It's your call. Looks like I'll have to be satisfied to watch Ed shit bricks when you slap the cuffs on him. Bastard killed that poor old dog."

Otto glanced at Meg, colored a little. "And the others. Pat and Max. Just the dog was most recent, that's all."

"It's okay." Meg offered a grim smile. "As long as he pays for all of it, it's okay."

"Well." Otto cleared his throat, stared hard at the maps pinned to the corkboard. "When they go around the back roads, we'll lose visual," he pointed out.

"No, I'll have that covered. A couple of civilian volunteers." He glanced up as Jacob and Bing walked in.

"Said you had a job." Bing scratched his belly. "What's it pay?"

MEG WAITED until he'd dispensed two-ways and sent the men out to take up their initial positions. "And where am I in all this?"

"With me."

"Good enough." She'd pulled her shirt out to cover the holstered .38 at the small of her back.

"They might question why you're not doing the flyby, as scheduled."

"Engine trouble," she said as they started out. "Sorry about that."

The crowd was full of color and noise and cheers with the smell of grilling meat and sugar filling the air. Kids were running around a streamer-and-flower-decorated maypole erected for the event in front of Town Hall. He saw the doors of The Lodge were open, and Charlene was doing a brisk business with those who wanted a more substantial lunch than could be had on the street.

Side streets were barricaded against vehicular traffic. A young couple sat on one of the barricades making out with some enthusiasm while a group of their friends played Hacky Sack in the street behind them. A television crew out of Anchorage was doing a pan of the crowd from the opposite corner.

Tourists shot videos or browsed the folding tables and portable booths where local crafts and jewelry were sold. Beaded leather bags, dream catchers, elaborate Native masks hung on folding screens. Plain and fancy mukluks and handwoven grass baskets ranged over the folding tables or slabs of plywood set on sawhorses.

Though it was warm and sunny, caps and scarves made of qiviut, the underwool of the Arctic musk ox, sold briskly.

The Italian Place sold slices of pizza to go. The Corner Store had a special on disposable cameras and bug dope. A spin rack of postcards stood just outside the door. They ran three for two dollars.

"An enterprising little town," Meg commented as they drove through.

"It is that."

"And after today, a safer one. Thanks to you. Otto nailed that. It's thanks to you, chief."

"Aw shucks, ma'am."

She rubbed a hand over his. "You say that like Gary Cooper, but you've got Clint Eastwood—Dirty Harry years—in your eyes."

"Just don't . . . I'm trusting you."

"You can." There was an icy calm over the rage now. If there was overflow, if that rage bubbled up and cracked the calm, she'd freeze it up again. "I need to be there, but . . . we can say this is your bear to take down."

"Okay."

"It's going to be a beautiful day for a parade," she said after a long breath. "The air's so still, though. Like it's waiting for something." They pulled up at the school. "I guess this is it."

The marching bands were decked out in bright blue uniforms with their brass buttons and instruments gleaming with polish. Horns clashed as different sections practiced, and adults in charge shouted out instructions.

Drums boomed.

The hockey team was already loading up, sticks clacking as they herded into position. They'd lead the parade, with their regional champions' banner hiding the rust on Bing's flatbed truck. A test of the recording and speakers had Queen's "We Are the Champions" pouring out.

"There you are." Hopp, snappy in a suit of hot candy pink, hurried up to him. "Ignatious, I thought we were going to have to run this show without you."

"Handling things in town. You've got a full house."

"And an NBC affiliate to document it." Her cheeks were nearly as pink as her suit with the excitement of it. "Meg, shouldn't you be getting up there?" She pointed skyward.

"Engine's down, Hopp. Sorry."

"Oh. Well, poop. Do you know if Doug Clooney's got his boat out on the river yet? I've been looking for Peach or Deb—they're supposed to be driving herd around here—but everyone's running around like chickens."

"I'm sure he's out there, and Deb's right over there, getting the hockey team settled."

"Oh. Good God, we're starting. Ed! Stop primping for five seconds. I don't know why I let them talk me into riding behind these horses. Don't see why we couldn't have gotten a convertible. It's more dignified."

"But not as much of a spectacle." Ed smiled broadly as he joined them. He wore a navy three-piece suit, bankerly with its chalk stripes and flashy with its paisley tie. "Guess we should've had our chief of police behind the horses."

"Maybe next time," Nate said easily.

"I haven't congratulated you on your engagement." His eyes were watchful on Nate's as he held out a hand.

He considered doing it now, right now. He could have him down and cuffed in under ten seconds.

And three elementary kids rushed between them, chased by another with a plastic gun. A pretty, young majorette in sparkles hurried over to retrieve the missed baton that landed near his feet.

“Sorry! Sorry, Chief Burke. It got away from me.”

“No problem. Thanks, Ed.” He extended his hand to complete the aborted shake and again thought—maybe now.

Jesse ran up, threw his arms around Nate’s knees.

“I get to be in the parade!” the boy shouted. “I get to wear a costume and march right down the street. Are you going to watch me, Chief Nate?”

“Absolutely.”

“Don’t you look handsome,” Hopp commented, and crouched down to Jesse as the boy slipped his hand trustfully into Nate’s.

Not here, Nate told himself. Not now. No one gets hurt today. “Hope you’ll come to the wedding,” he said to Ed.

“Wouldn’t miss it. Couldn’t settle for a local, eh, Meg?”

“He survived a winter. That makes him local enough.”

“I suppose it does.”

“Jesse, you better get back to your group.” Hopp gave him a little pat on the butt, and he ran off, shouting, “Watch me!”

“Help me up into this thing, Ed. We’re about to go.”

“We’re going to walk back down aways,” Nate said as they climbed into the buggy. “Things seem under control here. I want to make sure the Mackies are behaving themselves.”

“Stealing balloons.” Hopp cast her eyes to heaven. “I heard about that.”

Nate took Meg’s hand and strolled away. “Does he know?” she asked him.

"I'm worried. Too many people around, Meg. Too many kids."

"I know." She gave his hands a squeeze as the marching band's boots began to click on the pavement. "It'll be over soon. Doesn't take that long to get from one end of town to the other and back again."

It would be interminable, he knew. With the crowds, the shouts and cheers, the blaring music. An hour, he told himself. An hour tops and he could take him without anyone getting hurt. No need to run into an alley this time, no need to risk the dark.

He kept his stride steady but unrushed as he passed the fringes of the crowd and made his way to the heart of town.

The trio of majorettes danced by waving and tossing their batons to enthusiastic applause. The one who'd nearly beamed him shot Nate a big, toothy smile.

The drum major strutted in his high hat, and the band cut loose with "We Will Rock You."

He spotted Peter at the first intersection and turned his head to press his lips to Meg's ear. "Let's keep walking, down there to the balloon guy. I'll buy you a balloon. They'll pass us, and we'll keep them in sight a little longer."

"A red one."

"Naturally."

End of town circle around, he thought. The hockey team would already be done and moving back into town to see their friends, mix with the crowd. The band would head into the school to change out of their uniforms.

Out of the way. Most everyone out of the way. And Peter there to move any lingerers along.

He stopped by the clown with the orange mop of hair and a fistful of balloons. "Jeez, Harry, is that you in there?"

“Deb’s idea.”

“Well, you look real cute.” Nate angled himself to see the buggy, the crowd. “My girl wants a red one.”

Nate reached for his wallet, listening with half an ear as Harry and Meg debated which shape would do. He watched Peter move down the opposite sidewalk, and as the band marched by, taking the sound with them, he heard the clip-clop of the horses.

Kids squealed and dashed out as Hopp and Ed tossed handfuls of candy. He passed bills to Harry and continued to turn as if watching the spectacle.

And spotted Coben, with his white-blond hair catching the sunlight, in the crowd. So, he saw instantly, did Ed.

“Damn it, damn it, why didn’t he wait?”

Panic streaked across Ed’s face. Seeing it, Nate began to fight his way through the crowd that was massed into a wall along curbside. He couldn’t get there, not in time. He heard the cheers and shouts of the crowd like a tidal wave rushing around him. They applauded when Ed leaped out of the buggy, even when he pulled a gun from under his suit jacket.

As if anticipating a show, they started to part for him as he dashed for the opposite side of the street. Then there were screams and shouts as he knocked people aside, trampled over them when they fell.

Nate heard gunfire as he shoved his way to the street.

“Down! Everybody down!”

He sprinted across the street, leaped over shocked pedestrians. And saw Ed backing down the empty sidewalk behind the barricades, holding a gun to a woman’s head.

“Back away!” he shouted. “You just toss your gun down and back away. I’ll kill her. You know I will.”

“I know you will.” He could hear the shouts behind him and the fad-

ing music as the band marched on without a clue. There were cars and trucks parked at the curb here, and buildings had side doors that would almost certainly be unlocked.

He needed to keep Ed's focus on him, before the man could use his panicked brain enough to think about dragging his hostage into a building.

"Where are you going to go, Ed?"

"Don't you worry about that. You worry about her." He jerked the woman so that the heels of her jogging shoes bumped the sidewalk. "I'll put a bullet in her brain."

"Like you did Max."

"Did what I had to do. That's how you survive here."

"Maybe." There was sweat on Ed's face. Nate could see it glinting in the sunlight. "But you won't walk away from this one. I'll drop you where you stand. You know *I* will."

"You don't throw that gun down, you'll have killed her." Ed dragged the weeping woman back another three feet. "Just like you killed your partner. You're a bleeding heart, Burke. You can't live with that."

"I can." Meg stepped up beside Nate, aimed her gun between Ed's eyes. "You know me, you bastard. I'll down you like I would a sick horse, and I wouldn't lose a wink of sleep over it."

"Meg," Nate warned. "Ease back."

"I can kill her and one of you first. If that's what it takes."

"Her probably," Meg agreed. "But she doesn't mean anything to me. Go ahead, shoot her. You'll be dead before she hits the ground."

"Ease back, Meg." Nate lifted his voice now, and his eyes never left Ed's. "Do what I tell you, and do it now." Then he heard a chaos of voices, stumbling feet. The crowd was surging forward, Nate knew, with curiosity, fascination and horror outweighing simple fear.

“Drop the weapon and let her go,” Nate ordered. “Do it now, and you’ve got a chance.” Nate saw Coben come around the back and knew someone was going to die.

Hell broke loose.

Ed whirled, fired. In a flash, Nate saw Coben roll for cover and the splatter of blood from the bullet that caught him high on the shoulder. Coben’s service revolver lay on the sidewalk where it had flown out of his hand.

Nate heard a second bullet thud into the building beside him and the sound of a thousand people screaming.

They barely penetrated. His blood was ice.

He shoved Meg back, sent her sprawling to the ground. She cursed him as he stepped forward, his gun steady. “Anyone dies today,” he said coolly, “it’ll be you, Ed.”

“What are you doing?” Ed shouted as Nate continued to walk toward him. “What the hell are you doing?”

“My job. My town. Put down the gun, or I’ll take you out like that sick horse.”

“Go to hell!” With one violent move, he shoved the weeping woman at Nate and dived behind a car.

Nate let the woman slide bonelessly to the sidewalk. Then he rolled under another car, came up street-side.

Crouched, he glanced over to check on Meg and saw her soothing the woman whose life she’d claimed didn’t mean anything to her. “Go,” she snapped out. “Get the bastard.”

Then she began to belly forward toward the injured Coben.

Ed fired, the bullet exploding a windshield.

“This ends here. It ends now!” Nate shouted. “Throw out your gun, or I’ll come and take it from you.”

“You’re *nothing!*” There was more than panic, more than rage in Ed’s voice. “You don’t even belong here.” There were tears. He broke cover, firing wildly. Glass shattered and flew like lethal stars; metal pinged and rang.

Nate stood, stepped into the street with his weapon lifted. He felt something sting his arm, like a fat, angry bee. “Drop it, you stupid son of a bitch.”

On a scream, Ed swung around, aimed.

And Nate fired.

He saw Ed clutch his hip, saw him go down. And continued forward at the same steady pace until he’d reached the gun Ed had dropped as he’d fallen.

“You’re under arrest, you asshole. You coward.” His voice was calm as June as he shoved Ed onto his belly, yanked his arms behind him and cuffed his wrists. Then he crouched, spoke softly while Ed’s pain-glazed eyes flickered. “You shot a police officer.” He glanced without much interest at the thin line of blood just above his own elbow. “Two. You’re done.”

“We need to get Ken up here?” Hopp’s query was conversational, but when Nate looked up to see her coming toward him, crunching broken glass under her dressy shoes, he saw the tremor in her hands, her shoulders.

“Couldn’t hurt.” He jerked a chin toward the people who’d jumped over, crawled under or simply shoved barricades aside. “You’re going to need to keep those people back.”

“That’s your job, chief.” She managed a smile, then it frosted as she stared down at Ed. “You know, that TV crew got damn near all of this on camera. Cameraman must be certifiable. One thing we’re going to make clear in the upcoming interviews on this unholy mess. This one’s the Outsider now. He’s not one of us.”

She shifted deliberately away from Ed, held out a hand to Nate as if to help him to his feet. "But you are. You sure as hell are, Ignatious, and thank God for it."

He took her hand and felt that light tremor in hers as she squeezed his hand. "Anybody back there hurt?"

"Bumps and bruises." Tears trembled in her eyes, were willed away. "You took care of us."

"Good." He nodded when he saw Otto and Peter working to move the crowd back.

Then he looked over, found Meg crouched in a doorway. She met his eyes. There was blood on her hands, but it appeared she'd fashioned an expert field dressing on Coben's wounded shoulder.

She brushed a hand absently over her cheek, smearing blood. Then she grinned and blew him a kiss.

THEY SAID IT WAS FORTUNATE no lives had been lost, and injuries to civilians, while plentiful, were mostly minor—broken bones, concussions, cuts and bruises all caused by falls and panic.

They said property damage wasn't extensive, broken windows, windshields, a street light. Jim Mackie, with considerable pride, told the NBC affiliate reporter he was going to leave the bullet holes in his pickup.

They said, all in all, it was a hell of a climax to Lunacy, Alaska's May Day Parade.

They said a lot of things.

Media coverage turned out to be more extensive than the injuries. The violent and bizarre capture of Edward Woolcott, the alleged killer of Patrick Galloway, the Ice Man of No Name Mountain, was national fodder for weeks.

Nate didn't watch the coverage, and settled for reading reports in *The Lunatic*.

As May passed, so did the interest from Outside.

"Long day," Meg said as she came out on the porch to sit beside him.

"I like them long."

She handed him a beer and watched the sky with him. It was nearly ten and brilliantly light.

Her garden was planted. Her dahlias, as expected, were spectacular, and the delphiniums speared up, deeply blue, on five-foot stalks.

They'd reach taller yet, she thought. They had the whole summer, all those long days washed with light.

The day before, she'd buried her father, at last. The town had come out for it, to a man. So had the media, but it was the town that mattered to Meg.

Charlene had been calm, she thought. For Charlene, anyway. She hadn't even played to the cameras but had stood—as dignified as Meg had ever seen her—with her hand gripped in The Professor's.

Maybe they'd make it. Maybe they wouldn't. Life was full of maybes.

But she knew one sure thing. Saturday next, she would stand out here, in the light of the summer night, with the lake and the mountains in front of her, and marry the man she loved.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me what you found out today when you went down to talk to Coben."

He knew she'd ask. He knew they'd talk it through. Not just because of her father. But because what he himself did, who he was, mattered to her.

"Ed switched lawyers. Got a hotshot from Outside. He's claiming your father was self-defense. That Galloway went crazy, and he feared for his life and panicked. He's a banker, and he kept banker's records. He's saying he won the twelve thousand that suddenly showed up in his

account in March of that year, but they'll have witnesses that say different. So it won't fly. He says he had nothing to do with the rest of it. Absolutely nothing. That won't fly either."

There was a cloud of mosquitoes near the edge of the woods. They buzzed like a chain saw and made him grateful for the bug dope he'd slathered on before coming outside.

He turned his head to kiss her cheek. "Sure you want to hear this?"

"Keep going."

"His wife's turned inside out, so she's spilled enough to rip his alibis for the time of Max's death and Yukon's. Put that in with the yellow spray paint in his tool shed, and Harry stating Ed bought some fresh meat from him the day we had our little encounter with the bear. Weave it all together, you've got a tight little net."

"Added to all that is the fact that he held a gun to a tourist's head, shot a state cop *and* our chief of police." She gave his biceps a quick kiss. All of which," she added, "was caught for the record by the NBC cameraman." She stretched, one, long, sinuous move. "Great TV. Our brave and handsome hero shooting the bastard's leg out from under him, while he himself was wounded—"

"Flesh wound."

"Standing that bastard down like Cooper in *High Noon*. I'm no Grace Kelly, but I get hot just thinking about it."

"Gosh, ma'am." He slapped at a sparrow-sized mosquito that got through the dope. "It wasn't nothing."

"And I looked pretty damn good myself, even when you sent me to the damn sidewalk."

"You look even better now. The lawyers will try to work it . . . diminished capacity, temporary insanity, but . . ."

"It won't fly," Meg finished.

“Coben’ll wrap him up—or the DA will. Got their teeth in it now.”

“If Coben had listened to you, you’d have wrapped him up without all that show.”

“Maybe.”

“You could’ve killed him.”

Nate took a small sip of beer and listened to an eagle cry. “You wanted him alive. I aim to please.”

“You do please.”

“You wouldn’t have done it either.”

Meg stretched out her legs, looked down at the worn toes of her ancient gardening boots. Probably needed new. “Don’t be too sure, Nate.”

“He’s not the only one who can bait. You were razzing him, Meg. Pushing his buttons so he’d pull the gun off her and try for one of us.”

“Did you see her eyes?”

“No, I was looking at his.”

“I did. I’ve seen that kind of scared before. A rabbit, with its leg caught in a trap.”

She paused to rub the dogs when they galloped up. “If you tell me, no matter how many fancy Lower 48 lawyers he hires, that he’ll go to jail for a long, long time, I’ll believe you.”

“He’ll go to jail for a long, long time.”

“Okay, then. Case closed. Would you like to take a walk down by the lake?”

He drew her hand to his lips. “I believe I would.”

“And would you then like to lie down on the bank of the lake and make love until we’re too weak to move?”

“I believe I would.”

“The mosquitoes will probably eat us alive.”

“Some things are worth the risk.”

He was, she thought. She rose, held out a hand for his. "You know, in a little while, when we have sex, it'll be all legal. That going to take any of the spark out of it for you?"

"Not a bit." He looked up at the sky again. "I like the long days. But I don't mind the long nights anymore. Because I've got the light." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder to draw her close to his side. "I've got the light right here."

He watched the sun, so reluctant to set, glimmer on the cool, deep water. And the mountains, so fierce and so white, mirrored their eternal winter on the summer blue.