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Dangerous Seduction

Ruth Glick writing as
Rebecca York



Dangerous Seduction

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One

Fast asleep, Catherine Emerson rolled to her side and snuggled deeper under the covers. A moment later, she was caught in the web of a sensual dream.

Yet there shouldn't be anything sensual about this place, she thought. She was standing on the flagstone patio behind the vacation cottage her mom had owned long ago. It was rich with good memories, and she was surprised and happy to be back in one of the golden summers of her childhood.

The scene was slightly out of focus, and she blinked trying to clear her vision. She stepped off the edge of the patio and dug her bare toes into the sandy soil, then rolled her shoulders, feeling her breasts move under the light cotton gown she'd worn to bed.

Why was she in her gown? And why could she hear the ocean? It was too far away, wasn't it? Regardless, the power of the sea, the waves crashing on the beach, called to her. She wanted to throw off her gown and plunge naked into the surf.

Eagerly, she started toward the water. Yet she never reached it.

As she hurried across the sand, the scenery swirled and changed around her. Somehow she was in a lush garden where three-shaded paths wound between blooming pink and red azaleas. It was designed to look natural, but she could see that the little oasis had been carefully

maintained.

A little breeze sprang up, its cold fingers walking across her skin, tightening her nipples to hard points and making her wish she was wearing something more substantial than the light gown. Mist rose from the ground, obscuring the shapes of the trees and shrubs and confusing her sense of direction.

She spun around, a spurt of panic overtaking her. She could feel the fog reaching for her with cold tendrils like ghostly fingers, cutting her off from everything safe and familiar. There was danger here, hidden in the white vapor.

And she knew what that danger was—the man who had been disturbing her sleep for a week.

She had heard him calling to her. Heard him say he needed her, needed her desperately—that he was trapped in a nightmare and only she could set him free.

She had tried to tell herself that his voice was an illusion, a product of her overactive imagination.

“If you’re real, let me see you.”

“I can’t. Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I need your strength. I need you to step across the gap between us.”

“How? How did you find me.”

“With my mind.”

“That’s not possible.”

“I wasn’t sure it would be, either, but it seems I’ve managed it. I can only do part of it, though. You have to meet me halfway.”

Their conversation had been the same each

of the past six nights. She always woke feeling frustrated, as though the dream had betrayed her.

Well, that was right in line with the rest of her life, wasn't it? She had hit bottom. She hadn't worked in two months, and running out of money wasn't the only thing that had her biting her nails, figuratively and literally. She was a nurse. Helping people had always been a big part of her life. It was part of who she was, and without it, she felt lost, as if she wasn't quite sure who or what she was.

Maybe that was the reason she was having dreams about a man who needed her. A man who called out to her in the night. A man who told her he was in grave danger, and she alone could help him.

It was a good theory, but she knew deep down it wasn't true. She hadn't invented this guy. He was real. Yet how could he be? How could he be calling to her when she didn't know who or where he was, or even his name?

In the distance, a welcoming light shimmered through the fog. With a sigh of relief, she hurried toward it. As she drew nearer, she saw that the warm glow was spilling from the door and windows of a small white and green bungalow, set amidst the lush foliage.

"Hello?" she called but got no answer. "Is anybody home?"

No one responded, and she became uncertain. She stopped in the open doorway of the cottage, her eyes widening as she looked around. It had appeared to be a humble little cottage, but the interior was magnificent—like

something from a more opulent, former century. A rich Oriental rug covered the floor. Logs crackled invitingly in a stone fireplace. Filigreed lamps glowed in the corners of the room, and the furniture was all soft fabric and dark wood.

Who lived here? And why on earth would she be dreaming about such a place. . . ?

Marcus felt his chest tighten. He had called out to Catherine, asked her to come to him here, and she had. She'd finally broken through the barrier of her own disbelief—because she had wanted it enough. At least, he hoped that was the reason she'd come.

He remained still in the shadows, watching her look around the sumptuous room he had constructed for her pleasure.

His hands clenched on the carved wooden arm of his chair. He needed her, and he didn't like feeling dependent. Since reaching adulthood, he had tried to live his life so that he needed no one. It had worked out very well for years. But at the moment, it wasn't working at all. He'd gotten himself into a hell of a fix.

Catherine Emerson was his last, best hope.

Catherine. He whispered her name—but only in his mind. His pulse beat faster as he looked at her, taking in details that had only been hazy until now. Her figure was nicely curved beneath the gossamer gown she wore. Her shoulder-length hair was a rich chestnut, and her large brown eyes were fringed by dark lashes. Her expression was wary—but he understood why. She was in a strange place, caught by circumstances beyond her experience.

She wasn't tall. Perhaps about five feet five. She looked small and feminine. Well, actually—he'd describe her breasts more as magnificent than small, which only emphasized her femininity and made the rest of her slender form look nearly fragile.

He knew, though, that she possessed an inner strength. A strength he hoped he could count on. If she would lend it to him.

Catherine had time to feel a moment of wonder and relief before the door whooshed closed behind her. Suddenly she felt as though she had walked into a cunning trap. She had thought she was safe in her own dream, but safety, it seemed, was an illusion, too.

She whirled to reach for the doorknob, but a deep, resonant voice made her go still—except for the pounding of her heart inside her chest.

“Don't go, Catherine. Please.”

She recognized his voice—the voice that had invaded her dreams.

“It's you,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

Her gaze darted toward the shadows, and she found the man who had spoken, the one who had been calling to her night after night. He had tantalized her, tempted her. Frightened her.

She was still frightened.

“How did I get here?” she asked. “Did you bring me to this place?”

“Not exactly. I asked you to come, and you did. But you had to make the decision. I couldn't do it for you.”

She had longed to see his face and to find out what he wanted, but now that the moment had come, she hesitated, not sure what she wanted.

“The door is closed, but it isn’t locked. You can walk out,” he whispered, and she knew he was waiting for her decision.

She told herself she was no coward as she took several small steps forward. He was sitting in a carved, high back chair, regarding her with what looked like quiet calm. But the tautness in his arms and shoulders betrayed his tension.

“Are you as nervous as I am?” she asked.

She saw him swallow before he replied. “Yes.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

Taking another small step toward his chair, she studied him. He was wearing a conventional blue dress shirt, open at the neck, and dark slacks. His hair was dark and a little too long. His features were hard and masculine, softened by the sensual fullness of his lips.

Although he was sitting, she could see he was tall, muscular, and very male. Another step closer, and she saw the challenge, anticipation, and yearning mingled in the blue eyes that were watching her so steadily. Those eyes made her want to rush to him, take him in her arms, and wipe away the anguish she saw buried deep in his soul.

She stayed where she was as she demanded, “Who are you?”

“I can’t tell you. Not yet.”

“You’ve been watching me while I slept. You’ve been asking me to come here. Why?” she insisted, hearing the quaver in her voice.

“Because you are so beautiful,” he answered, his gaze never leaving her face.

“That’s no answer. And we both know I’m not.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“What do you want?” she managed.

“To connect with you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I do. More than you realize.”

She raised her chin. “*What* do you know?”

“You are compassionate. You are skilled at your profession. You help other people, even at great cost to yourself.”

The last observation sent a little zing along her nerve endings. “How do you know that?” she whispered.

“The same way I know your name. It’s in your thoughts at night, when you sleep.”

She took a step back. “I should leave.”

“If you do, I think both of us will regret it. But it’s up to you.”

He seemed to speak from absolute conviction, but she sensed an underlying vulnerability that tore at her heart. As she studied his pensive face, she was sure she had never met him before. Not in the real world. Yet deep in her soul, she felt as if she knew him—or should know him, as if he were familiar to her and had been so for a very long time.

Without the vulnerability that he was trying to hide, she would have turned and fled. Instead, she took a step toward him, and then another. Slowly, feeling the fibers of the Oriental wool rug against her bare feet, she crossed the room, stopping a yard from the man who needed

her help but refused to give her any details—details such as his name.

She tried to imagine how she must look to him. He had said she was beautiful, and she wanted to believe it. But she had always thought her face was ordinary. She hated the way her nose turned up, she had given up on taming her eyebrows years ago, and she knew her bottom lip was too big for the top one.

But her features weren't her most pressing concern. The room was cool, and she knew her nipples were all hard and wrinkly, poking against the fabric of the gown. And she knew that wasn't all he could see through the thin garment as his gaze dropped to the dark triangle of hair below her belly and tarried there for several heartbeats before traveling upward again. It lingered on her breasts once more, then traveled up the slender column of her throat and finally came to rest on her lips.

She pressed her arms to her sides in a futile effort to stop her trembling. When she realized the strategy was pulling the cotton even tighter across her breasts, she forced herself to relax. Her breasts were large. Sometimes she felt that they got in her way. But she couldn't help the little thrill that shot through her at knowing that he liked them.

Quickly, she canceled that thought. It didn't matter what he thought of her body. For pity's sake, this was a *dream*.

He tipped his head to one side, regarding her as though he understood very well what was going through her mind.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked in a low,

rough voice that sent tiny, crackling charges along her nerve endings and made her nipples tightened even further.

“No,” she answered, and to prove it, she took two more steps toward him.

This is a dream . . . only a dream . . . She repeated the litany to herself. It made perfect sense, but she knew she was grabbing at false reassurance. She had to remind herself to breathe as she stopped two feet from where he sat—and, still, she found it difficult to fill her lungs.

Dampness gathered between her legs, an embarrassment she was glad he couldn't see. She shouldn't be aroused. Yet his basic sexuality enveloped her.

He stood, then, and she saw instantly that he was in pain—that his right leg would barely hold his weight.

“You're hurt. What happened?”

His face darkened. “I was in a race car accident.”

“You drive race cars?”

“Yes.”

“A dangerous occupation.”

“I like danger.”

“What else do you do?”

“Climb mountains. Deep sea dive. Went on an arctic expedition last year.”

“You weren't lying about liking danger.”

“In my spare time, I put companies back on their feet.” He said it casually, but she could tell he was proud of the accomplishment.

“You need to lie down.”

“Because of my business practices?” he

teased.

“No, because your leg hurts.”

He laughed. “Nurse Catherine. Yes, maybe you’d better help me to bed.”

She stepped forward, and he slung his arm around her shoulder, leaning on her as they made their slow way across the rug to an ornate canopied bed in the corner of the room.

She stole a glance at his face, seeing that every step was torture. By the time they reached the bed, perspiration had broken out on his forehead.

He eased down onto the mattress, kicked off his loafers, then lay back, his eyes closed.

“You need to rest. I should leave,” she whispered.

“Is that what you really think? That I need you to leave me—now that you’ve gotten me to bed?”

Her gaze traveled down his body, and she saw what his dress slacks couldn’t hide. He was aroused, his large erection plainly visible behind the dark fabric.

“You know how you can help me, don’t you?”

“How?”

He held her gaze as he replied. “By letting me forge a bond between us. Lie down with me, and let me do that.” His tone was careful, solemn, yet it told her how much he needed her—sexually, yes, but it went deeper than that.

“I don’t know you,” she whispered.

“You will.” He smiled. “And this is just a dream. You can enjoy yourself without guilt.”

Could she? Or was safety only illusion?

Feeling uncertain and yet compelled to do

as he asked, she moved around the bed and stretched out beside him, her arms at her sides.

He turned toward her. "Thank you."

Her breath grew shallow as he slowly raised his hand. Leaning toward her, he reached out, capturing a lock of her hair and twining it around his finger as though making himself her captive.

"I love your thick chestnut hair," he murmured. "And your big brown eyes. And your breasts, of course."

Her breath caught as he slowly lowered his hand, tracing the V at the front of her gown. His fingertip barely touched her as it slowly slid down the inner curve of one breast, then even more slowly upward. His finger was warm. Hot. His touch seemed to scorch her tender flesh, spreading sensual pleasure from that one small contact point across her breast to her nipple. From there, the heat rippled downward, into her belly . . . and lower, causing a sudden spurt of liquid desire to bathe her inner passage.

She made a small sound that was part protest and part plea.

"I love touching you. I knew I would."

It's just a dream, she told herself yet again. But deep within herself, she knew it was so much more than that. All her senses were alive, and, dream though it might be, the scene was more vivid than any reality she could remember.

Her mouth was so dry, when she spoke, her voice sounded hoarse and unfamiliar to her own ears. "What . . . what do you really want from me?"

"Everything you can give," he answered, his

voice vibrating with emotions he was clearly struggling to hold in check.

Never relinquishing her gaze, he reached under her gown, lifting the fabric with one of his large hands, playing delicately with one of her knees before gliding his spread fingers slowly up her inner thigh, stopping to stroke and caress her silky flesh—building her heat and tension with just that light touch.

A small sound bubbled in her throat.

“You like that.”

It hadn’t been a question, nor could she lie. She answered with a small nod.

His hand moved with nearly painful slowness, as though he were giving her a chance to change her mind. When he finally touched her outer labia, she knew what he felt was dripping wet. His fingers took a gliding stroke through the hot, swollen folds, and her hips strained involuntarily into his touch.

“You are so, so sexy,” he whispered.

“Oh, God . . . So . . . so are you.”

She had never been touched with such skill, had never reached such white hot arousal. She knew he felt the heat of her—she saw it reflected in his eyes as his gaze burned into hers.

“I need your help,” he whispered. “Help me get undressed.”

She turned to him, her hands unsteady as they opened the buttons down the front of his dress shirt.

“Touch me. Make me burn, too.”

She did as he asked, smoothing back the fabric, then running her fingers through the thick dark hair of his chest before finding his

flat nipples and circling them with her fingertips. Coaxing the tiny nubs to hard points, she rubbed them, then rolled them between her fingers.

He sucked in a strangled breath, his gaze going from hot to scalding. “My pants are killing me,” he muttered. “I need them off—now.”

She had never thought of herself as a bold lover, but she felt incredibly daring as she undid his belt, then the hook at the top of his slacks. Lowering the zipper, she pulled them down. He helped her by raising his hip, and she tugged them off and tossed them aside.

When he winced, she went still. “Your leg.”

“Forget the damn leg.” Taking her hand, he carried it to his penis and wrapped her fingers around it. Barely.

Her hand was small. His erection was not. It was big and hard and red, standing boldly up from his body. She had never liked touching a man’s genitals, maybe because most times she had the occasion to do so were in her professional capacity, and the tasks involved were anything but pleasant. But she wanted to touch this man, and her desire was anything but professional. She wanted to caress him, give him back some of the pleasure he’d given her.

She clasped her hand around his swollen shaft, fingertips barely meeting, and stroked lightly, loving the sensation of satin-covered steel. “That feels so good,” she murmured.

He gave a strangled laugh. “At this end, too.” Then his tone became urgent. “Take off your gown. Let me see you. All of you.”

She went up on her knees and, with hands

that weren't quite steady, pulled the garment off and tossed it on the floor.

His hand came up to touch her, stroking her breasts, her ribs, her hips, then reaching around to smooth over her bare bottom, the curve of her hip, her belly, then arrowing downward until one finger slid between her swollen folds. First skating around the edges of her outer lips, he dipped the finger into her vagina, then stroked upward toward her clitoris.

"Touch your breasts for me. I want to see you do that," he said hoarsely.

She had never touched herself in front of a man—or anyone else. But she complied with the request, lifting her breasts in her palms, then stroking over them.

"Show me what turns you on," he urged, at the same time his finger made circles around her clitoris, every so often sinking back into her vagina to gather more moisture.

Hesitantly at first, then with increasing boldness, she rubbed her thumbs over her taut nipples, then took the engorged tips between her fingertips and squeezed them gently. His gaze was riveted to her breasts, watching as she tugged and rolled her nipples, which somehow seemed to have acquired a new level of sensitivity—and a direct connection to that wildly aroused spot his fingers kept not quite touching.

And then he did touch it—a quick brush, followed by a longer, lingering, gentle rub. She didn't know she'd been holding her breath until it came out in a gasp.

His voice turned urgent. "Lord, you are so

sensual. So female . . . Catherine, I need you. You don't know how much.

"Oh, God," she groaned. "I need you, too."

"I want to be on top of you, but I can't do it," he said. "Not with this damn leg. Please—put me inside you."

"I won't hurt you?"

"No."

Her gaze locked with his, she straddled him, then lowered her hips, bringing his extravagantly swollen penis inside her.

"Oh!" They gasped as one.

She began to move, raising her hips, then lowering them.

"Jesus . . . oh, yes, just like that." He reached downward and pressed his thumb against her clit, feeding her arousal as she fed his.

Her breath came fast and hard as she rode his magnificent cock.

"Lift your breasts," he said. "Play with the nipples again. Let me see you do it—from this wonderful vantage point."

Helpless to deny him or herself, she took her breasts in her hands and once again began playing with her nipples—harder this time, hover on the border where pleasure almost hurt.

"That is so gloriously sexy," she heard him say, breathless with his own rising passion.

Her arousal built in a giant wave that carried her upward to dizzying heights until, suddenly, it broke. She felt her inner muscles quiver, then clench hard around his penis before she lost control of her body entirely. Her hips pumped in rhythm with the contractions of her burning

hot tunnel, each tremor sending shock waves outward until her whole body shook with them, and her mouth opened to let out a long, breathless cry.

She swayed above him and felt his hand steady her, at the same time the fingers on her clitoris stayed where they were, coaxing the last tiny waves of rapture from her body. She heard him growl and felt him go rigid, then, in a series of hard, rhythmic thrusts, pump his seed into her.

Spent, quivering, she collapsed against him.

“Sweet Jesus.” His hand stroked her hair, her shoulder. “Catherine . . . thank you. I can’t tell you how badly I needed that.”

She slid to his side and cuddled against him.

His hands rubbed her arms, her ribs, smoothed her damp hair from her face. She wanted to lie there forever, enjoying the aftermath of what she had to acknowledge was the best lovemaking of her entire life. If this was a dream, reality was a pale substitute for it.

He wasn’t content, though, to let things be. “I wish amazing sex was all I wanted from you,” he said. “But I need something more.”

Wary, she raised her gaze to look at him. “What?”

“In the morning, call your nursing service. They’ll have an opening for a registered nurse at the Preston house. Apply for it.”

She felt her chest tighten. “The Prestons? Those rich people out in St. Stephens?”

“Yes.”

Resignation made her throat tighten. “They’ll

never hire me.”

“If you want to see me again, apply for the job,” he insisted.

Suddenly, she felt a cold wind blow through the room, sweeping away the warmth and coziness. She clutched his arm to steady herself, but the scene wavered before her eyes.

Realizing what was happening, she was seized with panic. “Let me stay!” she cried.

He was still lying beside her, but his voice seemed to come from far away. “I can’t stay. I have to leave. Just do what I said.”

The wind tore at her, lashing at her flesh.

“Are you causing this?” she asked, her voice shrill.

“No.”

The wind engulfed her like a pair of giant hands, picking her off the ground and carrying her away.

“Stop it!” she screamed.

But she was only wasting her breath.

When her eyes blinked open, she was back in her own bedroom. The twisted bedcovers were wrapped around her body—the product of nothing more than a restless dream.

Two

Catherine lay against the mattress breathing hard, trying to come to grips with what had happened to her.

Well, one thing she knew. She'd been sexually aroused. She could still feel the dampness between her legs. And she was pretty sure the orgasm had been real. She had felt it in the dream, contracting her muscles, sending waves of ecstasy through her body. And she felt limp and relaxed, floating in the aftermath of physical satisfaction.

She wanted to keep lying there, remembering the dream-man who had given her so much pleasure. But though her body felt languid and content, her mind was unsettled. She'd never fall back asleep. She might as well get up and see what she could make of the day—though, lately, it was getting harder and harder to make herself even try.

When she sat up, she finally noticed something that made her breath catch in her throat. She'd gone to bed wearing a night gown, she was certain. But she was naked. Frantically, she searched to no avail over the bed for the white cotton gown she remembered putting on.

She found it lying in a heap on the floor. Where she'd tossed it to accommodate her lover's request that she remove it. She didn't even know his name, but she had done what he asked.

She had felt so close to him, as though he

were real. In the cold light of morning, she was sure she had made it all up.

Climbing out of bed, she steadied herself with one hand on the bedpost. Then she reached down and grabbed the gown and pulled it over her head. Feeling a little more in control, she padded to the bathroom to stand in front of the sink and look into the mirror. She hardly recognized the woman who stared back at her. Her hair was a wild tangle around her head. Her cheeks were flushed from her recent sexual encounter, and her eyes were bright. She looked smug and satisfied—as though she'd just come from the bed of a very sexy man.

Only he hadn't been a real man. He'd been a man she'd conjured in a dream.

He'd been speaking to her in her sleep for a week, whispering in her ear. Telling her that he was in trouble, that he needed her, that she was his only hope. Last night, he'd done a lot more than whisper in her ear.

Feeling shaky, she sank onto the edge of the tub. From memory, she brought his image to mind. Dark hair, a bit too long. Eyes, a piercing blue, and hard, cleanly defined features. Laugh lines around his eyes despite that he seemed to be weighted down with some secret sadness. It amazed her to realize how complete her mental picture of him was. Dreams were fuzzy and mutable, never quite the same from one second to the next . . . weren't they? And she *never* remembered them in their entirety, down to the smallest detail.

Then there was their lovemaking. Talk about details! Dream-man had known all about how

to pleasure a woman's body. He had made love to her with fire and tenderness. And he'd said he needed her desperately, something no other man had ever said. She was honest enough to recognize that his need, the sincerity and intensity of it, was part of his appeal for her.

But this was all nonsense. She was going on about a man in a *dream*, for pity's sake. There was no point in dissecting the encounter, much less analyzing his behavior.

Yet it had all been so real that she couldn't quite convince herself it had been merely her imagination. Something strange had happened to her. Something beyond the realm of ordinary experience.

With a small snorting sound, she dismissed the fanciful idea. She wasn't a fanciful person.

So where had that odd notion come from?

With a sigh, she splashed water onto her heated face, then cupped her hands and took a drink to ease her parched throat.

Back in her bedroom, she looked at the clock. It was five in the morning, and she had planned to sleep until at least seven. But since she was up, she'd better face her problems in the real world, right here in Baltimore, U. S. of A., instead of worrying about an erotic dream.

She slipped into her robe and headed for the computer to check in with United Nursing Service.

She'd begun her nursing career working a regular shift in a hospital. Then Mom had gotten sick, and she'd reduced her hours to stay home with her. By the time her mother had died, she'd acquired a reputation among her mother's

friends for being good with aging patients. Private duty nursing paid very well, and she'd been able to arrange her life the way she wanted—until a few months ago, when her luck had changed for the worse.

She gave an involuntary shudder. She wasn't going to think about what had happened at the Brighton house or how her source of income had dried up as a result of it.

Maybe she'd have to start looking for work in another city—Washington or Philadelphia.

She fixed instant coffee and drank it while she scanned the listing. There were several new openings, but one caught her eye immediately and made her heart begin to pound. The Preston Family, St. Stephens, Maryland.

Her dream lover had said it would be there. But he wasn't—*couldn't* be—real. Which meant that either she'd suddenly become clairvoyant—or she'd stepped into the *Twilight Zone*.

With fingers that were anything but steady, she called up the specifications. The assignment was to take care of a thirty-year-old male patient who had been injured in a race car accident.

"I was in a race car accident. . . . I like danger."

The words her dream lover had spoken ran through her mind, and her heart pounded harder as she continued reading. The accident had occurred three weeks ago, and the man was still in a coma.

And he was at home—not in the hospital?

Thinking she didn't have a hope in hell of getting the position but feeling compelled beyond common sense to try, she filled in the

on line application. Then she began a data search of newspapers that had been published three weeks ago, putting in “accident” and “Preston.”

The first link in the “results” list was to an article about Marcus Preston. She clicked on it, waited a couple of seconds for it to load—then sucked in a quick breath as a picture appeared alongside the article.

It was him. The man from her dream.

A shiver raced up her spine, stirring the hairs on the back of her neck, as she went on staring at the face she’d last seen in the throes of passion. The same achingly familiar features. The same dark hair, not quite as long. The same striking blue eyes. The same long-fingered hands, hands that had caressed her so skillfully . . . There was no doubt—the man in the photo was the man in her dream.

But that was impossible. Was she really crazy enough to think her dream had some relationship to reality?

“It was a dream,” she said aloud. “Just a *dream*.”

The denial didn’t help. Everything that had happened with Marcus Preston had felt totally real. More real than reality, if that were possible.

The man was in a coma. Had his mind somehow reached out to her—connected with her in a way that couldn’t be explained in any normal terms? He’d said he needed to make love with her to forge a bond. She’d thought he’d meant a physical or emotional bond. But maybe it went beyond that. Maybe he’d meant a *psychic* bond—if such a thing actually

existed—and he was using their sexual attraction for each other as a means to connect with her.

She shook her head. The thoughts she was having were getting more ridiculous by the second. Last night hadn't been real. It *couldn't* have been. Could it?

"*What do you want from me?*" she had asked him.

And he had answered, "*Everything you can give me.*"

She swallowed. In real life, Marcus Preston was a stranger. Yet looking at his picture, she felt as if she knew him on a level of intimacy she had shared with no other human being. She also felt driven to do whatever was necessary to help him.

Quickly she began to read the article. Marcus Preston had inherited family money, but he hadn't been content to sit back and collect dividends. He'd risked his fortune buying failing companies and turning them around. He was also well known for his sporting feats—climbing mountains, skiing on expert trails, racing cars.

He'd told her all of that last night. And the more she read, the more convinced Catherine became that her dream hadn't been a product of her imagination. It was simply impossible that her subconscious could have manufactured a story that mirrored a real person's life as accurately as her *non-dream* mirrored Marcus Preston's.

Trembling inside and out, she continued to read even more personal information about the man who'd somehow managed to plant himself

in her mind while she slept. It seemed he'd had an unhappy childhood. One of his prep school friends was quoted as saying that Marcus had never been able to please his father, so he'd gone his own way, becoming a tough and cynical risk taker. The reporter writing the piece noted that the early experiences had also made him the most successful member of his generation of the Preston family. He was said to have a phenomenal ability to size up a business opponent and get the best deal possible for himself. Because he could read their minds?

She stared at the computer screen. In the dream Marcus Preston had been tender and sexy. But she wasn't fooling herself. He could be a dangerous opponent—dangerous to her—if he were awake.

The family sounded none too charming, either. How many of them were at his estate. And if, by some miracle, she got the job, would they give her trouble?

Catherine was reading another article about Marcus Preston when the phone rang.

It was Mrs. Ames from the nursing service, and Catherine felt her stomach clench as she waited for the woman to tell her that she might as well cancel her subscription to the service.

To her surprise, Mrs. Ames said, "Catherine, the Preston family reviewed your application. They want to hire you."

Her hand shook visibly as she reached for her coffee mug. "They do?"

"Yes. Now, listen—there isn't much time to fill you in . . ."

Mrs. Ames went on to give her information

she'd already learned from the articles.

When the woman stopped for breath, Catherine asked, "Why isn't he in the hospital?"

"He was," Mrs. Ames replied. "But his family wanted him to be at home—at Tidesfall Manor."

"Is that wise?"

"They felt the hospital setting wasn't doing him any good. They have the funds to provide a hospital environment at their estate."

Perhaps they did. But Catherine couldn't imagine that was the best thing for the patient. He should be in the hospital, where a doctor was available at all times. Of course, the family might be paying a neurosurgeon to hover at the bedside, for all she knew.

"What other medical staffers are at the house?" she asked.

"Two other nurses and a physical therapist are on site. And a doctor comes in every day. Of course, he's available if he's needed."

"Of course," she murmured.

"I need your decision, Catherine," Mrs. Ames said. "They want coverage twenty-four seven. If you can't do it, I'll have to try someone else immediately."

She had no real choice. To refuse would be to close her mind and deny everything that had happened last night. To pretend that it had meant nothing to her and, in fact, had not happened at all. Refusing would mean deciding to forget it—and *him*. As if she could.

Still, Catherine was acutely aware that she was stepping into something completely unknown—and frightening.

"I could do it on a trial basis," she said,

leaving herself a way out, if worse came to worst.

“Good,” Mrs. Ames replied. “That’s all I’m asking.”

“When do they want me?”

“Immediately. They’d like you there by early afternoon. I’ll e-mail you directions from the city.” The woman seemed to be in a big hurry.

“Is there some problem?” Catherine asked.

“Oh, no. Of course not.”

“Well, then I’d better get ready,” she answered.

She hung up the receiver, then went to pack. All the while, her stomach was in knots. The border between dream and reality had blurred, she didn’t know anymore what was real and what wasn’t, and she was frankly scared.

Yet she couldn’t help the bubble of excitement that rose inside her as she threw things into her suitcase. It seemed that, in a very short while, she would be meeting her dream lover face to face.

Three

An hour and a half later, Catherine had driven across the Bay Bridge to the Eastern Shore of Maryland and was heading south on Route 50.

For hundreds of years, fishermen and farmers had quietly occupied the Delmarva Peninsula, but since the mid-nineteen hundreds, wealthy residents from the other side of the Chesapeake had been moving in, buying large plots of land and building grand manor houses. Every time she'd had occasion to come out here, she found more development. More shopping centers along the highways, more traffic on the roads, and more exclusive communities of huge and ostentatious homes. She assumed Marcus Preston owned one of the latter.

She was surprised when the directions took her to an area that was still rural. When she reached Green Dory Lane, she started slowing to look at the names on the mailboxes.

Her heart pounding, she found the access road to Tidesfall and turned right through a set of brick gateposts topped by a wrought-iron arch. Beyond it, a two-lane drive wound through beautifully landscaped grounds.

Rounding a curve screened by huge pine trees, she drew in a sharp breath at the sight of the house. This was no pretentious new construction but the real McCoy—a red brick Georgian mansion with matching wings on

either side, probably at least two hundred years old and, she guessed, about thirty rooms

As soon as she stopped in the circular driveway, a forty-something blond woman wearing a gold sweater set threw open the front door and looked out. She disappeared, and a moment later a man of about the same age, dressed in blue slacks and a tweed sports coat, came down the steps. He had thinning hair and a slight potbelly.

When he gestured toward a parking space, Catherine pulled in. As soon as she had cut the engine, he strode to the driver's window and started complaining. "You're the new nurse? What took you so long?"

"Excuse me?" she said as politely as she could manage. "I had to pack and drive here from Baltimore." She thought about adding that if they'd wanted her here sooner, they should have sent a helicopter, but a smart retort wouldn't be a great way to start her relationship with these people.

"Well, come in," the man said impatiently. "One of our nurses quit, and we're having a hard time here."

So much for friendliness—or, for that matter, common courtesy.

When Catherine pulled her suitcases out of the back seat, the man eyed the old luggage distastefully, as though it were too cheap to be seen in the grand house. "Just leave your things in the front hall," he commanded. "Joseph will take them to your quarters."

Catherine complied, thinking that the marble-floored foyer was probably larger than

her whole apartment. And better furnished, she added as she eyed a restored antique chest.

“Come on. Come on,” the man said, obviously annoyed.

She turned to face him. “I’m Catherine Emerson. Who are you?”

His expression didn’t change. “Arthur Winters. Marcus’s brother-in-law. There will be time for small talk later. I want you to attend to your patient now.”

Catherine felt a spurt of alarm. “Has he taken a turn for the worse?”

“How should I know? I don’t have any medical training,” he snapped.

Marcus came awake. Well, not *conscious* awake. But he had been lost in the gray mist that kept filling up his mind, and now, suddenly, he was aware again.

Aware of *her*. Catherine was here, in the house. She had come to him, thank God.

Desperation had driven him to lengths he’d never dreamed even of trying. Yes, he’d always known he had some kind of odd psychic ability. As a kid, his nanny had joked about it, saying his parents had stolen him from the Gypsies. But the talent had faded as he’d grown older, and he hadn’t tried to practice or strengthen it. Yes, he could tell if the man or woman was lying to him, but he’d never used the talent on any regular basis or with any kind of purposeful intent.

He’d certainly never imagined his ability to read another person’s thoughts might end up being his only hope of survival. His only means

of connecting with the world outside of the awful darkness in which he'd been dwelling for God knows how long now.

He'd realized awhile ago that his family was doing something to keep him from waking up. Giving him drugs, he thought. He was genuinely afraid that, when the right moment came along—a moment when no one was looking and they thought they could get away with it—they would kill him.

Frantic, unable to speak or even move, he'd begun calling out, searching for someone, anyone, who might hear him.

He'd found Catherine. He had reached out to her, told her he needed her. And she had heard him. Against all odds, he had managed to bring her to him.

He wanted to sit up in bed and shout at that battleaxe, Nurse Hardcastle, to get the hell out of his room. But no sound came from his lips, nor any movement from his body. He was still trapped somewhere inside his mind.

But Catherine was going to help him escape.

Tension gathered inside him as he heard her talking to Arthur in the hall. In just a few moments, she'd be standing here, next to him. He planned to do everything he could to make sure the link they'd formed between them remained clear and strong. That link was going to wake him up. And then . . .

Well, one step at a time. . . .

Catherine was tempted to ask the brother-in-law why Mr. Preston wasn't being cared for in a hospital, but she kept the question to

herself as she followed Arthur Winters up a grand staircase that would have done the Russian Tsars proud.

“They filled you in on the case?” Winter asked over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she answered as she reached the wide upper hall. It was carpeted and lined with what she took to be portraits of the Preston ancestors. There was no time to stop and take a closer look, because Winters hurried her along to a room at the end of the hall.

Opening the door, he walked inside, and a heavy-set, gray-haired woman in a white uniform rose from the small desk that sat beneath one of the three large windows. Two of the windows flanked a king-size sleigh bed, its beautifully carved headboard rising high against the wall behind it.

“It’s about time,” the other nurse snapped. “I’ve been working since the night shift, and I need a break.”

“We’ll pay you time and a half,” Winters said.

“Double time,” she snapped.

Catherine held out her hand. “I’m Catherine Emerson. I’ll get started immediately.”

The woman ignored the hand. “Eileen Hardcastle. We’ll talk later. My notes are on the desk.” The woman bustled out of the room, leaving Catherine and Winter standing near the door.

He led her further into the room, and as she followed him around the screen that shielding a hospital bed, she forgot all about him. Her gaze riveted to the man lying in the bed. With her heart pounding, she took several steps

closer.

It was he. Her dream lover. Marcus Preston. Until that moment, she had only half believed she would find him here. But he was lying right in front of her—although it was almost impossible to accept that she was looking at the same person she had met in her dream last night.

Reaching out a hand, she touched his arm, relieved that she could feel muscle tone beneath her fingers. Someone had obviously been putting him through an exercise routine. The contact reassured her on one level—he was definitely a flesh-and-blood man, no figment of her imagination. She found it very disturbing, though, that he gave no sign that he felt her touch.

He was lying in the high, railed bed, as still as death. She had to look closely at his chest to see that he was even breathing. Her heart ached as she noted the purple smudges that marred the skin under his eyes. His dark lashes made a startling contrast against his pale skin. The day's growth of beard darkening the lower half of his face only added to his ill and disheveled appearance.

He was dressed in a hospital gown. Dark chest hair peeked out at the top of it. A light blanket hid most of the lower part of his body, but his right leg was in a cast and had been left uncovered. His right arm was hooked to an IV line, and she was glad to see that there was plenty of liquid in the bag.

Catherine swallowed hard around the lump that had formed in her throat. He was the

same—but so different from the man who had called her to him last night.

“Marcus?” she questioned.

He didn’t answer.

In her dream he’d been warm, vital, and so very sexy. In reality, he was unconscious, unaware that she was there.

Trying to stay objective, she picked up his wrist and began to take his pulse. Sixty-five—nice and steady. In a hospital he would have been hooked up to monitoring equipment, but she had to use a conventional cuff and stethoscope to take his blood pressure.

Conscious that Winter was still behind her and that she was being watched closely, she released the bulb and listened for the rush of blood to come back to Marcus’s artery as she watched the gauge.

“How is he?” a female voice asked.

Startled, Catherine turned quickly. Two women were standing at the edge of the hospital screen. One was the blond who had opened the door. The other, who looked to be a few years younger, wore a similar sweater set, this one in green instead of gold. Green sweater crossed to Arthur Winter and knit her fingers with his. Gold sweater stood with her arms folded across her chest. Neither of them came close to the unconscious man.

“His blood pressure and pulse are both normal.”

“I’m Pamela Winters, Marcus’s sister,” the one holding her husband’s hand said. “And this is my sister, Deidre. Her husband and our brother, Logan, will be here this evening.”

"I'm Catherine Emerson."

"The new nurse. I hope you can also take charge of my brother's physical therapy for the time being," the one called Deidre said.

Catherine frowned. "I thought a physical therapist was on staff."

"He disagreed on the treatment protocol."

"Disagreed with whom?"

"Dr. Philips. The doctor thought it would be better if we got someone else. Until then, he hopes you and the other nurses can keep Marcus in good shape."

"I'll try," she said. What else *could* she say? That she thought her patient ought to be in a hospital, where there wouldn't be any question about whether or not he got the proper treatment? Not if she didn't want to find herself back on the road in about five minutes, heading home.

"I'm sure you'd like us to let you do your job," Deidre said, motioning to the others to follow her out.

When the door closed behind them, Catherine let out a sigh of relief. She hardly knew these people, but she knew enough to realize she didn't like them. She sincerely hoped her contact with them would be minimal.

Turning back to Marcus, she said, "They're gone."

When he didn't answer, she realized she actually had expected him to open his eyes and speak. She was foolishly disappointed that he hadn't. Did she think her mere presence would rouse him out of his coma?

It shocked her to realize that a part of her

had thought that. In some strange way, she had forged a bond with this man, a bond that transcended the normal laws of time and space.

“You said you were in danger. How?”

Silence, both within her head and without.

In her most cheerful voice, she said, “We’re going to get you well. We’re going to get you out of here.” She put away the blood pressure equipment, then crossed to the desk and quickly read the notes from the doctor and the nursing staff. She was glad to see that they were meticulous and in good order.

The further she read, though, the more puzzled she became. As far as she could tell, there was no medical reason why Marcus was still in a coma. Yet the state persisted.

Returning to him, she couldn’t stop herself from lightly caressing his face, then his lips. Did they quiver under her touch? Or had she made that up?

His eyes were still closed. Switching her attention, she lowered the metal bars on the side of the bed, then began to check his body, moving his arms, making an assessment of the muscle tone—assuring herself that his physical deterioration had been minimal. It looked as if the p.t. had been doing the right things, and she planned to keep it up.

“Your arm muscles are in good shape,” she said, then pulled the sheet and blanket down and ran her hand along his uninjured leg before bending it, lifting his leg and moving the knee toward his chest.

The action pulled up his short hospital gown, exposing his genitals. She couldn’t help herself.

She stared at them, remembering how big his penis had looked in her dream, when he'd been fully aroused. Even in his normal state, it was exceptionally long and thick. Just looking at him, remembering how he'd felt inside her, sent a wave of arousal coursing through her. It settled deep in her belly, in that hot place inside her he'd filled so completely. . . .

Her hands clenched. Marcus was her patient. He was unconscious. And she shouldn't be standing here feeling light headed and aroused as she looked at *any* part of his body.

And yet . . . he had spoken to her in her dreams, called her to him and made sweet, passionate love to her. It was impossible simply to forget that experience—or to prevent her body's response to the sight of his.

She dragged in a steadying breath and let it out slowly. Maybe it had been an awful mistake to come here. She didn't think she would be able to keep her feelings from interfering with her professional judgment.

She reached out to steady herself and, as if it had a will of its own, her palm flattened against his thigh, very close to his penis. His hair-roughened flesh was warm and firm under her fingers. If she moved her hand just an inch or two, she could touch him, caress him intimately. The compulsion to clasp her fingers around him the way she had the night before was almost overwhelming. It was almost as if he were silently begging her to touch his penis—to close the powerful sexual circuit between them again. Her hand twitched, and she had to remind herself again that he was unconscious

and that making sexual advances toward him would be worse than unprofessional. In fact, it would be downright criminal.

“I see you’re already developing an intimate relationship with your patient.”

The dry, male voice coming from behind her brought a scream to her lips.

Four

She managed—just—not to let the startled yelp escape. Clamping her jaw closed, Catherine whirled from the bed and looked at the man standing by the edge of the pale gray hospital screen.

She hadn't yet met him, but she knew immediately who he must be. He had the same dark hair, blue eyes, and aggressive jaw line as Marcus.

"You must be Mr. Preston's brother," she said as she turned with feigned calm to pull down the hospital gown and fold the sheet into place over the lower half of her patient's body. "I'm Catherine Emerson."

"Mr. Preston," he murmured. "Why so formal, when it looked like you were getting ready to give him a hand job?"

"I was *not* doing anything of the kind!" She felt her face flame. "I was assessing his muscle tone."

"Oh, I see. Of course." Logan Preston looked from her to Marcus. "Can an unconscious patient respond sexually?"

"It's a physiological reaction," Catherine answered stiffly.

"I suppose that's a 'yes.'" he clarified.

She gave a tight nod.

"Well, my brother is a very . . . um . . . dynamic guy. So I wouldn't deny him sexual satisfaction while he's unconscious. If you're up for it, go to it."

Furious, she shot back, “I’m a nurse, Mr. Preston, not a prostitute.”

“Well, one way or another, we’re counting on your *professionalism*,” he said, clearly enjoying himself.

She wanted to smack his face. Two things kept her from doing it, then stalking out of this horrible household. Her bank account couldn’t afford her righteous indignation after two months of unemployment. But even more important than that, if she left, she’d be deserting Marcus—and giving up her chance to learn what had happened between them last night. If, indeed, anything had.

“Would you get me a glass of water,” Marcus’s brother had the gall to ask.

She opened her mouth to refuse, then closed it. If she acted like a proper servant, maybe he would go away. “Where will I find a glass and a faucet?”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Nobody’s shown you the layout?” He gestured with a nod toward the far wall. “The bathroom’s through that door.”

Walking with what she hoped looked like calm dignity, Catherine went to “fetch” the water.

When she returned, Logan Preston was standing beside the bed.

She held out the water, and he removed his hand from his pocket to take the glass from her. He downed a few swallows, then stood regarding her for several more moments, making her feel like a small animal caught in a trap. Then, without another word, he set the

glass on the bedside table, turned on his heel, and left the room.

Nobody here had been friendly, but Logan Preston had been the worst of all. And he had been up to something. She couldn't imagine what, much less why, but her gut told her that he'd been lying—or hiding something.

Dragging in a shaky breath, she leaned a hip against the side of the bed and let her head fall forward and her eyelids close.

"Sorry about that. He's always been a son of a bitch," a voice echoed in her head.

Her head snapped up, and she blinked, her gaze shooting to Marcus's face. He still lay with his eyes closed. Yet for a bare instant, an angry expression flickered across his features.

"Did you speak to me?" she whispered.

"You know I did."

The words weren't uttered aloud but seemed to come from inside her own mind.

"You're unconscious. There's no way you can be communicating with me."

Quite distinctly, she heard a brief, masculine laugh, yet the room remained silent. *"It seems I can. But only with you."*

"But . . . how?"

"I've always had some kind of extrasensory facility, but nothing like this. Last night must have accomplished even more than I hoped. It seems to have opened your mind to me even when you aren't asleep."

Last night. He *knew* about last night?

"Am I making this up?" she asked, desperate for evidence that she wasn't coming unglued.

"No, my dear, sensible Catherine, you are not

imagining things. The connection between us is real. I needed help—desperately. I went looking for it the only way I could, with my mind. And I found you. And you came to me.”

“Yes,” she murmured. Then, frowning, she asked, “Did your brother just do something to you?”

“I don’t know. I—”

The voice in her head stopped abruptly. “Marcus?”

He didn’t answer.

“Marcus?” she asked again, hearing the panic in her voice as she looked closely at his face. He seemed to have slipped back into a deeper sleep.

But why? What had happened to sever their connection? More to the point, how could she get it back?

Last night, he’d said he wanted to make love to strengthen the bond between them. All well and good in a dream, but it was obviously out of the question in reality. Maybe, though, some other kind of physical contact would help to reestablish the link.

“I’m going to give you a shave, now,” she said. “You’ll feel better when your face is smooth.”

She hurried across the room, through the dressing area, and into the palatial white marble bathroom. Beside one of the twin sinks was a tray holding a razor, shaving cream, a bowl, and a washcloth. She struggled to keep her hands steady as she ran the water until it was hot, filled the bowl, then carried the laden tray back into the bedroom.

Her patient was still lying with his eyes closed, the way she'd first seen him, and she started to wonder if she'd imagined the conversation with him.

"We'll get your face all nice and smooth," she said as she set the tray down on the hospital-style table with its swing arm.

After dipping the washcloth into the hot water, she used it to wet Marcus's face, soothing it over his skin, softening his beard a little. Then she squirted a blob of shaving cream into her hand and applied it carefully to his beard.

She'd shaved plenty of patients, but smearing foamy white cream on Marcus's skin felt like an intimate act. After rinsing her hand, she picked up the razor and carefully began scraping away the whiskers.

His beard abraded her fingers. Then the newly smoothed skin made her own flesh tingle. She didn't want to be turned on. She wanted to be entirely professional. But she couldn't stop the memories of the previous night from intruding, couldn't help the warm quivers of arousal that fluttered in her belly as she performed the personal service for Marcus.

When she finished, her heart was beating much too quickly, her nipples were hard and aching, and the muscles lining her vagina kept giving little, involuntary clenches as if begging for something to squeeze. No question about what, exactly, that something was.

She drew a steady breath, then carefully washed the remaining streaks of shaving cream from Marcus's skin. Pouring aftershave onto her hands, she stroked it over his too-pale but

beautifully masculine face.

The voice in her head startled her. “*Jesus, Catherine, if you’re as turned on as I am, then that stuff is going to start a fire.*”

“Where were you?” she asked.

“In the fog.”

“What does that mean?”

“My mind gets muzzy, and I go to sleep. Then, suddenly, I’m here again.”

She didn’t understand what he was talking about, but at least he was back with her. She stared at his newly shaved face. His lids were still closed, but she thought she saw his lips twitch.

“I never thought shaving was an erotic activity. But you’ve given me a hell of a hard-on,” he said. “*Are you going to do anything about it?*”

Her gaze slid downward to see his erection tenting the bedclothes over his groin.

But she couldn’t—she *couldn’t*—do what he was suggesting. It went against everything she held sacred professionally. It also went against her own natural reticence—doing bold and daring sexual things in a dream was one thing; doing them for real was quite another.

Catherine took a step backward and gathered up the shaving equipment, returning it to its tray. Before he could say anything else, she picked up the tray and carried it into the bathroom. Trying to calm her pounding heart, she carefully washed the razor, the bowl, and the washcloth.

Finally, though, she had no more excuse to stay in the bathroom. And she knew she couldn’t hide forever. Not and keep tabs on an

unconscious patient.

Unconscious! Ha! He was more potent out cold than most men were wide awake.

Taking a deep breath, she returned to the bedroom. For half a minute, Marcus let her be. Then the voice inside her head spoke again.

“Catherine, please—don’t run from me. Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” she said, thinking he probably knew she was lying.

He let her get away with it. *“I made contact with you in the dream. I need to do it here, for real.”*

“You are. You’re talking to me.”

“Yes, but I can’t keep it up without some deeper physical contact.”

“Hmph. A likely story.”

He made a frustrated noise that resounded inside her head. *“Listen—”* he said. *“I’m winging it here. I can’t explain it. Hell, I can’t explain any of this. I haven’t had any overtly psychic experiences in years—since I was, maybe, fifteen or sixteen. I never even took it seriously. So I can’t tell you how I know it’s critical that we build a bond between us—an intimate bond.”*

She hesitated, a worried frown marring her brow as she studied him. She believed him—Lord knows why, but she did. And she desperately wanted to help him. But still . . .

“Please, Marcus, don’t ask me to do anything unethical.”

He sighed. *“I was lying in this bed like a lump of putty—until we made love last night. Now I’m different.”*

“I’m . . . I’m so glad.”

"I need to be close to you again. I need you to touch me. Not as a nurse—but as my lover."

"I'll give you a massage."

"That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"I know. But it's what you're going to get."

She pulled the covers to his waist, ignoring his bulging erection that still poked against the fabric. Then, picking up a bottle of lemon scented oil from the tray of medical supplies on the bedside table, she poured some into her palm and rubbed her hands together. With practiced skill, she began working on his shoulders, her fingers slipping over smooth skin, pressing deeply into corded bands of muscle. . . . She tried to focus on the therapeutic procedure, putting perhaps a bit too much vigor into her ministrations. But it was no use. She couldn't ward off the slow wave of sensual arousal that was welling up inside her.

The wave grew as her hands moved down each arm in turn, picking up his hands and working her way around all ten long, tapered fingers . . . fingers that had teased and stroked her most private places . . . places that were starting to ache and throb with the recollection. She felt her breath accelerate . . . her breasts tighten. Felt moisture gathering between her legs. . .

"Catherine . . . For God's sake, tell me this is making you as hot as it's making me."

"Stop it."

"You feel it down there, don't you? Between your legs. In that tight, wet, beautiful . . ." He trailed into silence for a moment, then

murmured, *"I have a feeling you wouldn't like what I usually call that part of a woman's body."* Then, in a slightly teasing tone—*"So, tell me, Nurse Emerson, what do you call that part of your anatomy?"*

"Genitals," she managed to say.

"That's awfully prim, don't you think?"

"It's anatomically correct." But she knew he was right. She *did* sound prim.

"Don't you think pussy sounds sexier?"

"No, I do not. I don't like it at all."

"Okay, so . . . what about snatch?"

"Worse."

"I guess cunt's no good, either."

"Definitely not."

"Uh . . . how about snapping turtle?"

"You made that up."

"No, I didn't. You'd be amazed at all the . . . colloquialisms you hear hanging out with a bunch of guys. Let's see, there's mink, lunch box. Kitty-cat. Jelly box. I like that one. Or how about honey pot? That's kind of evocative."

"Yes, of Winnie-the-Pooh."

"Not exactly what we're going for here." He sighed. *"All right, then, what about some British terms? Cunny is nice. So is quim. I like that one, don't you?"*

When she didn't reply, he chuckled. *"Hmm, you do like it. So, sweet Catherine, tell me—does rubbing your hands all over my chest and belly like you're doing make your pretty quim all hot and wet?"*

"Stop it," she ordered, because listening to him whisper dirty words in her mind was making her ever hotter and wetter. And her

nipples were so hard she could barely stand it.

“God, you don’t know how much I want to run my fingers through that silky wet quim or yours . . . or how much I want to taste your sweet juices. I’d like to lick you from back to front, then push my tongue as far as I can inside your tight cunny and feel you squeeze it . . . then I want to lick your clit and suck and nibble on it until it’s all hard and swollen and you. . . .”

“Stop! Oh . . . please, stop!”

“But I can’t do any of that. And I’ve made myself even harder talking about it. It feels like my cock must be the size of a deli salami. Jesus . . .”

She had the nearly uncontrollable urge to laugh hysterically. Instead, she stood, dry mouthed, her hands lying still on his clearly defined abs, trying to control her breathing.

“Catherine, please, stop torturing us both. Do what we both want. Lock the door.”

With a feeling that fate was controlling her actions, she walked slowly to the door, twisted the lock, then, just as slowly returned to the bed. Standing beside Marcus again, she stared down at him and took a shuddering breath.

“Poor Catherine,” he murmured. “I want you so much. I want to do what we did last night for real. But I can’t. I’m trapped in this unconscious body, and I need you to help me wake up—by getting as close as we can to last night’s experience.”

“I . . . I understand,” she said—and, as hard as it was for her to believe, much less admit, she *was* beginning to understand. Only a short while ago, when he’d slipped into deep sleep,

she herself had reasoned that touching him might make him aware enough to talk to her—and it had. It made a frightening sort of sense that touching him intimately, as a lover would, might bring him even more fully awake.

“Touching me did make you hot, didn’t it?” he asked. *“That and me telling you all the things I wanted to do to you.”*

She couldn’t lie to him. “Yes.”

“Thank God, for that—and your honesty. At least, I know my intuition is on track and that this powder keg of excitement between us isn’t all one sided.”

“No,” she whispered. “It isn’t one sided at all.”

“You are so responsive, sweetheart. And that’s good. That’s very good. I want to give you pleasure—any way I can. If I could, I’d do all the things I said I wanted to do to you, believe me, I would—and more. But I can’t. So touch me again with those sensual hands of yours. Bring me alive, the way I want to bring you alive.”

A small voice in the back of her head—probably, what was left of her professional conscience—said she should walk out of the room. She ignored it. Reaching out to take hold of the bedclothes, she rolled them down, then pushed up his short hospital gown.

As she knew it would be, his erection was enormous—hard and thick, with the crimson head a good deal bigger than the shaft. Unhampered by the covers, it sprang away from his body, and as she watched, it gave a little involuntary bounce.

Some part of her mind was shocked and

amazed at what she was doing. But she didn't stop. Her hands were still slick with oil, and she slid one of them downward, over the flat plane of his belly, threading her fingers through the dark thatch of hair until they reached the base of his penis. Tentatively, she stroked one finger up the length of the hardened flesh, tracing the ridge of a vein.

"Oh, yes, that feels good. Wrap your hand around it, the way you did last night. I want to be in you, but I won't ask you to do that here. So will you stroke me? Hard and fast, until I come."

He didn't speak again. He didn't move. Yet she sensed the tension radiating from him.

Her own breath was coming in gasps. Before she could lose her nerve, she let her hand encircle his rigid shaft. When the devil didn't pop up through the floor and stab her with his pitchfork, she felt the tension drain from muscles in her body that she hadn't even realized were under strain.

Letting her own sensual needs guide her, she squeezed him—first gently, then with more force, feeling him harden even further under her touch, until he felt like a velvet-covered steel rod.

"Ah. You like that," she murmured.

"God, yes."

He had asked her only to touch him, but suddenly it wasn't enough—not for him or for her. He needed her as close as she could get. He needed not merely a woman he'd found in a dream but didn't really know but a lover, someone who knew him as well as it was possible to know another human being. And

she wanted the same.

Leaning over him, she brought her lips to the crimson tip of his erection and kissed it, then stroked her tongue down the entire length, hearing his gasp of surprise and pleasure in her mind. She had done this a time or two in high school and hated every second of it. But with this man, it felt right and good—and intensely arousing. Smiling, she circled the glans with her tongue, testing the ridges, using light, flickering licks to tease the spot on the top of his penis where the glans met the shaft.

If she had any doubt left that she was doing the right thing, it evaporated when his hips rose off the bed, straining upward, toward her mouth. She wanted to cheer at that first actual movement of his body, but instead, she concentrated her attention on eliciting more of the same.

A drop of semen beaded at the tip of his penis, and she licked it away. She had never liked the taste. But then, she had never tasted *his* semen, and somehow, the salty tang added immeasurably to the sensuality of what she was doing to him.

“Jesus!” he gasped, as she focused on the slit from which more drops of semen kept appearing. *“Oh, Catherine, that’s so good. So good . . . Please . . . oh, sweetheart, suck on it. Take my cock inside your hot, sweet mouth, and suck on it like you’re gonna swallow it.”*

His explicit request pulsed through her, soaking her already-wet panties with another surge of liquid excitement. Groaning, she closed her lips around the very tip of his penis, slowly

working her way downward until she had the entire head inside her mouth. Then, just as slowly, and all the while creating a suction against the smooth, hot, sensitive flesh, she slid him out . . . then back in, this time taking a little more of the thick shaft inside her.

She repeated the process several times, listening to his unintelligible utterances and his breathless gasps, until she found her comfort level. The truth was, she couldn't get more than about half of his magnificently aroused penis inside her mouth, so she wrapped her hand around the bottom half to compensate. And, as the thought occurred to her that she was ignoring another exceedingly sensitive spot, she used her other hand to gently begin stroking his large scrotal sac, which instantly contracted and tightened around his testicles at her touch.

He'd stopped even trying to speak, but she could hear his breathing, fast and heavy and full of groans cut short by the next gasp for breath. The intimacy was so vivid that she could feel every nuance of his response. And she knew that he was approaching climax.

"Wait . . ."

Her mouth and hands stilled at the hoarse utterance.

"I want you with me," he growled. *"Hitch up on the bed and straddle my good leg. Rub your clit against it and make yourself come."*

She didn't even consider arguing. She was hot and wet and on fire, and if he hadn't suggested it, she probably would have excused herself immediately after he'd come to go into the bathroom and take care of the problem. But

his way sounded much, much more appealing.

With a small whimper, she climbed up beside him and placed a knee on either side of his good leg and lowered herself until her . . . her *quim*, as she'd decided to call it—was pressing against the lower part of his shin. Good thing his legs were so long, or she wouldn't have been able to bend far enough to get her mouth back around his penis. As it was, she managed it with fair comfort—not that comfort was a big priority in her present state.

With her mouth once again bobbing up and down on his penis, she rocked her hips forward and back, rubbing her throbbing clit against his bare leg.

"That's it, sweetheart. Do it like that. Just like that."

His urgent words fueled the fire building inside her.

"Come with me," he urged. *"Just like last night—but for real, this time. We're right here, together, and we're going to come together."*

Whimpering, she shifted to press her breasts against his thigh, rubbing her nipples against the firm muscles to ease the ache. The action seemed to send him over the edge.

She heard his breath hiss out of his lungs, felt his hips jerk, erratically at first, then in rhythmic beats. He let out a strangled cry, and she felt the first jet of semen spurt into her mouth. She swallowed it—and the next, and the next, and the extreme intimacy of doing what she had never done for any man triggered her own body's ultimate response. The climax took hold of her all at once, shuddering through

her hard and fast, until she fell, limp and spent, against him.

An instant later, she felt a band clamp around her left wrist, which lay wedged against his side. Looking down, she gasped as she saw his fingers encircling her flesh.

“Marcus!”

He held her for a moment longer. Then his fingers loosened their grip, and his hand fell away.

But he had touched her. He had moved his hand and clasped her wrist. Which meant that making love to him truly had made a real difference. He had reached a new level of consciousness, if only for a little while.

“Marcus?”

No response. He’d fallen back into total unconsciousness.

Or had he? He was as still and silent as he’d been when she’d first arrived, but somehow, she sensed a difference. He wasn’t as far away. He was merely worn out.

Well, that was no surprise. So was she.

Leaning above him on her elbows, she noted that his pale skin was covered with perspiration. She stretched to grab a fresh washcloth from the swing-arm table and used it to wipe his brow. Then she pressed her lips to his cheek.

She hardly knew him, yet she felt a connection to him that she’d never felt with anyone else. A sexual connection, yes, but it was much more than that. She felt committed to him in a way she hardly understood.

She was leaning over to kiss him softly on the lips when she heard the doorknob rattle.

Five

Catherine lurched off the bed, hastily combing her hand through her hair. “Who is it?” she called.

“Why is the door locked?” an annoyed female voice asked. “What’s going on in there?”

“Is the door locked?” she inquired, trying to sound innocent as she pulled the covers back into place over Marcus. “Mr. Preston’s brother must have locked it behind him.”

“Let me in!”

“I’m coming,” Catherine said—then thought she heard a laugh from the man on the bed, but she couldn’t be sure.

As quickly as she could, she opened the door.

Pam Winters scrutinized her through narrowed eyes, then swept past her toward the bed. Rounding the screen, she looked at her brother, then demanded, “What did you do to Marcus?”

“What . . . what do you mean?” Catherine asked, struggling to keep her voice steady.

“He looks better.”

“I’ve . . . been giving him a massage,” she said, her gaze frantically searching the bed for any sign of their recent activity.

“I came to invite you to dinner,” Pam said.

Catherine blinked, disconcerted. “Oh. Thank you. But I really shouldn’t leave my patient.”

“The family wants to get to know you, and dinner is the best opportunity.”

It was apparent she wasn’t going to win this

one, so why try? “Yes. All right,” she agreed. “When?”

“In half an hour.”

“That doesn’t give me much time.”

“Well, we don’t stand on ceremony here. Your bedroom is the next one, down the corridor to the right. Nurse Byron will take over for you while you’re at dinner. I’ll stay until she arrives.”

Catherine didn’t want to leave, but she honestly couldn’t think of a good excuse to stay—nothing Pam Winters would accept, anyway. “I’ll be back later,” she told Marcus softly, then started toward the door.

Marcus was happy that the connecting door between his room and Catherine’s was thin enough to allow sound to travel. He lay in bed, listening as she moved around, getting ready for dinner. At least they’d put her in a nice bedroom. It was one he might have chosen himself.

The house was his. He’d bought it from Deidre and her husband when they’d needed an infusion of cash because of some stupid investments they’d made on Arthur Winter’s advice. Now Deidre, Pam, their spouses, Logan . . . the whole damned lot of them . . . were acting as if they owned the place.

He wanted to surge off the bed and bang some heads together. But it wasn’t going to happen. Not yet.

The amazing lovemaking to which Catherine had just treated him had helped. His instincts were on target. Binding her to him, becoming lovers together, was bringing him further and

further out of the fog. At the moment, though, he was wasted from the explosive climax he'd had—inside his sweet lover's incredibly hot mouth, for God's sake, when he hadn't dared dream she'd be uninhibited enough even to go down on him. He was still weak. Still unconscious. Still stuck in this damn bed. The frustration was enough to make him scream—if he could have screamed.

Nurse Byron came in and took his vital signs, then sat down beside him. He ignored her. She wasn't as bad as Hardcastle. But her hand cream smelled like wintergreen, which he hated. Ignoring the smell, he focused on the noises coming from the other room.

Catherine was in there—undressing, probably. He pictured her naked. Her smoothly curved body, her fantastic C-size breasts . . . the triangle of chestnut hair covering her pus . . . No, she didn't like that word. He'd better stop using it and get used to *quim*, which she not only liked but which had aided and abetted her arousal in unbelievable ways.

She was so pretty and sweet and . . . well, shy, really. Nothing like any of the women he was usually attracted to. But, Jesus, he wanted her—for real and in the most basic ways. He wanted to do all the things he'd told her about—and then some. Hell, he wanted to shove his cock into her and fuck her so hard she wouldn't be able to walk for a week, and neither would he. And he wanted to fuck her breasts, squeeze them together around his cock and pump until he came all over her creamy white skin . . . Then there was her mouth—he wanted to be inside

that again, too . . . and that gorgeous, smooth-as-a-baby's bottom of hers . . . yeah, he had some plans for it, though he thought it might take some convincing to get her to let him anywhere near it.

The thing he wanted to do most, though, was kiss her. Sweet kisses, tender kisses. Deep, wet, luscious kisses. Kisses were intimate, more intimate than any other sexual act. He hadn't kissed her in their dream lovemaking because, somehow, it hadn't seemed right. When he did kiss her for the first time, he wanted to be awake and aware. He wanted it to be real.

And he *would* kiss her for real. It was a worthy goal and one he would, by God, reach—because she was here, with him.

He heard Catherine come in, heard her and Nurse Byron introducing themselves to each other. Then Catherine was gone.

And he was alone again.

And scared.

Wearing a soft knit, light blue top and navy slacks, her hair pinned back in a severe style, Catherine descended the stairs. Her outfit wasn't fancy, but it was one of the best she'd brought.

She'd felt okay about leaving Marcus to come downstairs. The other nurse—Mrs. Byron—was there, and she seemed like a decent person. But when Catherine reached the front hall, she almost turned back. On some deep, primitive level, she knew Marcus needed her.

More than that, she sensed his fear that she was gone, felt him wanting to call her back to

him but restraining himself. It seemed their afternoon “session” had not only reinforced but intensified their psychic bond. Either that, or she was projecting her own desires to be with him onto him. She couldn’t tell for sure which it was.

Regardless, she would only be gone for a little while, and she had to find out more about the people in this house.

Catherine jumped when someone moved into her path from the shadows beside the staircase.

“I’m sorry to startle you, dear,” a plump, gray-haired woman said as she stepped into the light. “I’m Emily Richburg, Mr. Preston’s housekeeper. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“It’s good to meet you, too,” Catherine replied.

The woman looked over her shoulder, then lowered her voice. “They came in and took over the house. It’s not right. You need to help me.”

Catherine looked at her helplessly. “What do you mean?”

“Take care of him. Make him well again.”

She nodded slowly, concerned but puzzled by the obvious anxiety displayed by Marcus’s housekeeper. “I’ll do my best.”

Before the woman could say any more, a door opened, and Pam stepped into the foyer.

“Oh, there you are,” she said. “Come in to dinner. Everybody’s waiting for you.”

Mrs. Richburg hurried away, and Catherine followed Marcus’s sister into the dining room. The rest of his family was seated at the table, all dressed in casually elegant clothing that made Catherine feel a bit frumpy.

Pam took a seat by her husband, motioning Catherine to the empty place at the foot of the table. Silence fell as they all looked toward her, and she suspected that they'd been talking about her.

"This is my husband, William," Deidre said.

"Nice to meet you," Catherine answered, placing her napkin in her lap.

"How are you settling in?" Deidre asked as the butler served everyone bowls of lobster bisque.

Catherine dipped her spoon into the creamy soup. "Fine, thank you."

"She was locked in with Marcus a little while ago," Pam reported.

Catherine felt heat rise in her cheeks. "I didn't know the door was locked."

"We all make little mistakes," Logan drawled.

"Tell us what you think about Marcus's condition?" Deidre asked.

Glad to be able to focus on her patient, Catherine quickly she gave them a rough assessment.

Pam leaned forward. "When is he going to wake up?"

"That's hard to say," she answered carefully. "He's shown some signs of reaching a higher level of consciousness."

Logan's eyes narrowed, as though he didn't find the information welcome. "I hope that's not just wishful thinking. Exactly what did he do?"

"His facial expression changed," she answered, amazed at how easily the lie came to her lips. She wasn't going to tell them about Marcus's fingers circling her wrist—not until

she knew why Marcus thought he was in “grave danger,” not until she knew who, if anyone, among this crowd of rude and disagreeable people could be trusted.

“He always did love risky behavior,” Logan muttered. “It’s his own fault that he’s in this fix.”

No one disagreed.

Catherine wanted to retort that it was a pretty hard assessment, coming from a brother. But instead, she ate her soup.

“I’ve done some reading on coma,” Deidre said. “The longer he’s unconscious, the more likely it is there will be permanent damage.”

Catherine flicked a glance at her. “Yes.”

“So that would mean he wouldn’t be competent to make business decisions.”

Was that what this was about? They all wanted to get Marcus declared incompetent, so they could rob him?

“I’m not able to comment on that,” she said, unable to entirely keep the irritation out of her voice.

They left the topic alone, moving on to more mundane aspects of Marcus’s treatment—his physical therapy regime and the like. Catherine fielded the questions with studied care, acutely conscious of not wanting to say anything that might affect the status quo. No, she wanted things to stay just as they were until she could have a *nonsexual* chat with Marcus and find out what the devil was going on around here.

He was torturing himself. He knew it, yet he also knew doing it was serving a better purpose.

Thinking about making love with Catherine was floating him a little closer to the surface.

It also had him as hard as a rock—and he wasn't about to ask benign Nurse Byron to do anything about it, even if he could have. She was sitting on the other side of the room—reading a magazine, he thought, hearing the occasional turn of a crisp page—and he just hoped she stay there.

Lying in the darkness, he filled his thoughts with Catherine . . . of making love with her. He spent a long time imagining what it would be like to kiss her—how her mouth would taste, what her tongue would feel like . . . that lovely, sleek tongue that had licked his cock as if it were an ice cream cone melting under a summer sun. He thought about covering her mouth with his and ravishing her with a greed that he could hardly control, and she would surrender to his need with that boundless generosity that astounded him and was such an innate part of her nature.

When he'd wrung all the torture he could out of kissing her, he moved on. He saw her dressed in a long, flowing nightgown the color of café au lait . . . with only ribbons for straps and lace covering her breasts and the whole thing so sheer he could see the thatch of surprisingly soft chestnut hair covering her mound. Then he imagined undressing her . . . pushing those skinny straps off her shoulders and down her arms until those spectacular breasts spilled out—into his waiting hands.

And meanwhile, she'd be untying the belt of the robe he'd be wearing and pushing it off his

shoulders, her small hands sending a shockwave over his skin everywhere her fingers brushed and caressed him. Her hands . . . they were amazing, really—deft and skilled and confident, because of her work, yet shy, almost innocent, and achingly tender.

Conjuring more torture, he thought about them touching him . . . teasing his nipples, stroking his cock, digging into his back as he sucked on her breasts . . .

Crazed with lust by this time, he had no more patience for preliminaries. He saw himself sitting on the solid oak, straight-backed chair he kept in the cottage, by the writing desk. With his legs splayed wide, he dragged her between them and bent to bury his mouth between her legs. She was hot and juicy, and he licked her until she begged him to take her. Then he pushed his legs between hers and, in one smooth motion, pulled her down onto his cock.

He heard her gasp as her tight, pulsing tunnel stretched around him, squeezing him with little involuntary spasms, letting go even more juices that ran down to drench his balls. He bent to suck one of her dusky, hard-cockled nipples into his mouth at the same time he rolled and tugged the other one with his fingers.

He imagined her saying, “That’s so good . . . oh, yes . . . please, harder. Do it harder,” and he gladly complied while she moved up and down on his cock, her hips bouncing faster and faster as the pleasure built. Her nails were digging into his arms. Her head dropped to his shoulder, and her teeth bit into his neck, her mouth sucking at his flesh as she whimpered

and moaned.

It was taking torture to the level of art form, he figured, to think about what he knew would send them both skyrocketing over the top. A hand gliding down her back to cup her smooth, soft bottom. A single finger stroking up and down the deep valley between those two gorgeous half-moons. Stroking forward to feel her lips stretched around his cock and to gather her juices to make his finger slippery. Then finding the spot that made her jump and gasp at what he was sure was an unfamiliar sensation to her . . . not giving her time to think about it, if she even could have thought at that point—God knows, he couldn't have—but just touching her there . . . circling . . . another trip to gather up more hot, slick love juice . . . and more circling and stroking . . . and one easy, gentle push. And she exploded all around him, her luscious body out of control. Her spasming channel clamping down on his cock, squeezing him . . . squeezing hard . . . Tension gathering in his balls . . . that familiar burning deep in his belly . . . and in the next instant, the hot river of semen was shooting out of him, and he was filling her up with it.

And if he didn't get to do it for real—and soon—he thought he might *truly* lose his mind.

Still, as he lay there, hot and hard and unsatisfied, he had to admit, his senses were more alert and his mind closer to the surface of awareness than he could remember them being since his car had flipped over and the world had gone black. Too bad his mind, which could project itself all the way into Catherine's

dreams, couldn't move his damned hand as far as his own cock.

Poor little old Nurse Byron. She was in for quite a shock next time she toddled over to check his pulse, blood pressure, and temp.

By the end of dinner, Catherine was exhausted. After being shown the kitchen and given leave to use it, should she want snacks or hot drinks, she went upstairs and directly to Marcus's room, where she told Nurse Byron she would take over.

Then she changed Marcus's IV and checked his vital signs. They were stable, and she wrote down the information.

Having finished the routine tasks, she stood by his bed and looked at him. "How are you?" she asked quietly.

He didn't answer, and she reached out to smooth back a lock of his dark hair.

"I think you're good for him," a woman said behind her.

She whirled and saw that it was Pam. Lord, the woman moved like a cat.

"I wish you people would stop sneaking up on me," she answered, then regretted it. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she said, "I'm sorry. I'm tired, and that's at least the third time today I've been startled by someone I didn't know was behind me."

"I like to sit with my brother in the evenings," Pam said. "You could take a walk through the gardens if you like."

Catherine hesitated. She would like the chance to get out of the house, if only to clear

her mind so she could think better. But when she cast a glance at Marcus, she was certain she saw a frown flicker across his brow.

“Thanks,” she said to Pam, “but I think I’ll just stay here. Maybe in the morning.”

Pam looked surprised—and frustrated. But she masked the negative expression quickly, adding to Catherine’s growing belief that something was rotten in the state of Tidesfall.

“You’re very dedicated,” Pam said.

“Well . . .” Catherine flapped a hand in a dismissive gesture. “That’s why I’m a nurse. I wanted to help sick people.”

The other woman cocked one eyebrow. “Is that it? Or are you forming a bond with my brother?”

“A bond?” She gave what she hoped passed as a bewildered look. “I just met him.”

Pam’s expression remained suspicious, but she said, “All right, then. I’ll see you in the morning.” Turning, she left the room.

Catherine exhaled the breath she’d been holding. She wished she could build a fortress around Marcus’s room, a place to keep him safe.

But safe from what? Or from whom? Until she knew, she could do nothing. She felt as if she were trying to walk through Marcus’s fog, and she had to be very careful, lest she stumble and fall—and take Marcus down with her.

Methodically, she went about her duties, checking her patient’s IV drip and rechecking his vital signs. “I’ll be here until the night duty nurse comes back,” she told him, then crossed to the desk and looked at the clipboard to see that the next shift belonged to Miss Hardcastle.

“Has your family been this hostile since they brought you home?”

Again, he was silent, and she felt her anxiety level jump. Had their sexual activity been too much for him? She’d thought earlier that it had helped to bring him further out of his coma, but maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe she should have . . .

But, no. She quashed the worried thought, determined not to go down that road. She couldn’t keep second-guessing herself. Even though the psychic experiences Marcus was visiting upon her were totally out of her ken, at some point, she had to trust her own intuition to know what was and wasn’t right to do for him.

With a sigh, she sat down in the chair beside her patient, resigned to wait until he found his way into her mind once more.

Two hours later, when Miss Hardcastle came in, Catherine was glad to go off duty. She was exhausted from a very long and stressful day—to say nothing of the previous dream-filled night. Yet, she tossed restlessly for an hour before falling asleep.

Soon after she had, though, she started to dream.

“Meet me in the garden.”

“Yes,” she answered eagerly.

She took the back stairs and slipped out the kitchen door, onto a wide terrace that looked out over well-tended plantings and flagstone paths. She passed a mass of orange day lilies, then an eye-popping mix of purple and salmon

impatiens.

When the flagstone path ended and turned to mulch, she felt a echo from the night before. In that dream, this was the spot where the mist had closed in around her.

Glancing up, through the trees, she was reassured to see a quarter moon hanging low in the sky and stars twinkling above her. But they weren't the only illumination. Strands of tiny lights were strung on poles, turning the garden into a fairy landscape. In the background, moonlight sparkled on the dark water of a lake. It was a beautiful setting, and she knew that someone had created it especially for her.

She also knew who that someone was. Moreover, she suddenly realized that their surroundings weren't the only thing he'd decided to decorate.

Looking down, she saw that her own nightshirt had been replaced by a negligee unlike anything she'd ever owned. The sheer confection was the color of heavy cream. It had ribbon straps, lacy cups that barely covered her breasts, and a wide band that emphasized her narrow waist. The gauzy skirt swirled around her legs. Below the hem, her feet were bare and her toenails were painted with delicate pink polish. To top it off, her hair, which she almost always wore pinned back, was lying in soft waves around her head and shoulders.

Every detail was perfect—undoubtedly because the man who had called her here had personally made the selections for his own pleasure. But it was her pleasure, too, that

concerned him, and he'd chosen well.

"Marcus," she called. "Where are you?"

"Here." His voice was so close, it startled her.

She whirled to find him standing a few yards away, beneath an archway covered with deep red roses. He was wearing a pair of dark slacks and a long-sleeved burgundy shirt that draped softly in a way that told her it must be silk. The top two or three buttons were open, revealing a good deal of the crisp, dark hair on his broad chest. After seeing him in his sick bed, it took her breath away to encounter him as he stood before her, strong and powerful and so very sexy.

"Is this your dream or mine?" she asked.

"Both, I think," he replied. "You're asleep in the bedroom next to mine, and I'm . . . well, in the same state I've been in for I don't know how long, now."

"A little over three weeks," she told him.

His eyes widened a little. "Only that long? It feels like eternity."

"But, Marcus . . ." She took a step toward him. "Why did you bring us here? Why not just talk to me as we did this afternoon?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I hate having you see me limp and unconscious."

A smile flirted with her lips. "Not so limp."

That made him laugh. "Not with you, no. But with Nurse Hardcastle, I'm as flaccid as a proverbial wet noodle.

"I should hope so," she said, unable to repress a grin.

"I wonder if anyone's ever been hard for Hardcastle."

She groaned. "That's awful. But who knows? Maybe she was a chorus girl in Las Vegas, in her youth."

"Oh, sure. I'd buy that. But enough of Hardcastle."

He walked toward her, limping slightly, coming to a stop about an inch away to pull her close, wrapping her in a warm embrace.

She lowered her head to his shoulder. Now that she was in his arms, she longed to cling to him, to kiss him and stroke him, and to feel his hands and lips on her body in turn. But she didn't know how much time they had.

She raised her head and met his gaze. "We have to talk about your relatives."

He grimaced. "Yes, unfortunately, we do."

"They're not very nice."

"That's putting it politely."

"I'm . . ." She hesitated. "Well, I'm not sure they want you to get better."

His eyes narrowed. "My thoughts exactly. How did *you* come to that conclusion."

She dragged in a breath and let it out in a rush. "I've been reading your medical chart. I can't find any reason why you're still unconscious. According to all the physical indications, you should be awake."

His expression hardened into a look of fury. "I knew it."

"Marcus, tell me what's going on—with your family, I mean."

"They'll inherit a lot of money if I don't wake up."

Assimilating the implications of what he'd said, she asked slowly, "Do you think that's why

they got you out of the hospital and brought you home?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Lord." She'd thought the "grave danger" he'd told her about might have to do with his relatives declaring him incompetent in order to take control of his money. She hadn't considered . . . murder. At least, she hadn't taken the idea seriously when it had flitted briefly through her head.

Murder! Grave danger, indeed.

"How can I help?" she asked.

"You already are helping," he replied. "Every moment I spend with you makes me feel more alive. Stronger. More like myself." His gaze roamed her face as he raised a hand to tuck a curl behind her ear. "You're like a miracle—my own very personal miracle. And looking at you like this, I want nothing more than to kiss you senseless, then carry you to the cottage where we met last night and make love to you."

"I wish we could, but we have to—"

"Talk. I know." He shook his head. "Besides, I promised myself I wouldn't kiss you until I could do it for real." His fingertips still toying with her hair, trailing up and down her neck, he added, "Kissing is special. Intimate in a way that even intercourse isn't. I want our first kiss to happen when both of us are awake and completely aware."

Trying hard not to wonder what his self-made promise might mean about the future, she said, "So do I. But right now, you need to tell me—"

"In a minute," he murmured, trailing the

backs of his fingers down her throat, spreading them wide as they made their way across her chest and over the swell of her breast. "You are so tempting." He watched his fingertips toy with her nipple through the tissue-thin lace that covered it.

She sucked in a breath as arousal, sharp and sweet, shot through her. "Marcus . . . you shouldn't have brought us here—or dressed me like this. If you don't stop . . . oh, Lord . . ."

He had both breasts in his hands now, both nipples between his fingers. "No, I definitely should not have put you in this gown," he murmured.

"Marcus . . ."

"Jesus . . ." He dropped his hands to his sides and squeezed his eyes closed.

"We can't avoid it," she panted, trying to keep her wits about her. "We *have* to talk about your sisters and brother."

"I know." Opening his eyes, his jaw firming in determination, he took her hand and led her to the rose arbor, beneath which sat a low-backed wooden bench. "Okay," he said, pulling her down to sit beside him and draping an arm around her shoulders. "Let's talk."

She gave him a dubious look.

"I'll behave—I promise. Tell me what you want to know about my family?"

"Start with why they're so . . . *awful*."

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "We were raised to be awful. Our father pitted us against each other in all kinds of ways, some critical but most completely unimportant except that they kept up the rivalry. School, sports contests,

even stupid little things like who could find the biggest pumpkin at the local pick-your-own pumpkin patch—we were rewarded every time we came out on top. And our mother encouraged it, thought it would build character. But the result was that we were never allowed to develop normal relationships, like brothers and sisters do.”

She winced. “It sounds like a painful childhood.”

He shrugged. “Well, I was hardly deprived—lots of people survive far worse. But it did keep me from ever really getting to know my siblings. And I knew early on that I’d have to get away from my family if I were ever going to live my own life, on my own terms.”

He fell silent, his gaze unfocused and his expression grim, as if he were remembering things he’d as soon have forgotten.

“And when you left, you changed?” she prompted.

He gave her a rueful glance. “I’m probably not the nicest guy you’ll ever meet, but I do have friends who are decent people and who seem able to tolerate me. And I sure as hell wouldn’t kill my sisters or brother to get ahead in life.”

“Which is what you think your sisters and brother are trying to do to you?” she asked, thinking that if it were possible for her to feel any more surreal than she already did, making love and having intimate conversations inside a psychic dream, adding murder to the mix was sure the way to accomplish it.

Marcus was nodding. “The brakes on my

race car failed. It's taken me awhile to remember all the details of what went on before the race. But I'm pretty sure that Deidre got William to tamper with my car." At her shocked gasp, he went on quickly. "I can't prove it, but I think that's what happened."

"What about the others?" she asked. "Do they know?"

He nodded. "Logan is in on it, I'm certain. I've been estranged from him and from Deidre and William for years. We all inherited the same amount of money, but I've increased my stake tenfold, while Deidre and Logan have made some serious mistakes. I think they're pretty well broke. They want my money, and they are willing to kill me to get it."

"And Pam?"

Marcus hesitated, then said slowly, "Pam and I . . . we're friends, I think. I don't believe she's in it with them. But, honest to God, I don't know her well enough to be absolutely sure."

Catherine frowned, thinking back on everything Pam had said and done, wondering if her suspicious attitude meant she was being protective of Marcus—or concerned that Marcus's nurse might foil the murder plan. But she knew no better than he where Pam's loyalties might lie. She was having enough trouble believing that anyone's brother or sister could be so despicable as to plot a murder. Yet for Marcus's sake, she *had* to believe it—and to stop it from happening.

"You see why I felt desperate enough to dredge up a little bit of psychic skill I had as a kid and turn it into a major search campaign?"

“Yes, of course,” she replied, raising a hand to his cheek. “I’m just astonished that I should be the one who heard you. But I’m incredibly glad I did—even if I don’t know what I can do to help.”

Brushing a kiss against her hair, he murmured, “I’ve got a theory about why you alone heard my SOS, but it’ll keep until later. First, I’ve got to get out of this mess I’m in. And I can’t do it without you. I need you to keep them all away from me—or at least, don’t let them be alone with me. If you can just do that . . . I feel like I’m getting closer to the surface. Then, after one of them visits me, I’m back in slumberland.”

She drew in a sharp breath. “I think it happened when Logan came in. You had been talking to me. He asked me to get him a glass of water. I went to the bathroom to get it. Then after he left, you didn’t hear me when I spoke to you.”

“Yeah. It happens like that.”

“Marcus, you *have* to wake up,” she said, urgency coloring her tone. “I’ll keep them away today, and maybe I can manage tomorrow. But I can’t do it indefinitely. You have to get away from them.”

His arm tightened around her shoulders. “Believe me, I’m trying. And your being here, physically close to me, is helping more than even I imagined it would. But in calling you to me, in getting you to come here, I’ve . . .”

“You’ve . . . what?” she asked, frightened by the rush of anxiety she saw twist his features.

He half-turned to face her, taking her hands

in his and giving them a squeeze. “God help me, I’ve put you in danger, too,” he said.

“Me?”

He nodded. “I’m asking you to do things that are dangerous.”

She gave her head a quick shake. “I don’t care if it’s risky.”

He sighed. “Catherine, I wish I didn’t have to tell you this, but it’s important—to both of us. I know why they hired you. I heard them talking. After you applied for the job, they did a quick background check and found out that a patient of yours died under suspicious circumstances. The plan is to kill me and make it look like you did it.”

She felt as though she’d been hit in the chest with a wrecking ball. “No,” was all she could manage.

He gathered her against him, stroking her arms and shoulders, his lips placing small, tender kisses on her temple, her forehead, her hair. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You don’t have to tell me about it. But you needed to know what the consequences of helping me might be.”

“No, I want to tell you.” Actually, she wanted to bury her face against his shoulder and hide, but she wasn’t going to play coward.

Raising her gaze to his, she said. “It was old Mr. Brighton,” she said. “He had cancer. He had only a day, two at most, to live, and he was in terrible pain. But the morphine dosage prescribed by his doctor wasn’t enough—although, it was about what’s normal in those cases. He begged me to give him an overdose. He kept asking, and finally I . . .” She drew a

ragged breath. "I didn't give him an overdose. I gave him enough to put him in a coma, enough so he wouldn't feel the pain. It turned out to be enough to let him slip away a few hours later. But it wasn't enough that anyone could have said definitively that I'd killed him."

"In other words," Marcus said, "It could have been an accident."

She nodded. "But I know the police were suspicious."

"And the suspicion makes you vulnerable—the perfect fall guy for my dear siblings. You need to—"

He cut off abruptly, his brow drawing together in a dark scowl.

Alarmed, she asked, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Wait," he whispered, his look intent. "I think . . . Hardcastle's been asleep in the chair by the window for hours. But . . . Catherine, someone else just came in the room. I don't know who, but I—" His gaze shot to hers. "Go back. Wake yourself up and—"

"Hang on," she said, leaping from the bench. "I'm coming."

Six

She awoke moments later in her own bed, heart pounding and fully alert.

She jumped out of bed and headed across the room. She was wearing nothing but a long T-shirt that covered her to mid-thigh, but if she'd been stark naked, she wouldn't have spared a moment to dress—not when Marcus's life was at stake and even a wasted second might make her too late to save him.

Moving quickly on bare feet, she carefully, silently, opened the door connecting her room to his. His room was dark, lit only by a small, low-wattage lamp in the far corner, and she strained hard to see through the shadows.

She made out Miss Hardcastle—sleeping, as Marcus had said, in the overstuffed armchair by the window. A shadow moved by the hospital bed, and her gaze shot to it.

A man. William. He was standing over Marcus. He had a hypodermic in his hand . . . and he was reaching for the IV line.

“No,” she screamed, flying toward him.

William whirled. “You!” he spat, swatting her away with a powerful blow.

She landed against the small bedside table, her back crashing into the carved wood and the air whooshing out of her lungs.

She sprawled there, stunned, as William turned back to Marcus.

“No!” Catherine screamed again. “Miss Hardcastle! Wake up! Help!” She tried to push

herself off the floor, and pain shot through her right side, taking her breath away.

“She isn’t going to wake up.” William looked at her warily, obviously deciding whether or not further violence was necessary to keep her down. “She’ll just keep snoring away, thanks to a healthy dose of sleeping pills in her tea. So it’s just you and me, Nurse Emerson,” he grinned. “It will be my word against yours. And we know who the police are going to believe, don’t we? They’re not likely to give your story much credence, particularly with the legal power I plan to hire, given your history.”

Apparently satisfied that she would be no further threat, he turned to go about his wicked business.

He was a moron to think she’d just lie there and watch him kill the man she loved. A wild mix of panic, fury, and resolve gave her strength. With a mighty effort, Catherine scrambled to her feet, then launched herself at William, landing on his back.

“Shit!” He swung around, batting at her with the hand not holding the hypodermic. But he never connected.

Behind him, Catherine saw Marcus surge off the bed and fling himself at his brother-in-law.

She let go instantly, landing on her feet just as William lost his balance. Before he could regain it, she grabbed the bedside table, raised it high with both hands, and brought it crashing down onto William’s head.

He dropped, unconscious, onto the rug.

Catherine jumped over him to get to Marcus,

who was leaning against the bed.

“You woke up!” she exclaimed, taking him in her arms.

“Yeah, how about that?” He gave a short laugh, slumping heavily against her.

For long moments, they simply clung together, with her supporting him as he breathed heavily against her neck. She could feel his entire body quivering with the strain of remaining upright, and she was about to insist he lie down when a scuffling noise made Marcus straighten and tense.

They both looked to see William staggering from the room.

Catherine started to go after him, but Marcus’s hand grabbed at her arm.

“Let him go,” he ordered. “He’s a dangerous maniac, and I don’t want you hurt.”

“But he tried to *kill* you! We need to report it to the police.”

“Yes,” he said wearily. “Call 911.”

“I’m putting you back to bed first,” she insisted.

She cranked up the bed, though, so he didn’t have to lie flat. He was pale and looked extremely tired, but after she’d called the police, she checked his vital signs and was pleased to see that they were normal.

Then she ran to her room and pulled on a pair of sweats, not particularly wanting to meet the police half-naked. She also got a light blanket and covered Miss Hardcastle, who continued to snore in the easy chair. It seemed the least she could do for the woman.

In less than ten minutes, two uniformed

officers walked into the room. They were escorted by Pam, who crossed quickly to Marcus.

“Marcus! Thank God, you’re awake!” she said. “But what’s going on? Who called the police?”

“I did,” Catherine said.

Pam shot her a quick look—but didn’t, Catherine noted, ask *why* she’d called them—before leaning over to hug her brother. “Oh, thank God . . . thank God, you’re all right.”

Marcus managed to raise one hand briefly to pat Pam’s back.

She straightened. “I’m glad you’re back with us.”

“So am I.”

One of the police officers spoke to Marcus. “Hey, pal, what happened?”

He was an unremarkable looking, middle-aged man, Catherine noted, a little thick around the middle. His partner was, perhaps, ten years younger.

“I thought you were in a coma,” the older officer continued. “And word was, you couldn’t have any company. It’s great to see you’re awake.” He shifted on his feet, looking embarrassed.

“I’m really glad to see you, too, Tommy”—Marcus nodded to the younger officer—“Glen.”

“So what happened here?” the officer named Tommy asked. “And who’s the old bro . . . uh, lady snoring away over there?”

“That’s Miss Hardcastle,” Pam answered. “Marcus’s night-duty nurse. But what’s wrong with her?”

“She’s been drugged,” Catherine explained.

“The situation is kind of dicey,” Marcus said. “My brother-in-law tried to kill me. Miss Hardcastle was drugged to keep her from interfering. I woke up and found William trying to inject something into my IV line. I’m sure when your lab analyzes it, they’ll find a barbiturate overdose.”

Pam looked stricken. Catherine met the other woman’s wild-eyed gaze when it swung her way briefly before zeroing back on her brother.

Marcus’s voice was tinged with weariness as he went on. “Miss Emerson, here—my nurse—stopped William from offing me. But he wasn’t working alone. My sister, Deidre, and my brother Logan were in on it with him. They arranged the accident that put me out of commission. Then they got worried that I might recover.”

Pam gasped. “I was afraid of something like that.”

“Why?” Marcus asked.

“Because they were acting so strange. Having whispered conversations. And they’d stop whenever I came around.”

Quickly, she walked over to Marcus’s high-backed sleigh bed and opened the drawer in the lamp table beside it. Removing what Catherine recognized immediately as a handheld tape recorder, she came back toward them.

“I was afraid for you,” Pam said to Marcus. “So I . . . I bugged your room. The tape is voice activated and extremely sensitive. It picks up even the slightest sounds.”

“I always knew you had a good head on your shoulders.” Marcus gave her a smile. “That tape will let us hear William telling Catherine that he was going to kill me and pin it on her.”

“Oh, God.” Pam shot her a look of horrified distress as she added, “I have another recorder in the conservatory, where they were spending a lot of time.”

Catherine was pleased to hear about the second recorder, which might help to prove what Deidre, William, and Logan had tried to do. But her immediate concern was the first recorder—and what, besides proof of a murder plot, it might reveal. Activities of a sexual nature, for instance. She felt heat creeping into her face at the thought of the police and God knows who else listening to her performing oral sex on Marcus . . . or her having an orgasm. Had she cried out? She couldn’t remember. And what about their oh-so-explicit conversation?

Thinking back, she decided it wasn’t so bad, because most of the suggestive comments had come from Marcus and had been audible only inside her head. If she were lucky, the whole incident would sound like she’d merely been giving Marcus a therapeutic massage—perhaps with a bit more enthusiasm than might be considered normal.

The police took the tapes.

They also, at Catherine’s request, carried Miss Hardcastle to her own room. The woman might be a mean old witch, but Catherine felt a certain professional responsibility toward her as another nurse and thought it only common decency to leave the woman some dignity.

Before departing, the police also called the State's Attorney, a Mr. Wayne, who, because Marcus was confined to bed, came to interview him at home. When Mr. Wayne left, it was to issue arrest warrants on the three conspirators. Logan, Deidre, and William had long-since fled, but the police were confident that they'd be apprehended.

Amid the madness, Catherine called the doctor, who arrived as Wayne was leaving. The doctor checked Marcus over and said he was on his way to making a full recovery. A portable X-ray machine told him that the broken leg was mending quickly, but he said it could be several weeks before the last traces of the drugs Marcus had been given were out of his system. He also strongly recommended physical therapy to help Marcus regain his strength.

"So how did you get such personalized service from the cops?" Dr. Philips asked when he'd heard the story of the recent encounter.

Marcus laughed. "It helps to have a Wednesday poker game with the boys in blue. And I also give a big donation every year to the Police Boy's Fund."

The doctor turned serious. "I didn't approve of moving you home. But your family was adamant."

Marcus nodded. "And now you know why."

Before he would let the doctor leave, he insisted that Catherine be checked out, too. She'd already decided she was fine, but she went with Dr. Phillips into her bedroom and let him examine her so that he could assure Marcus that she'd suffered no more from William's

violent attentions than a couple of bruised ribs.

When the doctor left, Catherine looked at Marcus, who returned her gaze with a tired smile. "Is that it? Tell me there aren't any more people I have to talk to today."

She shook her head. "Even if there were, I wouldn't let you. You look exhausted."

"I can't argue with that."

"Marcus . . ." She laid a hand on his arm as she asked the question she'd been dying to ask for hours. "How did you do it—wake up, I mean?"

"I just . . . knew I had to," he said simply. "I heard you scream for help, and I heard you fall, and . . ." His free hand covered hers on his arm. "There was no way in hell I was going to let the bastard hurt you again."

"Oh, Marcus." She wanted to hug him, but she felt suddenly uncertain. This was no dream—he was awake and on his way to being fully himself again. She wasn't at all sure what sort of relationship, if any, he might still want to have with her.

And this was no time to find out.

"You need to rest," she said.

"Uh-huh," he agreed, his eyelids falling closed. "So do you."

"Nurse Byron said she'd check in on you in awhile. And I . . . I'll see you later."

"Hmm," he acknowledged, already half asleep.

She stood watching him until his breathing grew even. His hand slipped off hers to lie motionless across his abdomen. He was asleep.

She removed her hand from his arm, still

studying the relaxed features of the man whose life she'd saved that morning—and who'd saved hers in return.

She loved him, deeply and completely. But did he love her? Or was all he felt toward her—apart from intense sexual attraction—merely gratitude?

She didn't know. Nor did she know if it would be possible to make a relationship that had begun under such bizarre and dire circumstances into something that could last a lifetime.

But she badly wanted the chance to try.

Seven

“I’m sorry. But I’d like to be alone.”

At least Marcus wasn’t speaking to her, Catherine thought. He was telling his sister Pam and her husband that he wanted to finish his recovery at Tidesfall on his own.

They left, assuring him that he could call if he needed them.

Catherine was afraid to ask if he wanted her to leave, as well. She didn’t want to hear the answer.

Marcus looked at her with the same determined expression he’d worn when he’d awoken that morning. “I want to get back to normal as soon as possible,” he said.

“Then I’d suggest you hire another physical therapist,” she replied.

“That’s a good idea. Handle it for me, please,” he suggested, and she could see him swinging into executive mode. “Get someone you’ve worked with in the past—someone you trust.”

“All right.” She took a slow breath. “And I should pack, I guess, or—”

“No, you shouldn’t,” he snapped, then quickly dropped his gaze and began in a more moderate, almost hesitant tone. “I want . . . Well, I’m not free to say what I want. Not until I know what kind of recovery I’m going to make.”

She started to assure him that his recovery would be complete but clamped her mouth closed, realizing it would do no good. He’d need to prove it to himself.

Staring at his hands on his lap, he said, "I'd like you to stay here until I'm well." Then raising his gaze to hers, he added, "Please, Catherine, don't leave."

"Okay," she said softly.

It took him a month. It was both the best and the worst month of her life.

Marcus asked to be put on an intensive rehabilitation program. The cast came off his leg, and he began walking with a cane. He spent hours in the gym every day, working with his physical therapist.

The evenings, he spent with her. They ate in the small, comfortable morning room, then sat in the conservatory or the den. Sometimes they watched movies on his huge plasma-screen television set. Sometimes they sat together and read.

She liked it best when they simply talked, and they talked about anything and everything. They had the same political philosophy. They were both Orioles fans, and they both liked opera. They both read mysteries and biographies. And they both hated beer, miniature-size dogs, and arrogant people who were incapable of admitting mistakes. She wasn't the sports freak that he was, but she was happy to be able to say she shared his enthusiasm for white water rafting and backpacking.

Talking about trails they'd hiked led to his questioning her about her life. He wanted to know everything about her childhood, and she often saw a certain wistfulness in his blue eyes

when she told him about her warm and loving parents, now both dead, and the close relationship she still had with her sister, who lived in California.

The evening Deidre and William were apprehended in Mexico, he was clearly as relieved as she was, although later he seemed somewhat distracted. Then, when Logan was picked up in Montana a couple of days later, she was sure his show of satisfaction was ambivalent, at best. With a little gentle prodding, she got him to admit that, while he was truly glad his siblings and William weren't still on the loose, he couldn't dispel the regret he felt about what might have been. She understood that he was grieving for the family he never had, and she thought he'd probably always feel at least a little sad about it.

She also thought one way to mitigate his sadness would be to make a family of his own. But she didn't say it. Didn't say how much she longed to spend her life with him, creating a family together. She didn't know what he wanted from her.

Not her nursing skills, that was certain—he'd ceased to need those from anyone and had dismissed the other two nurses only two days into his convalescence.

It confused and, frankly, distressed her further that he seemed determined to keep their relationship platonic—even when she felt the sexual tension humming between them. Even when that tension became so hot, just a look from him made her think she might melt into puddle of seething need and beg him to make

love with her. He, at least, had his long daily sessions in the gym to work off the steam that built between them in the evenings. She had to rely on long walks—and her own hands.

She had moved to a bedroom down the hall from his, telling him she didn't want to disturb him. Every night, she lay in bed, awake and wanting him, hoping that he'd call her into one of their dreams. But it seemed that special link was broken—or he didn't want to use it. Either way, the results were the same. She had no psychic powers and couldn't reach out to him as he had to her.

By the end of May, she'd concluded that she should go home. While the days with Marcus had served to strengthen her love for him, it seemed they'd had the opposite effect on his feelings toward her. If he loved her, he surely would have said *something* by now. Miserably, she decided to tell him she was leaving. She would do it . . . soon.

Her afternoons were free because Marcus was with his physical therapist. Since she had no duties, Catherine had gotten into the habit of curling up with a book on the wicker chaise in the bright, sunny conservatory. She was sitting among the graceful tropical vegetation and bright flowers when Mrs. Richburg came bustling in, holding a white envelope.

"Mr. Preston wanted me to give you a message," she said.

"Is he all right?" Catherine asked anxiously.

"I believe so," she replied, handing over the sealed envelope, then leaving as quickly as she'd entered.

Catherine held the envelope in her hand for several moments, thinking it was a strange way for Marcus to communicate with her. Struggling to keep her hand from trembling, she slipped her thumb under the flap and opened the seal.

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Please come meet me in the summer house.

It was signed simply “Marcus.”

She knew the summer house. She had visited it. It wasn't exactly like the cottage in their dreams but had a more open and airy feel to it and was furnished with more modern, though no less comfortable, furniture.

Leaving the main house, she headed down a flagstone path, then stepped off into mulch. Her heart was hammering inside her chest as she reached the small green and white building with its huge open windows.

Marcus was standing in the open front doorway, watching for her. His gaze remained fixed intently on her as she approached. He was dressed much as he'd been the first time she'd seen him—a white dress shirt open at the neck and dark slacks.

She stopped a few feet away from him, her breath catching in her throat. “Why did you ask me here?” she whispered.

He regarded her gravely. “I thought it seemed fitting. We started out here—in a way. I turned this place into what I wanted it to be—for us.”

Nervous and suddenly shy, she took a step toward him. “What do you mean, this place is ‘fitting’? For what?”

He cleared his throat. “You might have noticed that I've kept things between us . . .

shall we say, light since the morning the police were here.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“I was recovering from being in a coma. I was in . . . less than prime physical shape. And I didn’t know what kind of a recovery I was going to make.”

“I never had any doubts.”

“But I did. So I set a goal for myself. Walking down here on my own, without a cane. And I did it,” he added with a note of triumph.

“Yes, I see. But why did you feel you had to reach your goal before we could . . . well, engage in certain activities we already know we both enjoy?”

He drew a deep breath. “This is probably going to sound really old-fashioned—and pretty ridiculous given our history together, but I wanted us to get to know each other. I wanted to see what we had in common—without sex getting in the way.”

“It doesn’t sound ridiculous at all,” she said, feeling more hopeful than she had in days. “I’ve been happy to find out we have a lot in common—besides sex.”

“Yes.” He laughed. “I’m relieved there’s something more between us than mutual lust.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Is that all you thought it was?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve known since the first time I laid eyes on you what I wanted”—he gave her a crooked grin—“besides that minor little thing about saving my life, that is.”

“And what exactly do you want?”

He closed the distance between them in two

easy strides, cupping her face in his hands and tilting it upward, toward his. "I think you know what I want," he said.

And he lowered his mouth to cover hers.

The instant his lips touched hers, her knees went weak, and she melted against him. He wrapped her in his arms with a low, throaty groan that spilled into her mouth as he slid his tongue between her lips. She opened herself instantly to him, and his head angled for deeper possession, his tongue circling hers in a seductive dance, inviting her to join him. And she did, using her tongue to learn the inside of his mouth the way he was learning hers.

By the time he ended the kiss, they were both breathless.

"Our first kiss," he said, his lips still brushing hers.

"Yes," she answered. "You said you wanted to wait until you were awake to do it."

"You remember."

"How could I forget? But, Marcus, why did you wait so *long*?"

"Because I knew I couldn't kiss you without making love with you."

"Are we going to make love now?"

"Oh, yes," he murmured, then raised his head just far enough to focus his gaze on hers. "Catherine, my sweet lady, let me show you how good it can be between us—for real."

She sucked in a quick breath. "Marcus . . ."

He laid a fingertip against her lips. "You've saved me once. I need you to do it again. I need you to save me from the cold life I made for

myself. I've trusted no one, loved no one. I thought I was protecting myself, but the truth is, I was scared—scared of giving another person the power to hurt me.”

“I'd never hurt you,” she whispered.

“I know. And I don't want that kind of closed-off life ever again. I want to bask in all the warmth you keep offering me. I want the love you've given me—even when I haven't let you say the words. Or am I mistaken? Have I just been living on wishful thinking?”

She had to struggle to speak past the tears of joy that had tightened her throat. “You're not wrong. I do love you—very much.”

“Thank God,” he breathed, folding her back into his arms, rocking her against him. “Catherine, I've loved you from the first moment you walked into that dream, looking so scared and so determined . . . and so beautiful that I thought I must somehow have managed to make contact with an angel.”

“I don't know about the angel part,” she murmured, embarrassed but inordinately pleased.

“I do. And I knew in that very first instant that you were mine—my lover, my other half. My soul mate.” His gaze burned into hers as he added, “I'm as certain as I am that the sun will rise in the east that that's the reason you, and you alone, heard my cry for help.” He shook his head ruefully, “My only cause for regret came in knowing that I didn't deserve a woman like you.”

“Then you have no cause for regret,” she insisted. “Because you deserve every good thing

in life.”

His lips crooked upward. “Starting with . . . this?” His hand wandered its way from her waist upward to cover her right breast.

She had craved his touch for so long, that single action aroused her to fever pitch.

He looked down at her breasts, watching as his thumbs rubbed the hard tips that were outlined by the thin fabric. “You want me,” he said.

“You’re being smug,” she managed to say. “You know how much I want you. And I understand why you wanted to wait, but I’m really, *really* glad you’ve decided to stop torturing us both.”

“Well, I thought the wait would make this first time very, very hot. Shall we see if I’m right?”

“Yes . . . oh, yes,” she said breathlessly as he began undoing her shirt.

He slid the buttons through their holes slowly, pausing to kiss each inch of skin as he exposed it. She swayed on her feet, gripping his shoulders to keep from simply collapsing. When he finished with the shirt, he reached behind her to unhook her bra, pushed it up, and took the weight of her breasts in his hand, rubbing his thumbs over the aching nipples, wringing a wordless plea from her.

“Your clothing is in the way.”

“Yes.” She turned him loose long enough to discard the shirt and bra, then cupped the back of his head to her when he dipped his head and drew one of her nipples into his hot, sexy mouth. At the same time, he took her other nipple

between his thumb and index finger and gave it a gentle squeeze.

He kept up the sweet torture until she had to beg him to stop. “Marcus . . . oh, God, I can’t stand up anymore. Please . . .”

He let her go, but instead of standing, dropped to one knee, dispatched the button and zipper of her slacks, and skimmed them down her legs, taking her panties with them. Her sandals came off, too, and then he rose to wrap her in his arms, naked and vulnerable and trembling with excitement.

“You, too. I want you naked, too,” she gasped, tearing at the buttons on his shirt.

He helped, and within seconds, they were locked in each others arms, skin to skin, their mouths engaged in a deep, voluptuous kiss, her breasts crushed against the wall of his chest and his hot, hard erection pushing suggestively, rhythmically against her belly. Vaguely, it occurred to her that they were in plain view of anyone walking in the gardens—not that there was anyone likely to do that. She did wonder, though, if they’d make it inside the cottage.

But she didn’t really care. All that mattered was that her dream lover wasn’t a dream anymore. He was real, and he was kissing her as if she were the only thing that mattered to him in the world.

When he dragged his mouth away from hers, picked her up, and headed for the cottage door, she thought he would carry her to the bed along the back wall. But he went only as far as one of the big open windows. There, he set her on the wide window ledge, with the setting sun on her

back.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, hands stroking her thighs. "I've been dreaming of this," he murmured. "Dreaming of feasting on you. Open your legs for me."

"Oh, God, I've never . . ."

"Good. Then I get to be the first to taste your delicious juices."

Gently but insistently, he ran his hands up her inner thighs. Squeezing her eyes closed, she did as he'd asked, spreading her legs for him.

With those long, tapered fingers she loved, he gently opened her outer lips. "Jesus, you are so pretty—all rosy and wet and swollen."

She gasped at the first touch of his tongue making an exploratory foray around the perimeter that defined her most sensitive places. She sat with hands still braced on the windowsill and her eyes still closed, her whole being focused on the delicate, knowing strokes of his tongue. Back and forth, he went, from her vagina to her clitoris, dipping into her inner passage, rimming it before flickering upward again.

When she thought she'd die of the pressure building inside her, she tangled her fingers in his hair, because that was the only part of him she could reach, and begged, "Marcus . . . Oh, Lord, please . . ."

"Please what?" he murmured, tugging on her clitoris with his lips before sucking it into his mouth.

"Oh! Oh, God, I need you. I need you inside me. Now, *please!*"

He made a sound deep in his throat, gave

her throbbing clitoris one last lick, then stood to encircle her waist and lift her against him. “Wrap your legs around me,” he ordered.

But before he’d finished the sentence, she had them clamped around him, and she was rubbing herself against him, feeling his big, hard cock pushing against her mound. “I want it in me,” she repeated, urgent, insistent.

“Sweetheart, that’s just where I’m going to put it,” he promised, carrying her across the room to tumble with her onto the bed. Levering himself above her, he rocked his hips, teasing her clitoris with the head of his cock.

“Marcus. . . !”

“Take it, Catherine. Take my cock inside that hot, sweet place that’s made just for me . . . take it all . . .”

And then he pushed that long, thick shaft into her. And as she arched against him, blinded by pleasure, staggered by the fullness and heat of power of him, she had room for only one thought—that no dream, no matter how wonderful, ever could have matched the reality of his body staking its claim to hers.

She opened her eyes to find him looking down at her.

His eyes were a glittering, brilliant blue, and they seared into her as he planted a single word in her mind. “*Finally.*”

She reached to touch his lips, his cheek. “Yes, finally.”

She held his gaze as he began to move inside her, watching the tight pleasure she saw transforming his features. Such fierce intensity she’d never seen, and it thrilled her to the core

that she should be the cause of such passion.

“Catherine . . . *my Catherine*,” he growled before lowering his head to cover her mouth with his in a kiss that completed the circuit—their bodies joined in all possible ways as the rhythm of life took hold of them.

It drove them onward, the pace increasing until he was pumping into her fast and hard, and she was meeting every breathtaking thrust with an upward surge of her own hips. Her hands clung to his back. Her heels dug into his buttocks. She forgot to breathe. His hands shot under her bottom, scooped her up, and held her tight against him. And, suddenly, the tension inside her coiled to the breaking point. At the same time, his body went rigid.

The next instant, the wave broke over them, washing through them both in surge after surge of exquisite sensation. It seemed to last forever, the aftershocks still rippling through her, into him, and back again, as he rolled to his side, taking her with him, their bodies still joined.

Long minutes passed before either of them spoke. Her fingers stroked lightly, barely moving, over the sweat-slick skin of his back. His lips occasionally toyed with her earlobe. She felt boneless, completely sated, and at peace in a way she had never been in her life.

Finally, Marcus raised a hand to stroke a lock of damp hair from her forehead. “So . . . do you forgive me, now, for making you wait a month?”

“I forgive you for everything you’ve ever done,” she murmured. “Blanket absolution for all your sins, real or imagined.”

He chuckled softly.

“But don’t ever do that to me again. I might not be so forgiving the next time.”

He drew back a little to look at her. “What? Don’t make love to you again? “

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“So, what did you mean?”

“I *meant*, don’t make a decision about how you’re going to act with me all on your own, without talking to me about it. When two people have a relationship, they consult each other.”

He grimaced. “You’re right. And I’m sorry. But I’m not used to . . . well, to real, close-to-the-heart relationships. You’re going to have to help me do it right.”

“I will . . . if you want me to.”

“Now who’s being obtuse? You know damned well I want you to. You just need to let yourself believe it.”

“Well, when you put it that way . . .”

His expression became serious. “Catherine, will you marry me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. She’d known where he was heading, but hearing the actual words still sent a shiver through her—a mix of excitement and pleasure and nerves. “But I’m just plain old Catherine Emerson. And you’re—”

“The plain old millionaire who loves you.”

She laughed.

He gave her a tender smile. “Besides, there’s nothing plain about you. You’re an angel of mercy, and a very sexy lady—all rolled into one beautiful package. What more could a man want?”

“You’re going to make me vain.”

“I don’t think there’s a chance in hell I could pull that one off,” he said. “But I’m willing to give it my best shot. But you haven’t accepted my proposal yet,” he reminded her. “And since I figure it’ll take at least the next fifty or sixty years to turn you *really* narcissistic, I’d like to get started as soon as possible. So say yes, so I can get started.”

“Yes.”

“Praise the Lord! Another hurdle behind us.” He grinned, gathering her to him to kiss her.

As their lips melded and their tongues played lazily inside each other’s mouths, she felt the embers of arousal stirring deep in her belly—and his penis hardening against her thigh.

She laughed softly.

“What?”

“You’re not supposed to be able to get hard again so quickly.”

“See what you do to me?”

“You really *are* going to make me vain, aren’t you?”

“I told you I’d give it my best shot. And besides . . .” He nibbled at her ear as he whispered, “I think we should celebrate our engagement. Don’t you?”

Sensing a new freedom in him, the same feeling taking hold of her and making her new, she slid her leg over his hip, bringing his erection into instant contact with her . . . what was that odd but pleasant sounding word? Her *quim*. Yes, that was it. And she rubbed it boldly against his rapidly hardening penis as she said, “Exactly what did you have in mind?”

“Give it another second or two,” he muttered, nibbling his way down her neck to her breast. “I think you’ll get the picture.”

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, and she knew he was going to take her on another wild ride. The ride of her life.

As if he’d read her thought, he raised his head to look at her and whispered, “This is just the beginning for us, sweetheart. Just the beginning.”