



Loose Id

ALMOST
Paradise

DELIA CARNELL

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Loose Id.®

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Almost Paradise

Delia Carnell

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Dedication

"I love you, Jake."

Chapter One

Tyler heard it just before sunup. Like a whip crack or the thunderclap behind a lightning bolt, it startled him out of a restless dream. He waited, sleep a lost cause now. Still, he wanted first light before walking down to the beach. It might be friendly, helpless, injured. Or it might be scared, angry, vicious. Either way, he waited for the light.

Only minutes passed before he saw a discernible difference in the shadows. Squinting, he pulled the shade away from the window and looked out. The sliver of moon was gone, but he could just make out the white foam where the breakers spilled onto the sand. The faintest hint of a sunrise lightened the edge of the horizon. Tyler knew it wouldn't be long. He was well aware that both dawn and twilight teased a man into thinking there was a permanence to things. But nothing remained the same. Of that, he was certain.

He swung his legs over the side of his bed and slid his feet into sneakers. No need to bother with the laces. They had long since worn themselves into frayed strings. The shoes held up, though. As if they knew he needed them a little longer. *How much longer?* he asked himself. But what did it matter? What was time, after all? Just a guideline when you had places to be and things to do. On the island, it made no difference.

He'd gone to bed still wearing his cut-off jeans. And that was different. Had he known somewhere inside that something was happening today? He ran his hands through his unruly hair and stood up, shrugging off the feeling of foreboding in the process.

There was neither dread nor reluctance in him as he ventured out the door and down the two steps from the bungalow to the sand. Just a feeling of resignation that whatever it was, it was there for him. He didn't know how he knew that, nor did he wonder about it. He'd long since learned to accept things as they came on the island. What could he do about it anyway?

A narrow trail led to the beach, framed on either side by palmettos and scrub palms. It was a short walk, just far enough to separate land from sea, even in the rainy season. Frangipani taller than he showered him with the sweet scent he'd grown to enjoy. Night blooming jasmine joined in, as if even the flowers knew something different was happening.

The jungle thinned into the clearing that became the beach. Tyler quickly scanned in both directions, but saw nothing. The eastern sky lightened to deep plums and darker roses, heralding the arrival of the sun. But still there was not enough light to see. He stepped slowly across the sand, expecting to be greeted somehow. Nothing moved besides the waves. Even they seemed to be lapping more quietly than usual. No pounding surf now. Only soothing ripples along the shore.

He looked again, left and right, then whipped his head back to the left. There, almost at the bend of the coastline. Something had glinted in the light. He moved along the water's edge, now able to make out a vague shape. It was smaller than he'd expected. That's why he'd missed it the first time he'd looked. He'd thought there would be a ship of some type nudging the sand with each crest of the waves. But this was much smaller.

His sneakers squished in the wet sand as he drew closer. His heartbeat quickened, but he wasn't afraid. It was anticipation that curled his stomach and skittered up the hair on his arms, not fear. What did he have to fear? The worst had already happened, and here he was on this island that truly could be called, well, almost paradise.

Less than ten yards away now, he still didn't know what it was. A bundle of clothing, perhaps? A package of some sort? Then the light hit again on the item that had glinted before. A diamond. A small speck of gold. He took the last few steps in a single leap and dropped to his knees on the sand. Slowly and carefully he reached out for the sparkle and lifted the hand of a woman. Automatically, he felt for a pulse with one hand as the other traced the woman's arm to her shoulder.

He didn't realize he'd held his breath until he let it out on a sigh as he registered a faint pulse against his fingertips. She lay on her side, away from him, her left arm flung over her head. Gently he pulled on her shoulder to turn her onto her back. She wore a man's white dress shirt and snug blue jeans. Her hair was a mass of blonde tangles. Long legs stretched into the water. He couldn't see her feet, but somehow he knew there were no shoes.

She had the face of an angel. High cheekbones. Porcelain skin. Thick, dark lashes. Her eyes were closed, but he knew as well as he knew the sun would rise in the East that they would be blue. As he studied her face, she made a small whimpering sound, as if she were in pain. He ran his hands up and down her frame, but found no injuries. No matter. Injuries didn't always show, he'd learned.

Since nothing appeared to be broken, and the tide was rolling in, he carefully picked her up and held her in his arms against his chest. Just as he thought. No shoes. For that, he smiled. And it may have been his first smile in months.

Tyler picked his way carefully back across the sand with the woman sheltered close to his heart. Although she was tall, she was also lean, making her no burden at all to carry. He just wanted to be careful because, aside from being washed up on the shore, he sensed she was fragile. In a number of ways.

She didn't stir a bit when he juggled her in his arms to catch the beach house door with one hand. He stepped inside and turned in both directions, deciding where to put her. The bungalow was a single room. Plenty big enough for him, but now the population had just

doubled. Yeah, the census takers will want to be alerted, he thought wryly to himself as he looked about.

The cottage was so small that the double bed and weathered desk and chair just about filled it up. Tyler spent most of his time outside where the fire ring and cooking area were covered by a lean-to he'd fashioned out of a large tarp and some ropes he'd found on his second or third day. A large rain barrel caught the water for cooking and washing up, but he walked to the nearby waterfall for bathing. The place was perfect for him. Now he had to find space for a woman.

No use pretending. There was nothing to do but lay her down on his bed. Well, it was his bed now. No telling whose bed it had been before he'd stumbled upon it. He eased her onto the bed, mindful that her clothes were soaked. The cottage had two windows on every wall, allowing the ocean breezes in no matter which way they were blowing. But now as they skittered across the woman's wet skin, she shivered.

Tyler stood up straight and looked at her, debating. As much of a dilemma as her arrival presented, how much more would it be if she caught pneumonia? Was that a real possibility, or was he making it up? He shrugged. What was she going to do about it? Call the police?

He bent over and undid the buttons on the white shirt with nimble fingers. He lifted her shoulders enough to shrug her out of it easily. Her breasts were covered by little more than a scrap of lace. Sodden, too, but he thought he'd leave that. For now, anyway. The jeans took a little more of a struggle. Skintight to begin with, they were plastered against her curves by the saltwater bath they'd just been through.

Finally he managed to wiggle her out of them, and still she slept on. He took the clothes outside and hung them in the morning sun to dry. Now that there was full light, he looked back out toward the water, searching for any conveyance that might have brought the woman to his beach. He saw nothing. He hadn't expected to, but still ...

Leaving the question for another time, he headed back inside. Now that he didn't have the chore of her clothing to occupy him, now that the sun streamed through the window next to the bed, now that he had a moment to really look at her ...

She was stunningly beautiful. Her hair was wild with curls. She had a long neck that curved gracefully into slender shoulders. Her breasts, barely concealed by the lacy bra, were high and round. He could see the dark nipples protruding against the thin fabric. As if she knew he studied her, the nipples hardened before his eyes. He swiftly tore his gaze away in response, but he was drawn to the ridge of her ribs, the concave belly, the wisp of lace at her mound. He could barely make out the darker hair covering her sex.

And as he looked, his cock sprang to life, pushing against the worn denim of his shorts. His balls tightened, and he felt his pulse deepen as blood surged to his groin. His hands drew into fists with the tension, but at least he knew one thing. He was alive, after all.

Quickly, before he had time to think about it, he took off her sodden underwear and covered her with a soft old quilt. Even though he'd willed himself not to look at her, there were glimpses he could not avoid. Porcelain flesh, firm breasts, curled dark hair. He tucked the quilt under her chin, then straightened. Almost unconsciously, his right hand found the swollen ridge of his cock as it pressed against rough denim. His balls ached with the need to release his seed, but not here, not in front of her. Whoever she was, she did not deserve to be violated that way.

With a last glance to be certain that her breathing was even, Tyler stepped outside of the bungalow and walked a few yards away. Quickly, he let his shorts fall down around his ankles and grasped his swollen dick in his fist. He closed his eyes and stroked the sensitive shaft. It had been so long, so damned long. He knew it would take only seconds. He braced his free hand against the trunk of the palm and leaned against it as he pumped his cock.

He heard his own moan as he came in thick, hot spurts onto the sand at the base of the tree. His breath was ragged as he let his spent cock fall out of his hand. He leaned hard against the tree, so racked with the orgasm that he almost couldn't stand.

He tried to calm his breath as he thought about it. How long had it been? When he'd first arrived, he'd been so traumatized that sex had been the last thing on his mind. As the days passed, he'd been so busy with the physical labor of surviving on the deserted island that he'd fallen into bed each night exhausted. Now that he had the whole process down to an easily managed routine, he still didn't think about sex. Until now. Until he plucked the woman from the shore and placed her naked in his bed.

If he found it puzzling that he hadn't missed sex until now, it wasn't something he wanted to examine at length. He shook the thought from his head and reached for his shorts. That had been a pleasant diversion, but there was work to do. Now two people would eat instead of one. And he knew for a fact that she would be hungry when she woke up. He zipped his shorts and strode off to gather coconuts.

Chapter Two

She slept through the morning. At first Tyler tiptoed around the bungalow performing his daily rituals as quietly as possible. He soon discovered, however, that not much of anything disturbed her. It was damn near impossible to crack open a coconut quietly, and when that didn't rouse her, he figured she was in deep sleep. Probably needed it, seeing that she had arrived by swimming and not by cruising on a luxury liner.

The bungalow he'd discovered his first day on the island had been outfitted with a few essentials. Some rudimentary cooking tools, a few sewing supplies, a basic first-aid kit. He'd found a bottle of aspirin which he'd never touched and a bottle of whiskey which he'd consumed most of the first night, but never sampled again.

There had been two bars of soap. The first one was now down to a sliver. He took it with him to the spring-fed pool where he bathed every day beneath the waterfall. He took also the woman's clothing to rinse the saltwater out of it. He didn't use the straight razor to shave every morning, but since he had company, he thought he might as well make himself as presentable as possible. He even pulled his shoulder-length hair into a ponytail and tied it with a length of vine.

Tyler didn't know the names of the plants and trees on the island, but he had quickly learned which ones tasted good, which ones had leaves strong enough for building, which wood burned even when it was damp. He feasted daily on coconuts, bananas, dates, mangos, an assortment of berries, and of course, fish. He'd tried almost everything and never consumed anything that made him sick. Just a stroke of luck, he supposed.

On his way back to the bungalow, he gathered food in a basket he'd made of palmetto fronds. He hung her clothes to dry in the sun, then stepped inside. She hadn't moved. Her plump lips were slightly parted, and he could hear her breath whooshing lightly through them. Just to be sure, he reached under the quilt and felt again for her pulse. It was stronger now, steadier than when he'd found her on the beach.

He turned to walk away from her, intending to head out for fishing, but as he stepped across the floor, she made a sound. He stopped and looked back, cocking his head inquisitively. Was she awake? A soft murmur escaped her, and he walked back to the side of the bed. Her brow was furrowed, as if in sleep she did not escape her worries. She shook her head slightly and murmured again.

Tyler reached for the wooden chair by the desk and set it beside the bed. He sat down and gently stroked her hair. "It's okay. You're okay," he whispered.

She jerked her head back and forth.

"Shh ..." He ran his fingertips along her cheekbone. "You're safe now. Whatever it was, it can't get you now."

Her eyes fluttered open, and she stared at the ceiling for a few seconds, as if attempting to focus. Slowly she turned her head and met Tyler's gaze. Oh, God, yes. They were blue. Not just blue. Aquamarine. Turquoise. He didn't even know the words to describe the color. But they were stunning. He stared, mesmerized for a moment, then slowly drew his hand away from her face. "Good morning."

She just looked at him with a quizzical expression. One he well understood. There would be a lot of questions now. And no answers. He smiled. "What's your name?"

Still she stared with those big, luminous eyes. He didn't see fear in them. That was a good thing. Just confusion. She moved her head just a bit, just enough to indicate she didn't know her name. Or she couldn't say it right now. That was okay. He didn't think he'd known his name right away, either. There was a lot for the mind to process here.

The quilt was still up at her chin where he'd tucked it earlier. She pushed it down a bit and left her hands on the outside. Without sitting up, she looked around as best she could from the bed. Slowly her gaze came back to his face. He tried to sound reassuring. "It's okay. You're safe here."

She nodded, as if she understood and was not afraid. Her fingers moved restlessly on the quilt. Her gaze fell upon her left hand, and she lifted it before her, bringing it close to her face. The same sparkle that he had spotted on the beach caught her eye now. With her thumb, she touched the diamond solitaire on her ring finger, then looked up at Tyler, the question clear in her eyes.

"Uhh ..." Oh, God. What should he do? Tell her he was the man who'd put that ring on her finger so she'd feel comfortable, or risk scaring her by telling the truth -- that he'd never seen her before he fished her out of the sea? "I bet you could use a drink of water."

Coward! he chided himself as he sprang up to pour water into a tin cup. He put a hand behind her head to help her drink as he held the cup to her lips. Thirsty, she leaned forward eagerly until the quilt slipped. She gasped and jerked away, grasping the cover to her chest just as a glimpse of creamy breast came to view.

"Sorry," he said as he turned his head while she arranged the quilt to suit her. Silly, he thought. Didn't she realize he was the one who'd taken her clothes off? Probably not. And probably better not to bring it up, either. In some ways, confusion was better than knowledge. He offered the cup again, and this time she drank slowly.

When he pulled the cup away, she looked up at him. "Thank you," she said, though the words were barely whispered.

"No problem. Do you want something to eat?"

She shook her head. "Tired."

As if on cue, her eyes closed. Good, he thought. Sleep was good. Sleep would keep her from remembering, from thinking, from asking the questions he couldn't answer.

He sat beside her a few more minutes, watching as her breathing regulated into deep, even rhythms. Then he went outside to fish for their dinner.

Tyler went about his business with a calm acceptance. He caught fish, laid a fire in the pit outside the bungalow, cooked in the seasoned old frying pan. When she still didn't wake, he ate, keeping her portion wrapped in palm leaves and buried near the hot coals for warmth. Throughout the day, he wandered in and out to check on her. She slept deeply, never turning or making a sound but for the regular and quiet drawing of breath in and out, in and out.

At last the sun sank behind the mountains on the western side of the island. As his houseguest slept on, Tyler stretched out in the hammock between two palms on the side of the bungalow. Sleep rarely came easily to him, and he figured tonight would be no different. He clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the stars through the gently waving palm fronds. Now that the day was over, the work done, and his belly full, he let himself ponder the questions.

Where did she come from? That was a good one, but there were others that mattered more. Why was she here? Ah, that was the better question. Time was elastic on the island, but Tyler guessed it had been weeks before he remembered the events that brought him here. Would it take her that long as well? Would it matter that she wouldn't have to go through the process alone, as he had? Surely that would help.

He felt himself drifting off, pleased that it was this easy tonight, but before he had the chance to sink deeply into slumber, a horrible scream pierced the quiet of the island night. He jumped up and dashed into the bungalow. Logically, he knew nothing could have gotten in to hurt her, but the adrenalin kicked up anyway as he hurried to her side.

He could just see her in the starlight, sitting straight up in the bed, wild-eyed, with the quilt bunched around her waist, her breasts bare. She didn't seem to know or care. Tyler sat down on the edge of the bed and took her trembling hands in his. "It's okay. There's nothing here to hurt you."

Slowly her eyes found focus and looked at him. "What happened?" she whispered.

"Just a dream." He pulled the quilt up and tucked it beneath her arms. "Nothing to frighten you. Just a dream."

He found his way to the small cupboard in the corner and pulled out a lantern he rarely used in order to conserve the oil and wick -- for what, he did not know. He struck a match from the dwindling supply and brought the flame to life. A pale golden light splashed around the tiny cottage, providing enough illumination to reassure.

She looked at him with fear still lingering in her expression. "Why can't I remember?"

At last the numbing protection of exhaustion had worn off and left her with the shocking reality. "You will. Don't worry about it right now."

She drew in a deep breath and let it out as a sigh, shaking her head slightly, as if not convinced. "Who are you?"

"My name is Tyler. And this --" He swept his hand around to indicate the room. "-- is where I live."

She moved her head, taking in each object slowly, as if seeing a desk, a chair, a cupboard for the first time. At last her gaze came back to him. "Okay."

Thank goodness, she accepted that information without further question. For now, anyway. Her eyes were calmer now, and her breathing more regular. "You will be safe here for the night." He stood up. "I'm right outside in the hammock."

She looked out the window beside the bed, struggling to see anything in the darkness. "Could you ...?" She brought her gaze back to him. "Would you stay inside?"

"Uh ...?" He didn't relish the thought of sleeping in the chair, but how much would it have meant to him to have company the first night? "Sure."

He turned the chair around and sat in it, stretching his long legs before him, his feet propped on the bottom of the bed. She watched him settle in, then satisfied that he would keep her safe through the night, she lay down on his bed and snuggled beneath the quilt.

He watched her until he was sure she slept soundly, then he extinguished the flame in the lamp. The sleep he'd welcomed earlier was nowhere to be found now. He sat in the chair and listened to the sweet susurrations of her breath. Every now and then she would whimper, and he reached out to pat her reassuringly. After a few times, he moved the chair so that he could keep a soothing hand on her while she slept. Soon that became too uncomfortable. He considered it only briefly before stretching out on the bed next to her, keeping the age-worn quilt as a protective barrier.

But as soon as he found a comfortable position, she threw the cover back and snuggled against him, burrowing into the juncture of his arm and chest, laying her head against his heart. His body sprang to life, but he willed his sexual urges to cool. There was no place for that now. She would be vulnerable and scared. And while he had the advantage of time that she didn't, he still had the baggage of life before the island.

No, for now it was enough to feel the warmth from her skin, to listen to her breathing, to smell the ocean in her hair. Tomorrow would be difficult enough without throwing the complication of sex into the mix. For now, at least, he just slept.

Chapter Three

She was ten years old. A lean blonde thing all arms and legs in the backyard of her childhood home in Texas. She had begged for a trampoline for Christmas. Of course, she got it. She got everything she asked Daddy for. She was ten years old and jumping on her trampoline in the bright Texas sun.

She summoned all her strength and hit hard, trying to soar higher and higher with each leap, trying to fly, to defy gravity. She loved the freedom, the wind in her hair, the jolt in her tummy when she jumped as high as she possibly could. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun and laughed out loud.

It must have been her own laughter that woke her. She felt the memory slipping away, and she tried with all her will to keep it there. But it was gone. All that remained was the joyous feeling of flying and the warmth of the sun. Everything else about her was gone. Her name, her age, her home. It was a mystery.

Slowly she opened her eyes. The man was lying in the bed next to her. Holding her in his arms, to be more precise. Tyler was his name, she remembered. At least her short-term memory worked. He continued to sleep, which gave her the chance to study him a bit. His skin was a golden bronze, but who wouldn't have a great tan living in this tropical oasis? His

hair was brown with sun-bleached highlights. Curling tendrils escaped the ponytail on both sides of his face, softening the angular planes.

He was well muscled. That much, she remembered. There had been a gentle strength in him when he'd held her to drink the water, when he'd moved agilely about the room. While it didn't surprise her to find him lying beside her in the bed, neither did it frighten her. There were precious few things she knew to be a certainty. That this man would not harm her was one of them. Knowing that made the lack of everything else easier to take.

Morning light streamed through the window next to the bed. She sat up to look around at the place where she supposed she would be living while she got things sorted out in her head. She tugged gently on the quilt to wrap around her until she found her clothes. That caused the man -- Tyler -- to stir. Instinctively protective, she drew her knees up close to her chest and hugged the quilt.

Fully alert, Tyler stood up quickly, as if embarrassed to be caught sleeping next to her. "I'm sorry. You were ... you ..." he stammered, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

She decided to save him. "It's all right. I appreciate you taking care of me last night." She lowered her gaze. "Since I obviously don't know how to take care of myself."

"Well, you managed to get to the beach, so that's a start." He gestured toward the doorway. "Come on. I'll show you to the latrine and the rain barrel where you can wash up. Your clothes should be dry by now."

If she'd thought dressing in her own clothes would make her feel better, she was disappointed. She didn't recognize them. Obviously the white shirt belonged to a man, but the bra and panties fit perfectly. She smoothed the quilt on the bed in the corner and sat down, closing her eyes. If she could remember how to make a bed, why couldn't she remember buying this underwear?

"You dressed?"

She looked toward the doorway, following the sound of Tyler's voice. "Yes."

He stepped inside. "Then come on out. Breakfast is ready."

She wouldn't have thought she'd be hungry, but the prospect of food was appealing. She gave him the start of a smile, and when he smiled back, his face was transformed from ruggedly handsome etched with worry lines to drop-dead gorgeous. That smile! Goodness, where had he been hiding that? If she wasn't careful, she'd have an altogether different type of hunger to deal with.

Following his lead, she took tentative barefoot steps through the sandy path from the cottage steps to a fire pit ringed with tree trunks and stumps. There was a makeshift chair woven from palm fronds and lean branches. Tyler gestured for her to sit there, so she did, realizing that she took the only seat that looked comfortable. He didn't seem to mind.

Now she was aware of the sound of waves breaking on the shore. She looked toward the sound and saw the ocean sparkling in the morning sun not more than a dozen yards away. The water was a bright turquoise, clear and calm. The waves were gentle, but steady. Tall palms dotted the brush line, offering shade. It was a tranquil setting, one she wouldn't mind enjoying as a vacation.

Unexpectedly, a tremor ran through her from head to toe. This was no vacation. She didn't know what had happened, but her gut told her there was danger ahead. Not the man. She wasn't afraid of him. For whatever reason she was stranded in this tropical garden, he was here as well. She was starting to get used to the oddness of the things she knew. Her own name escaped her, but that her fate and this man's were entwined was a certainty.

He came forward carrying two plates. Handing one to her, he sat on the tree stump near her. "It's not bacon and eggs," he said, "but it's breakfast."

The plate was laden with an array of fruits. Banana, mango, dates, big white chunks of coconut, and a couple of things she couldn't identify. She picked up a date and bit into it.

The fruit exploded in her mouth with surprising flavor and sweetness. She closed her eyes and savored it. “Mmmm ...” She chewed lazily. “This is wonderful.”

“Yeah,” he said around his own mouthful of fruit. “Try the papaya.”

She picked up the orange, fleshy piece she had not recognized. When he nodded, she brought it to her nose for a sniff before taking a bite. Another taste sensation thrilled her with its intensity. “I must be really hungry. The tastes are so vivid.”

“That’s what I thought at first, too.” He reached across and handed her a coconut shell filled with the thin white milk of the fruit. “But it’s always this good. I haven’t even thought about a cheeseburger in months.”

She drank from the shell, then looked at him. “Months? How long have you been here?”

While she waited for an answer, he chewed slowly, but she got the impression he was stalling. “I don’t really know,” he said at last. “I thought about marking the days somehow, but it just really never was that important.”

She watched him lick juice from his hands, then continue. “Long enough for my hair to grow this much. Long enough for my denim to just about wear out.” He shrugged. “What difference does it make?”

Apparently none. But there was more to life than eating really good fruit and swimming in a sparkling ocean. Didn’t he miss his home? His family? “How did you get here?”

He stood up, took her empty plate from her, and gave her a smile. “The same way you did.”

Chapter Four

They spent the morning exploring the island. He showed her the barrel that caught rain for fresh water. He took her to the waterfall and showed her the pool for bathing and the dark empty cave in the cliff that the water fell beside. He taught her which trees produced which fruit and how to know when it was ripe. He made a hat for her from palm leaves to keep the sun off the pale skin of her face. But he answered no more questions.

For the time being, that was all right. She wasn't sure she would know what to do with the answers anyway. When he left to fish for their next meal, she went inside and tidied up the bungalow. It was glaringly obvious that they would be sharing a bed. The prospect didn't disturb her too much. She just wasn't sure she was ready for that much intimacy.

Still, it had felt good to have those strong arms wrapped securely around her last night. A little tremor of sexual awareness fluttered through her stomach. Almost unconsciously her thumb rubbed against the ring on her left hand, startling her with its reality. Somewhere there was a man who claimed her with this diamond. Was he looking for her right now? Missing her? Wondering what happened to her?

What if he had been in the water, too? She sat down on the edge of the bed and clutched her stomach. It made sense that she would not have been in the water alone. Something to mention to Tyler as soon as he came back.

On cue, he poked his head inside the door, brandishing a string of fish. "We can eat soon. Take off your clothes."

"What!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" His cheeks reddened. "I'm not used to having anyone to talk to. I guess I assumed you knew what I was thinking. It gets hotter in the midday. You'll probably be more comfortable if we cut those jeans into shorts. And you don't need all the fabric in that shirt. I thought I could use the extra from both to make you some shoes."

"Okay." It took her a moment to recover from the shock, but what he said made sense.

He gave her that grin again. "Scissors in the sewing kit over there." He pointed toward the desk in the corner. Then he left, swinging the fish jauntily.

Clearly he was glad to have some company. She reminded herself that he'd had far more time to adjust to life on the island than she. And that was a good thing. Her feet had been tender on the walk about the island this morning. She never would have thought of using her jeans to make shoes. *Time makes survivors of us all, doesn't it?*

But how long did they have to stay? Was this to be her life now? Forever?

* * * * *

Tyler cleaned the fish with the ease of an expert. And that's what he had become in the many days he'd been relying on the ocean for his protein. He'd scared the woman, and that was something he hadn't intended to do. She was fragile, and he knew it. Poking the fire to bring up the flames for cooking, he promised himself he'd be more careful with her.

Just as the fish cooked to a golden perfection, she came out of the bungalow. She'd cut the jeans to well above her knees and turned up a one-inch cuff. The shirt was now

sleeveless and cropped with the tails tied beneath her breasts, exposing a sleek length of firm abdomen down to her belly button. The sight made his mouth water more than the smell of the meal he'd prepared, but he ordered his body to cool. No need to scare her twice in the same day.

They ate in a peaceful silence, but after the meal, he began to talk casually as he worked on piecing together some of the denim to fashion shoes for her. She sat on the log near the fire, absently raking the sand with a palm frond. He was no more than six feet away, folding the fabric this way and that, trying different methods to see which worked best.

"Have you remembered anything?" he asked casually, without looking up from his work.

"No, but I've thought of something."

He looked up. "What is it?"

"This ring." She held up her hand. "Does it seem logical that a man would have been with me? That he might be in the water, too?"

He was sure she'd come to the island alone, but she wasn't ready for that information yet. She needed to remember little bits at a time. "If there was someone with you, he'll get here or he won't. We can't do anything about it now."

Taking the pieces of fabric, he knelt before her and lifted her foot to measure. "Do you remember the man? Your fiancé?"

"No. I've tried to, but I can't recall any information about him."

"Do you remember where you live? Is it snowy? Warm? Mountains?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He traced her foot on the fabric with the charred end of a stick from the fire. "Do you have any idea what you did for a job? Where you went to school?"

This time she sighed. "No."

"What's your name?"

“Marissa.”

She gave a little gasp, and he looked up at her with a grin. “Well, that’s a start, isn’t it, Marissa?”

“I remember!” She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed in delight. “I remember my name!”

It was as natural as waves caressing the shore for his arms to go around her in response. She laughed with delight while he held her, his face in her hair, smelling the ocean and the sun. Her breasts rubbed against his chest, causing his cock to stir. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to take her sad, pouting lips with his and bury his tongue in the sweet honey depths. The urge was so overwhelming, that he put his hands in her hair and turned her head to face him.

The tears in her eyes stopped him. “It’s okay,” he said, wiping at the moisture with his thumbs. “The rest of it will come back soon enough.”

She shrugged out of his arms and went back to her seat on the log. “You didn’t remember anything when you first got here, did you?”

He picked up the fabric and began sewing. “Not a thing.”

“But you remember everything now.”

“Well ... I guess there’s no way to know if I remember *everything*. I remember enough, I guess.”

“Tell me.”

He looked up. “Tell you what?”

“Anything. Where you’re from. What you do for a living. Why you’re here.”

Chuckling, he pulled the thread through the layers of denim. “Why I’m here is not for me to answer. I was a CPA. In Maryland.”

“A CPA!” Her voice was almost a squeal. “You don’t look like any bean counter I’ve ever known.”

“And have you known a lot of ...” He grinned. “... bean counters?”

That stopped her with her mouth half open. After a pause, she said, “I don’t know. And I don’t know why I said that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. And I haven’t seen a mirror since I’ve been here, but I’m really sure my appearance has changed dramatically.”

“You mean you weren’t always tanned and buff?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’m buff?”

She spread her arms wide. “It’s a pretty nice gym you’ve got here.”

He shook his head and went back to sewing. “Guess so.”

It amused him that she called him “buff.” He’d always been pretty much the stereotypical bean counter that she’d said. Not an athlete. Funny how survival could change a person. He knew he’d developed muscles that he’d never had before. He liked the strength he felt when he did physical labor. It occurred to him that he could go on forever without sitting behind a desk again. His bean counting days were over.

“Are you married?”

The question interrupted his thoughts. Startled, he plunged the needle into his finger. “Ow!”

“Oh, sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He rubbed his finger briefly, then looked at her. “No bleeding.”

He started back to work, then remembered the question. “No. I’ve never been married.”

“But you love someone.” He shot her a quizzical look, and she continued, “Just the way you said it. Made me think there was someone.”

For a long moment he looked at her, into the aqua depths of her eyes. When had he lost control? When she washed up on the beach? “No, Marissa. I’m not in love with anyone.”

She stood up and walked toward the water. He continued to sew, watching her, wondering if she was remembering. It was too early, he thought. But she'd come up with her name far more quickly than he had. Perhaps it was because she was not alone, as he had been. The needle fell still in his hands as he watched her.

* * * * *

Marissa bent to scoop up a shell, examined it for a moment, then let it fall back to the sand. It was great to know her name now. At last she felt as if there was something familiar in her world. Turning her face to the sun, she closed her eyes and let the warmth seep into her. She said the name Marissa over and over again in her mind, trying to put a last name with it, a middle name. She imagined it in a man's voice, a mother's. But nothing else came.

She walked a little in the edge of the water, but always kept Tyler in her peripheral vision. He'd become her landmark, not just for the camp, but for life as she knew it right now. She didn't want to be out of his sight. Pretty heavy responsibility to lay on a stranger, she knew, but he didn't seem to mind.

When she turned to head back, she saw him watching her. No, clearly he didn't mind. She tried to picture him behind a desk, wearing a white shirt and a tie, running his fingers over the keyboard of a calculator or bent over some detailed spreadsheet. It just didn't gel. He looked more like the guide on some wilderness adventure vacation.

His shoulder-length hair was loose now, curling lightly around his face. His entire body was a deep golden tan. Any time his cut-offs slid lower on his hips, she never saw a tan line, making her think he'd roamed the beach naked before her arrival. His arms and chest were taut and sculpted. Not an ounce of flab in sight. The man was the very model of a Grecian statue.

And she wanted him. Just thinking about that body sliding over hers made her panties wet. Her nipples hardened even now when she let her mind drift into that forbidden garden of delights.

It could not be. As she took a seat near him by the fire ring, she told herself she'd do better to remember that some man had put a very large diamond on her finger. He probably expected her to remain faithful, desert island or no desert island.

"Almost done," he said, pushing the needle through the thick fabric. "Brush the sand off your feet, and we'll try them on."

He reached over and lifted her foot, sliding it into the makeshift slipper. "There you go! Fits as good as Cinderella. I'll get some vine to use as laces. They'll stay on better."

She stretched her leg out, turning her foot back and forth. "Well, it's not Jimmy Choo, but it's very nice. Thank you."

"Jimmy Who?"

"No. Jimmy Choo." She smiled and put her foot down on the sand. "Designer shoes. Very now."

"Very expensive?"

"Oh, yes."

He started folding the scraps of denim. "And you had a lot of these expensive shoes?"

"Yes, I --" She stopped, closed her eyes. "I remember." She could see a large closet with a rack of shoes on one end, ten or twelve feet wide, floor to ceiling. Dainty shoes. High-heeled shoes. Fuck me shoes.

"Well." She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Either I am a wealthy lady, or I clean the closet of a wealthy lady. I remember a rack with a lot of expensive shoes."

He reached for her hand and held it in his upturned palm. "Cleaning ladies don't have nails like this."

She looked, noticing for the first time the carefully sculpted nails with the perfect French manicure. "I probably don't type for a living, either." She held up her other foot, the one that didn't have the experimental slipper on it. Her toes were painted a bright red.

"Looks like I have pedicures, too."

“You’re just a pampered princess, aren’t you?” he teased.

She frowned, some memory just on the edge of her mind, almost there, almost stepping from the shadows. She looked for the shoes again in her memory, tried to see outside the closet door. But there was nothing else. “Apparently so,” she whispered.

Chapter Five

Tyler probed and pushed at her memory as much as he dared the rest of the day. That she came from money was something he'd already figured out. The white dress shirt was custom made. Unless she'd stolen it, she was intimately acquainted with a man of wealth. The diamond was two carats. Maybe three. And he'd noticed the red toes when he'd first plucked her from the sea.

But what did it matter? Money didn't buy the way out of the circumstances they were in. Although greater men than he had surely tried. A long time ago, he'd resigned himself to staying forever on this island. That Marissa had arrived gave him hope. Maybe there was a way out. He needed more time to think about it, but one thing was certain -- the two of them had to make this happen together. It was just another thing he knew without knowing how or why.

Late afternoon, he found her swinging in the hammock. "Want to go gather coconuts with me?"

"Oh, yes!" She sat up and slipped into her new shoes, tying the vine laces tightly.

He was impressed with the enthusiasm she showed for every little task. It was as if she clung to these everyday things, reassuring in their simplicity. That was a feeling he

understood. The helplessness of not remembering things was assuaged a bit when there was a chore to perform with an instant result.

It was an easy hike to the grove of coconut palms. Nothing was very far from the camp. And that was by design, he'd long since determined. The water source, the fruit, the pool for washing -- everything was close to the bungalow. Even the low, flat rock where he stood to throw his line in for the fish was on the beach just to the right of "home." Certainly made it easy for an out-of-shape accountant to become a survivalist.

The fashion-conscious rich girl didn't have much trouble, either. She kept up with him on the well-worn path, swinging the shallow wooden bowl he'd brought to carry the coconuts back.

"Okay, step back," he told her when they reached the first tree. "You don't want to take one to the head. Probably knock you out."

He stuck the machete through his belt loop and began to shinny up the palm.

"You're pretty good at that," she called from the ground.

He reached the top in seconds and drew out the blade to hack at the fruit. "Yeah, you should have seen me the first time. Took me a few days' worth of trying to get up here."

Tyler let six large coconuts fall to the ground, then called to her, "Okay, that's it."

As he scrambled down, she gathered the coconuts and placed them in the wide bowl. He reached the ground just as she stood up and hoisted the heavy bowl up above her shoulder, carrying it as a waiter would bring out a tray of food. She started back toward their camp.

"Marissa."

She turned, expertly juggling the bowl without losing a piece of the fruit. "What?"

"Where did you learn how to do that?"

"Do what?"

He looked at her, choosing his words carefully, knowing her memory was fragile.

“Does a waitress make enough money to buy Jimmy Choos?”

She stood as still as a statue, staring at him until her eyes lost focus, and he thought for a moment she would pass out. Then, abruptly, she snapped back, blinking rapidly.

“What is it? What did you remember?”

But she just shook her head, saying nothing. As much as he wanted to press her, to know what she saw in her mind, Tyler let it go. They made it back to the bungalow in silence. For the rest of the day, he gave her space, speaking to her only when he offered her the fresh coconut milk after he’d drained it from the fruit they gathered.

He puttered about the fire ring, cleaning the machete, arranging wood, straightening his fishing supplies. Finally, when the sun began to slip behind them, he could no longer give her the solitude she seemed to want. Even as he’d respected her space, he’d made sure he knew exactly where she was. With twilight closing in, he went to the beach where she’d been sitting since their last meal.

Perched on a rock, staring out to sea, she showed no sign of hearing his approach, but when he laid a hand on her shoulder, she didn’t flinch, as if she expected him to come for her. “Let’s get inside before it gets dark,” he said gently. “You don’t know your way around yet.”

“I could get lost?” When she looked up at him, he saw the silvery trails of tears on her cheeks. “I’m afraid it’s too late to worry about that.”

“Come on.” He held out his hand to help her up. After a moment’s hesitation, she took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

“You can sleep in the bed,” he told her as they walked back along the path. “I’ll take the hammock.”

She nodded, then looked at him, frowning. “Won’t there be mosquitoes?”

He chuckled lightly. She hadn't worried about that last night. Of course, she'd been nearly comatose last night. "I've never noticed any."

"Well, anyway ..." They'd reached the bungalow's small porch. She paused at the door. "It isn't right for me to take the bed."

She brushed the sand from her shoes and stepped inside. "We did all right sleeping together last night. I see no reason to make either of us uncomfortable."

They'd done all right? Perhaps she hadn't ached like he had after sleeping -- or trying to sleep -- beside her all night. Sure, it had been a long time since he'd had sex, but it was more than that. Did she not know that she was an incredibly sexy woman? Perhaps the sexiest he'd ever known? Those long, slim legs; firm, full breasts; pouty mouth; hypnotic eyes. Did she not know?

But in her eyes, he saw the answer. There was a quiet desperation in her expression. The memory by the coconut tree had frightened her. She wanted him near. For comfort, for reassurance, it didn't matter. He understood that feeling. "Okay." He tried for cheerfulness and hoped she got it. "Let me just go wash up first before we lose the light."

As soon as the screen door banged behind Tyler, Marissa sank to the edge of the bed. It was all she could do to keep her limbs from shaking because she was frightened now. The memory had been swift but vivid. Shiny, tight shorts, a low-necked tank top. The smells of hot wings, burgers, and fries. A heavy tray with a pitcher of beer, foam sloshing over the rim. The raucous sounds of drinking men and sports on television. Wandering hands groping her butt, her breasts as she tried to squeeze through with the tray up over her head, defenseless.

But that wasn't the worst. There was one man sitting at a high-top alone. A man in an expensive suit, watching her, following her every move around the crowded room. No matter where she went, she could feel his dark eyes on her. She was sure he was the man

who had bought the diamond on her finger. But she was equally sure he was someone to be feared.

And that was all. There was just that one moment in time, as if a snapshot, but with all the sensations magnified around it. She tried to turn it over in her mind, to view it from other angles, to go outside the room and see where she was, but that one picture was all she could conjure.

Quickly, before Tyler returned, she removed her cut-off jeans and shirt and slipped beneath the quilt on the bed. She slid over to the far side and turned to face the wall. Closing her eyes, she hoped for sleep to take her away before he got there, but in just a few seconds, the squeaky hinges of the screen door announced his presence.

She said nothing, all but holding her breath while he got in beside her. The old bed creaked, and his body weight caused her to roll just a tiny bit toward him. She wrapped the fingers of her right hand around the edge of the mattress and held herself as far away from him as she could get.

She heard him moving, choosing a position, and then whispering gently, "Sweet dreams, Marissa."

She squeezed her eyes shut against the tears that welled yet again. This man was so achingly tender with her that it touched her very soul. Instinctively, she knew that no man had ever treated her with such kindness. Just his simple words soothed her better than all the attempts she'd made herself all afternoon. She turned over and found him lying on his back, his hands clasped behind his head, elbows out. "I'm sorry, Tyler. I just don't know what to think about all this. What is happening here?"

"I think you need to figure it out for yourself." The last of the light was fading, but she could see his eyes open, staring at the ceiling. "Besides, I could be wrong."

"You don't think you're wrong."

He turned his head just enough to look at her. "No. I don't." As if he knew she needed it, he took one hand from behind his head and skimmed it lightly down the side of her face. "Go to sleep."

* * * * *

The sweet sound of light rain and the far distant rumble of thunder woke Tyler. He had enjoyed these showers as much for their freshness as for the water in the rain barrel. But this time, there was a long, lean woman curled up against him. He had already determined that there was a deep vein of insecurity in Marissa, and that in sleep she was able to seek out the comfort she was too proud to ask for awake.

Her head lay on his chest, as if her ear were pressed to listen to his heartbeat. Her left hand lay on his abdomen, and her left thigh was slung across his hip, putting her very shapely calf on top of his cock. Which was even now growing thicker. He put his hand in her hair, smoothing her flyaway curls away from his face, but lingering in the silky sleekness.

Then he moved to her shoulder, the velvet skin there smooth beneath his work-roughened hands. Her breast was alluringly close, but he managed not to stroke it, though his cock responded as if he had at just the thought. Surely the movement against her leg would wake her.

Lightning flashed over the ocean, casting just enough illumination for him to see her eyes. Not asleep. No, she was wide awake and aware of everything happening from body to body. Her hand on his abdomen began to stroke in light, lazy circles.

He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. Her touch was raw pleasure, setting long-dormant nerve endings aflame, but it was wrong on so many levels. He took her hand, holding it still against his chest. "Not a good idea, Marissa."

She moved her leg against his shaft. "A very good idea."

What kind of Supreme Being would cause a man such a trial? “No. Really not a good idea.” He squirmed away from her and sat up. “Well, yes, it’s a *great* idea. Just not the right time for it.”

She scrambled up behind him, her left hand on his shoulder. “Right time?”

Turning to face her, he took her hand from him and rubbed his finger over the diamond. “Someone went to great expense to mark you as his.”

As if he were on fire, she jerked her hand away from his and folded her arms across her barely covered breasts, leaning back against the wall. If dawn was nearly there, he could not tell through the clouds pouring rain on the jungle just now. But there was enough distant lightning for him to see the look of sorrow on her face. He scooted back against the headboard. “You remembered him, didn’t you?”

She looked at him through the jumbled curls that fell in her face and nodded. “A little.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

Since he’d been on the island, he’d come to love the patter of rain hitting the palms. In the beginning it had soothed him. Tonight it was just background music while he waited to see whether Marissa would speak.

Finally, she shifted, drawing her legs up under her and pulling the quilt to cover herself, as if she just realized she was nearly naked. “You were right,” she said at last. “I was a waitress.”

Tyler didn’t speak, waiting for her to go on.

“I met him at the restaurant. He would sit at the bar and watch me. Back then, I thought it was romantic, that he loved me so much he couldn’t keep his eyes off me.” She shivered and clasped her arms more tightly across her breasts, gathering the quilt in her restless fingers. “Now I know better.”

“He hurt you?”

Tyler had to strain in the dim light to see her nod, so tentative was the motion.

“Not physically,” she explained. “He never hit me. But he might as well have ...”

Her voice trailed to a whisper. Tyler took a risk and reached out, pulling her into his arms. She came into his embrace, and he held her there, stroking her hair and tucking the quilt around her shoulders to keep her covered. “It’s all right, Marissa. He isn’t here now.”

She nodded, but then continued, as if once begun, she wanted as much of it out as possible. “I was nothing more than a Barbie doll to him. He bought all my clothes, told me what to wear when. He chose my hairdresser, my make-up. All of it was his doing. I liked it at first, that he would lavish me with gifts and attention. But ...”

Her voice faltered, but she took a deep breath and continued. “I had no life. He dictated my every move. It was almost as if I didn’t really exist anymore except as his plaything.”

“So you left him.”

“I hope so.”

Tyler leaned his chin on the top of her head. “You hope so?”

“I don’t remember anything else.”

Well, she would. Soon enough. And Tyler had a pretty good idea the rest of that memory would be what she needed to explain why she was here on the island. His own story had been tragic enough. It made sense that hers would be, too. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he was beginning to understand why they were there together.

Chapter Six

The next few days settled into a comfortable routine. Apart from gathering the food, eating, and bathing in the waterfall every day, there wasn't much to do. Marissa enjoyed the relaxation and didn't question the need her body seemed to have for resting. Lying in the hammock beneath the palm trees became her favorite thing to do.

It was there she spent most of her time, staring up at the blue sky through the lacy pattern of palm fronds, watching the cotton clouds skitter by. Only when she let her mind glide like that did details of her life come back to her. That's how she remembered some of the things about Hitch.

That Hitch was his name, she was certain. Maybe his name was really Hitchcock or Hitchman, or maybe his mother just named him Hitch. Maybe he liked Hitchcock films. Maybe he spent his college summers hitchhiking around the country. It didn't matter. His name was Hitch.

And along with that came the certainty that he was a very bad man. She didn't know what it was -- drugs, gambling, embezzlement. That didn't matter, either. He was a bad man, and she hoped he never found her on this island.

She spent a lot of hammock time thinking about the island, too. It was a pretty sure bet that both she and Tyler had not fallen overboard from some luxury liner. That really only happened in Goldie Hawn movies. What were the odds it would happen to both of them, and that they'd end up on the same spot of the same island? Impossible.

No, it was more like they'd both just been dropped in this exact spot by some divine hand. But that was even less likely than the movies, so she dismissed it as well. And again, it didn't matter. She was here. Tyler was here. And they were managing to survive quite nicely, in spite of it all.

He walked past her now on his way to fish for dinner. He waved, but kept going, passing only a few yards away from her. Damn, he was a good-looking man. Those denim cut-offs were just about threadbare. He'd worn them so long they were practically molded to the shape of his very fine ass. His skin was a golden bronze, and his hair was as sun-bleached as any California surfer's.

He said he'd never had a muscular body in his bean-counting days, but he certainly had one now. His shoulders were a mile wide and rippled with the bulges some men would spend hours in the gym to achieve. His abs were rock solid. If they did get off this island, they could make a fortune marketing this fitness routine. Catching your own food would do that to a physique.

She put one foot into the sand and set the hammock to swinging. He gave her a lot of space, and she was grateful for it, no matter how badly she wanted his hot body. It was a bit frustrating, but he was right. Sex would only complicate a life they didn't understand. Well, *she* didn't understand it. She was really sure Tyler had it figured out, even though he didn't want to say so.

He was a smart man, and he'd been here a long time. She knew by certain questions he asked that he was watching her to see whether her memory of things followed the same pattern his had. For some reason, she was moving more quickly. Probably because he was there to guide her.

When he came back in a little while, carrying a string of fish, she stretched, catlike, and got up to follow him. It had become her habit to prepare the fruit while he filleted and cooked the fish. She liked working beside him, and she liked sharing the chores of their survival. She picked up a coconut and whacked it with the machete, the way he had taught her.

Who taught him? she wondered. He didn't like it when she pushed him for details of his stay on the island, but she pushed him anyway. "Tyler, how long was it before you remembered your life?"

"I don't know." He didn't look up from the fish. "I didn't keep track."

"But it wasn't this quick, was it? I mean, this is what, my fourth day?"

Now he looked up, almost startled. "You remember everything?"

"No, but I know enough about Hitch to be sure I'm not in love with him. I don't know any details, but I think I was leaving him when I came here."

He only nodded and returned his attention to the fish. She pushed again. "How about you?"

"What?"

"What were you doing just before you came here?"

He selected a lime from the bowl of fruit they kept near the fire ring and sliced it with his fillet knife. After squeezing the juice onto the fish, he wrapped the fillet in palm leaves. All of this without answering her question.

She took the few steps that separated them and laid a hand on his arm. "Tyler, I'm trying to understand."

"I know." Finished with the fish, he placed it in the old frying pan. "I'm just not sure my story has anything to do with you."

"Tell me anyway."

Sighing, he took a seat on a log by the fire ring. She followed, waiting for him to speak. They had nothing to do now while the fish cooked. He had run out of excuses.

“Her name was Deborah.”

“An old-fashioned name.”

He cocked a brow at her, as if to tell her not to interrupt. She obeyed.

“She wasn’t the only girlfriend I ever had, but she was the one I really loved. She was smart, funny, pretty ...”

“Sexy?”

Marissa clapped a hand to her mouth, realizing that she’d interrupted again, but he smiled. “Yeah. Sexy.”

He stretched his long legs out before him, getting comfortable. “I thought she was The One. I had picked out a ring, and I was going to give it to her on her birthday. But we didn’t quite get there.”

This time she remained silent, waiting for him to find his words.

“Deborah worked for an advertising firm. Lots of artist-types in her environment. Far more exciting than a number cruncher. She was cheating on me with one of the graphic designers.”

Marissa’s heart gave a little tug. How could a woman cheat on this man? He was the kindest, sweetest man she’d ever known. Who wouldn’t want him forever? “You’re sure?”

He gave a little chuckle. “Oh, very sure. I surprised them. Mid-fornication, you might say. And I have to admit, I’d suspected it. Just kept myself in continuous denial until, well, until it was too obvious to deny any longer.”

“What did you do?”

“What would any broken-hearted, betrayed lover do?”

She waited, her eyes wide in anticipation. “You hit him?”

“Oh, yeah.” He stood and poked the fish with a stick. “I think this is probably ready to eat.”

Scrambling to her feet, she grabbed his arm. “Tyler! What happened? Did you kick his ass?”

“No, I think you’d say I was the one who got my ass kicked.” He took a small length of palm frond and used it to flake the fish. “Yeah, it’s ready.”

“Wait. What happened next?”

“Next?” He carried the fish to the small table and set it down. “Next I woke up on the beach. Just like you did.”

She could only stand frozen to the spot and stare at him. A tremble ran through her from head to red-polished toes. The answer was there, just on the edge of her thoughts, but she couldn’t quite grasp it. There was a sameness to their stories. They had both been deeply in love. They had both chosen poorly. They had both been betrayed? Marissa couldn’t remember anything about Hitch cheating on her. She didn’t think that was the problem.

But something like it. She shook her head, as if trying to clear her thoughts and followed him to the makeshift table to eat. “Tyler, there’s more,” she said, sitting down beside him and taking the plate he offered.

“Of course there’s more.” He picked up a piece of mango and held it to her lips. She let him feed it to her, brushing the very tips of his fingers with her tongue as she savored the sweet fruit. She closed her eyes, delighted as always by the bright burst of flavors in all the fruit of the island.

When she opened them again, his fingers still hovered beside her mouth as he stared at her with undisguised lust in his expression. She knew it well. A girl didn’t sling beer in a joint like she did without seeing that look. Except coming from Tyler, it was ... well, it was flattering.

As if he suddenly realized he was all but drooling over her, he pulled his hand away and attended to his own plate of food. How long were they going to keep ignoring these sparks between them? They had no other lovers to whom they owed allegiance. Clearly, they had both ended relationships before arriving on the island. And even though the circumstances remained a mystery, they were still a man and a woman with urges and desires as natural as eating the fruit and the fish.

Chapter Seven

Tyler went through the jungle like a stampeding bull, swinging the machete left and right. The pretense was gathering firewood, but truth was he had to get away from her before he threw her down on the sand and took her like some primeval beast. Not that he thought she would object to that. She clearly sent him the come-on signals.

The question was, what would happen when they gave in to the very human temptations and had sex like the two emotionally starved people they were? Would it ruin everything?

There was no forbidden fruit here, he reminded himself. No one had shouted out in a booming voice that they could have this lush paradise as long as they didn't eat the apple. He hadn't even seen a snake the entire time he'd been here. Then what was stopping him? Initially, she had been too fragile, and he'd done well to respect her space. But now ...

Now she remembered almost everything, and she wasn't scared. Nothing that had happened so far had made her cower in fear. She faced each memory as it came to her, examined it at length, and then matter-of-factly put it away, all but challenging the universe to throw her another one.

She may have been used and abused, but she was no weakling. She was a strong, vibrant woman who had let a man get to her. It happened all the time. The good news was, this one was brave enough to get over it. So she was ready to move on. Even without the complete memory, she knew what was in her heart.

He slid the machete through the loop at his waist and turned back. The sky was darkening, and the firewood wasn't this deep into the jungle anyway. She would know he didn't have to come this far. Everything they needed was scant yards from the doorway. He picked up a few branches to make it at least look like he'd had real work to do.

The sun was sinking rapidly as he hurried back to the bungalow. By the time he reached the small clearing, twilight had turned the sky to a deep purple. He dropped the wood on the pile, taking the time to arrange it neatly, forcing himself to be patient. Straightening, he ran his hands through his hair, pulling out the length of vine that held it out of his face. He drew a dipper of water from the rain barrel and rinsed his hands. Then he went into the bungalow.

Marissa sat on the edge of the bed and watched him come in the door. She had lit the lantern, turning the wick low so that it cast a faint glow around the room. The light hit the golden flecks in the dark green of his eyes. He stood for a moment, his hands curling into fists, then slowly relaxing. Finally, he took the few steps and sat down beside her.

She turned her head to look up at him. Her heart thudded as they stared at each other, the unspoken question between them. *Are you sure?* She let her gaze travel down his broad chest to his denim-clad thighs, then back up again. Oh, yes. She was very sure.

Slowly, she raised her hands to the buttons on her shirt, but before she'd undone the first one, he gently moved her hands away. His long fingers ran over the buttons one by one, parting the fabric one space at a time. Finished, he slid his hands inside and pushed the shirt

away from her shoulders, trailing it down her arms until only the lacy scrap of bra covered her breasts.

Anticipating his touch, her nipples hardened. Never taking his gaze from her eyes, he moved the lace aside and brushed his thumb across one pebbled peak. The sensation shivered through her all the way to her pussy. Moisture gathered in her panties, and she moaned from the exquisite pleasure. When he lowered his head to suckle her, she gasped and dug her hands into his hair, holding him against her while his tongue bathed the swollen bud.

His mouth caressed that sensitive spot, but it wasn't enough. She wanted more, and she wanted it now. The lips of her pussy clenched at the thought. Her walls throbbed from wanting his cock inside her. At last he lifted his head. His eyes seemed to burn with the passion they'd held back the past few days. He wanted to fuck her. She had never been more certain of anything.

As she pulled at the snap on his cut-offs, he found the clasp on her bra. With a few tugs, shoes, shorts, panties were on the floor. Tyler pulled her against him. She went fluidly into his arms and turned her face to receive his kiss. His lips were firm, but he kissed with a gentleness that she found sexier for its very sweetness. His tongue darted into her mouth, meeting hers.

Her pussy throbbing, she reached for his cock. It was long and rock hard as she closed her fist around it, rubbing her thumb across the moisture in the tiny slit at the tip. Tyler broke the kiss, gasping. It was all she could do to keep from sliding her pussy onto his shaft, but she would come in an instant, and she wanted more. Bending, she took his cock into her mouth.

He moaned aloud and put one hand in her hair as she sucked his dick. Rocking on the bed, she fucked him with her mouth, wrapping one hand around the bottom of his shaft and finding his balls with the other.

"Marissa! No."

She eased him out of her mouth and looked up, her hand still pumping him. “No?”

“Well, yes, but ...” He sucked in a breath and covered her hand with his, moving her away from his dick. “But no, not that fast. Not yet. I want to fuck you.”

“Oh, and I *want* you to fuck me, Tyler.”

She scooted back on the bed and lay against the pillows, spreading her thighs, offering him her pussy. Using just one finger, he parted her folds and slid along the slick flesh to her swollen clit, rubbing light, lazy circles around it. Marissa couldn’t stand it any longer. She grabbed his hand and pulled, bringing him onto her.

But Tyler wasn’t having it. “Not yet,” he whispered as he brought his lips to hers for another kiss. As desperately as she wanted him inside her, this kiss was a pure pleasure of its own. His lips glided gently across hers, making her feel that he worshipped her with his mouth. He slid his tongue inside, as if he couldn’t taste enough of her.

The hardened muscles of his chest pressed into her breasts, shooting fire through her nipples, causing her to squirm, seeking more of this exquisite touch. He wrapped one arm around her, and with the hand of the other, caressed her skin from shoulder to ribs to the indentation of her waist. She shivered from his touch, so eager to feel him on every part of her, every inch.

As if he, too, needed to touch as much as possible, he continued to explore her curves, still kissing her, still sipping from her lips as if this were a thirst that could never be slaked. His hand followed the slope of her hip and again found the juncture of her thighs. As his lips left hers to trail along her neck, his hand toyed with the nest of dark curls. One finger slid into her seam, then another.

Marissa gasped and arched against the feeling. It had been so long since anyone had touched her in a loving, pleasurable way. She almost cried at the pure emotion in Tyler’s gestures. But when he slid two fingers into her slick valley, she cried out in passion instead. Fucking her with his fingers, he found her clit with his thumb. And when she thought this

was more sensation than she could take, he lowered his head to take one nipple inside his mouth.

“Tyler!” she cried out.

“Yes, baby,” he answered, still moving his fingers inside her, increasing the pressure on her clit. He lifted his head from her breast to whisper near her ear. “Come for me, Marissa. Come in my hand.”

“No!” With more effort than she thought she possessed, Marissa pulled her pussy away from him, away from the fingers that drove her too near the edge. “Not without you, Tyler. Not this first time.”

He chuckled softly and kissed her on the lips as he settled his long legs between hers. His cock teased her seam as his tongue probed her mouth. The double sensation was maddening. The hair on his chest, golden in the lamplight, rubbed against her aching tits. She would come before he’d completed the first stroke if she didn’t regain control.

But who needs control? she thought as he slid his thick cock into her pussy. And then she had no more thoughts, only sensation as he plunged into her harder and faster, fucking her, branding her, making her his. He moaned and tensed for a split second before plunging a final time, taking her over the cliff with him as wave after wave rolled through her from pussy walls to tits. She pressed her thighs more tightly around him, wanting him never to leave this spot, to stay connected to her forever.

But even as he rolled, keeping her close in the shelter of his arms, she knew they had a connection that would be difficult to sever.

Chapter Eight

Waking up on the island had always been a pleasant feeling for Tyler, but never more so than when he woke up with Marissa in his arms, having made love to her for the first time. There was a kind of peace settled on him that had not been there for a very long time. Maybe never.

It was more than just the satiety of his sexual appetite. Or the temporary satiety, anyway. His cock began to stir, fully aware that a gorgeous woman was even now pressed against him, naked and pliant. But it was more than that. He really couldn't complain about his time on the island. Food had been easy and plentiful, the daily chores manageable. While at first he welcomed the solitude and the quiet, he'd become lonely of late. He was glad for the company now.

Waking, Marissa stirred and stretched, pressing her exquisitely formed ass against his thighs. "Breakfast first, or the waterfall?" she asked without turning over to face him.

Having spent each morning so far trying not to watch her splashing in the cool water of the bathing pool, the idea of watching her bathe naked was quite appealing. "Waterfall."

She turned in his arms and kissed him, then giving him a smile, dug under the quilt for her clothing. He found his cut-offs and followed her out the door of the bungalow. The

waterfall was a short walk away. He'd grown accustomed to gathering fruit for breakfast on his way back. As they passed the fire ring, he stopped to examine the bowl they'd left there yesterday. "Looks like we have plenty of fruit."

Standing beside him, she picked up a coconut. "Is there pineapple on the island?"

"Haven't seen any."

She put the fruit back in the bowl. "That's surprising. This seems like the kind of place that would have pineapple."

"Yeah." But he wasn't thinking about the fruit. The morning sun had turned her hair to burnished gold. Her eyes were alive with a sparkle he had not seen there before. She even smelled different this morning. Like sex. Like a woman who had been loved. He felt his dick start to harden and took her arm. If they didn't head for the waterfall right now, he'd take her back to the bed. "Let's go."

It took only a couple of minutes to reach the pool. The path was green and soft with the dew of the morning on it. Flowers bloomed on the bushes and vines. Tyler whistled a made-up tune and held Marissa's hand.

The waterfall was just high enough for them to stand under, formed by the rocks tapering from the small hills on the backside of the island. Tyler had traced the water to its source, an underground spring midway up the hill. The cool, crystal water pooled at the bottom of the fall before traveling on down to the sea. It was large enough to swim laps across, deep enough for diving. And perfect for two people who had just made love for the first time.

Marissa shed her clothes on the flat rocks in front of the cave beside the waterfall and dove in. Tyler hesitated, wanting to watch her first. But when she surfaced, her wet hair slicked back, her bare breasts bobbing in the water, nipples pebbled from the cold, he stepped out of his cut-offs and followed.

Diving to the bottom, he found her feet and took them in his hands, then followed the length of her legs as he surfaced, finishing with one hand on her pussy. Laughing, she locked her hands behind his neck. But in a moment, her laughter died, her eyes widened, and her breath caught as his fingers worked their way into her seam and found her clit.

Rubbing the swollen nub, he watched her, saw her throw back her head, while he worked it back and forth, around and around with his fingers. He lowered his head and put his lips against the long, slender column of her neck. Her tits barely broke the surface of the water. He moved his mouth to one hardened nipple, sucking and laving the pebbled peak while still holding her pussy in his hand.

She gasped, her fingers tightening on his skin as she struggled to hold on while he kept assaulting her with lips and fingers. Tyler was rock hard, his balls beginning to ache with the need to release, but he kept his attention on Marissa, wanting her to come, to fall apart in his hands. He loved that he could do this for her, that for this moment there were no questions, no worries, no half-memories.

The little sounds she made, accompanied with breaths both deep and shallow, told him her orgasm was near. But just when he thought she hovered on the edge, her eyes flew open and she straightened, shoving his hand away.

"Inside me," she said on a ragged breath. She pressed her mouth to his as she wrapped her thighs around his waist, searching for his dick with her pussy.

He was happy to oblige her, sliding his hands around her hips to the perfect curves of her ass. His fingers dug into the firm flesh as he guided her onto his shaft. In contrast to the cool water, her pussy was warm, growing warmer as she clenched around him. Tyler was not without experience, but this level of passion was new to him. He planted his feet in the soft bottom of the pool and gripped her, pumping into her welcoming canal with an intensity he'd never known.

Her nipples grazed his chest as she moved against him. His cock grew harder as he fucked her in the pond, holding her tight against him. He felt the orgasm building and thrust faster, feeling her body caress him with every stroke, her mound slapping against him as she moved to find the perfect spot for herself.

He could stand it no longer. At first he'd thought to pleasure Marissa, but he was completely out of control. His balls drew tight, and his dick seemed to grow even thicker as he fucked her as if he could not get deep enough inside her walls. Then finally, time seemed to stop as his entire body convulsed, shooting the hot stream into her. He heard voices scream and realized it was both of them, coming together. Her pussy throbbed around him as her release met his.

She went limp against him, and he struggled to remain standing, so depleted was his body, so fulfilled. He wrapped his arms around her as he felt his spent cock slide out of her. She buried her face in the juncture of his shoulder and neck, her breath hot against his skin as she regained control. Gradually her breaths became slower, calmer. She lifted her head and looked at him.

He looked into her eyes, so crystal blue, and saw his future, his redemption. If they never left this place, so be it. He could be happy anywhere with this amazing woman. Holding her close, he made his way to the waterfall and sat her down on the rocks with the shower falling over both of them.

Laughing, she leaned forward and kissed him. "That's a great way to wake up."

He reached for a strand of hair that fell over her eye and tucked it behind her ear. "Are we awake? You're sure we aren't dreaming?"

"I haven't been sure of anything the whole time I've been here." She stood up and let the water run over her, working it through her hair with her hands.

After playing in the water so long their skin wrinkled, they sat in the sun until they were dry enough to put their clothes back on. Marissa tied the denim shoes Tyler had made for her, thinking about this new turn to their relationship. Not the sex. The sex had been inevitable from the first moment they'd had a good look at each other. There had never been any doubt that there was chemistry. No, what surprised her was how she felt about him.

Shoes tied, she stood up and walked the few feet to where he waited for her. He held out his hand, and she took it as they started back quietly along the path to the bungalow.

There was a quiet peace inside her that had not been there before. Just having Tyler beside her had that effect. She knew there were still holes in her memory to fill in, questions to answer, but she was certain of one thing. This man was an important player in her life.

She knew that he felt something as well. It was an almost tangible feeling between the two of them that had been growing since the first day she woke up on the beach. That neither of them put words to it didn't matter. All of the details of her life needed to fall into place before she could think about expressing emotions. The time would come.

When they arrived back at the fire ring, Tyler went to fetch water for them while she prepared the fruit. The bowl still sat where they'd left it after inspecting it this morning. Odd that none of the animals or insects on the island bothered it overnight, she thought. But so far she had seen neither insects nor animals. She was just about to ask Tyler about that when she froze in her spot and screamed.

Dropping the dipper in the rain barrel, Tyler rushed to her side. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She couldn't speak. Certain that her heart had stopped for a second, she tried to take a deep breath, but even that was difficult. She shivered, cold from her head to her toes. Tyler put his hands on her arms, shaking her. "Marissa!"

She gave her head a toss, as if it would clear the image from her mind, but when she looked again, it was still there. She lifted one hand and pointed to the fruit bowl. Sitting on the makeshift table, next to the things they had left there earlier, was a pineapple.

Chapter Nine

Tyler looked over his shoulder, following the line of her arm. When he saw the pineapple, he gathered her into his arms, holding her against his chest. “It’s okay.” He soothed her with his voice. “It’s just a pineapple.”

She burrowed her head, trembling against him. He understood. It had startled him at first when things started appearing as if his very wish had conjured them. He knew now that it was not that simple, but it was still new for her.

He’d had the idea that a machete would help him get the coconuts out of the trees. The next day he’d found a machete beside the fire ring. At first he’d thought the thing had been there all along, that he’d just not noticed. Then a tropical rainstorm had made him curse aloud. A rain barrel would collect that cool, clear water and save him the walk to and from the pool every time he needed to wash his hands. When he went outside after the storm, there was the rain barrel. He wouldn’t have missed something that large. It was definitely not there from the beginning. A frying pan to cook the fish, a lantern for the darkness ... When he needed something, it appeared.

He ran his fingers through her damp hair and turned her face to look at him. The blue of her eyes had deepened as she looked wildly at him, around the fire ring, then back at him. Thick tears hung on her lashes, threatening to spill. "Marissa, it's okay."

The words sounded inadequate, even to him, but he had no way to explain what he himself did not understand. "I don't know what it is," he said, wiping at the tears with his thumbs. "But I know it won't hurt us."

"How are you so sure?"

The expression in her eyes melted his heart. He didn't want this for her, this uncertainty, this fear, this sense of helplessness. "Because I've been here a long time. These things have happened to me, too. But nothing has ever been bad for me."

He turned her around and settled her on the log near the fire ring, then knelt beside her, still stroking her arms, trying to comfort her. "There is nothing here to hurt us. Look around." He swept his arm in a broad arc. "Do you see anything that threatens? We don't even have bugs here."

Her eyes glassy, she moved her head slowly, sweeping her gaze everywhere he pointed. From the fire ring to the bungalow, toward the jungle and back out to the beach. Finally her head came back around and her vacant stare fixed on him. She opened her mouth and spoke very slowly. "What is this place?"

"It doesn't matter." He ran his hands down the length of her arms to her fingertips. Holding both her hands in his, he squeezed. "You know what it is. You just aren't ready to let yourself think it yet."

His heart pounded as he waited for her to comprehend. She looked past him to the water, then swept her gaze around again as she had done just moments ago. She shook her head, then met his eyes again. The desperation he saw there was almost more than he could bear. "It's okay. You know it's okay."

Shaking her head again, she pulled her hands away from his grasp and stood. He tried to pull her back, but she shrugged away from his touch. And so he let her go. If she needed to be alone to think things through, so be it. Once again, he gave her space.

* * * * *

Marissa spent most of the day in the hammock. While she had found it comforting before, it did little to soothe her confused emotions now. Staring up through the fringe of palm fronds, she saw the blue, blue sky and wondered if even that were correct. Maybe she was used to a world where the sky was green. Maybe the sand should be red, the sun blue. Nothing made sense anymore. Nothing.

And yet ... She held her left hand up in front of her and looked at the diamond she still wore on her ring finger. She watched the sparkle as she turned it this way and that, catching the light. And yet, something was familiar about all this. She almost felt as if she'd been here before, and now she was back for a visit.

Déjà vu? She contemplated it, digging one toe in the sand to make the hammock swing. No, it wasn't quite like she'd been here before. More like she'd heard about it, so there were no surprises.

But what about the pineapple?

The terror that engulfed her before had diminished to the dull ache of fear. If she let herself think too much about it, she felt a surge in her stomach almost like electricity. Instinctively she knew she hovered on the edge of panic. How long could she balance there before she fell? And would she ever crawl out again? Maybe this was how the world ended -- driving her crazy, inch by inch.

Still, the pineapple ...

No question she had wanted it, had even asked for it in a way. Someone -- or *something* -- had responded to that desire. But who? Who was watching them? Who heard

their words, read their thoughts? Religion was not a big part of her life. Now she almost wished she knew more than she did.

That was ridiculous! She pushed her foot against the sand, swinging the hammock fiercely. There was no religion -- at least none she'd ever heard of -- that preached about sending people to desert islands to eat pineapples.

Then what was it?

"I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," she said aloud to the clouds, to the palms that swayed above her head. *Is that it?* she wondered. *Am I dreaming?*

If so, it was the most elaborate, most intense dream she'd ever experienced.

The screen door banged as Tyler came out of the bungalow. She watched him step to the table by the fire ring and gather his fishing supplies. Like clockwork, he prepared to catch the fish, like he did every day at this time. Even without a watch, he seemed to know. She glanced up at the sun, judging the amount of day left by its position in the sky.

She lay back in the hammock and closed her eyes. Was he real? Was Tyler really there, or was he also something she'd wished for in her mind? Or, wait! She sat up and watched him coming across the path. Tyler was here first. Was *she* just a wish fulfilled for *him*?

"Going fishing," he said with a smile as he neared. As if the pole, the line, and the basket for bait didn't clue her in. As if there were any other options for dinner. As if he could run down to Burger King for a Whopper.

"I don't know why you bother."

He stopped beside the hammock, his body blocking the sun, shading her. "I tend to get hungry this time of day."

She turned her head away from him. "Why don't you just wish the fish into the frying pan?"

"Ah, but then I wouldn't know the satisfaction of providing for myself, of catching my own food and preparing it myself."

"Must be a guy thing," she muttered.

Tyler chuckled, infuriating her that he could take all this so calmly. But then, he'd had time, hadn't he? She looked back just as he turned away and started toward the beach. For a moment she watched him walk across the sand, watched the muscles ripple under sun-bronzed skin, watched the easy grace of being one with his environment.

Well, she wasn't eager to be that comfortable, that accepting of her fate, whatever it turned out to be.

You just aren't ready to let yourself think it yet.

Closing her eyes, she lay back in the hammock and set it to swinging again with her foot. She had already thought a myriad of things, each one more terrifying than the one before. What could possibly be left? What was so frightening to her that her mind protected her by clouding the memory?

It was there. On the edge. Just like he said it was. If she could just pull back that dark curtain ...

When he came back by again, string of fish brandished like a trophy, she waved him away with a hand gesture. She didn't want to eat. She didn't want the fish that leapt onto the fishing line. And she damn sure didn't want any part of the magic pineapple!

She lay there while he stoked the fire, while the sizzling fish aromas wafted to her on the tropical breeze, while he banged the dishes together, cleaning up. She lay there as the sun slid behind the mountain to the west, to the back of the island. She lay there as, one by one, the stars winked open in the dark blue velvet cloth of home.

The only sound was the pounding of the waves onto the shore and the ripple of palm fronds in the wind. *We don't even have bugs here.* Convenient, that, wasn't it? No snakes. No creatures of any type. Except for the two humans. And she wasn't even sure that description applied. Sure, she was a human. Tyler was another question.

As she rocked in the night breeze, the screen door slammed. The sky was filled with stars now, pinpoints against a pitch-black canvas. A half-moon illuminated the foam on the wave crests. In a moment, she heard his footsteps on the sandy path.

“Marissa?”

Pretend to be asleep? Or answer him? She wanted the solitude, but a memory flashed inside her. Her thighs wrapped around him as he fucked her under the waterfall. His cock, thick and deep in her pussy. His cries of passion when they both came. Had that only been hours before? She turned her head toward his voice.

“Marissa, come inside. Sleep in the bed.”

She started to argue, to refuse. But whatever was happening here was not his fault. There was no need to treat him as if it were. Slowly, almost gingerly, she got up from the hammock and let him hold her hand as they walked back to the bungalow.

Chapter Ten

The water in the deep garden tub came up to her chin, but it was growing tepid, the bubbles all but gone. The delightful scent of tropical flowers still hung in the air, and she basked in it a moment longer.

The bathroom door burst open, and Hitch came through it explosively, as he did everything in life -- full speed ahead. He smiled when he saw her naked. Sitting down on the edge of the tub, he reached into the water and tweaked a nipple. It hurt rather than pleasuring, but she returned the smile and skillfully guided his hand away from her breast, lifting his fingers to her lips for a kiss.

“You’ll be ready for dinner in less than an hour?”

Standing up, she reached for a towel. “Of course.”

Hitch took the oversized terry sheet from her and held it as she stepped out of the water. After wrapping it tightly around her, he gripped her upper arms. “Don’t make me wait. I have some business downstairs, but it won’t be long.”

She looked into his dark, dark eyes, trying to find there whatever had attracted her a year ago. Shrugging, she eased out of his grip. “You’re getting your shirt wet, darling.”

Pulling his white dress shirt out of his trousers, Hitch followed her into the bedroom. He reached for a fresh one, throwing the wet shirt across the edge of the bed. "Wear those new jeans. The tight ones. Your ass looks great in those."

Marissa bit her bottom lip and forced herself to calm. Turning around, she gave him a smile. "Sure, Hitch. I like those, too."

She turned back around and opened drawers to pull out lingerie -- a wedge of silk that could barely be called panties and a scrap of lace to cover her breasts. As soon as the door closed behind Hitch, she let out a breath she hadn't even realized she held. Bracing both hands on the dressing table, she lowered her head and tried to summon strength. She needed to walk away from this man, and she would do it. But not tonight.

Tonight she needed to dress for him and go to the steakhouse on his arm, let him show her off to his friends and associates, let him gloat that he had a gorgeous woman and they didn't. Tuesday, she would put the plan in motion. Tuesday morning, he left for a gambling trip to Vegas. Tuesday afternoon, she had a secret meeting at the Women's Center to help her look at her options and get out safely. By the time he came back -- a winner or a loser -- she'd be gone.

She straightened and picked up the blow dryer, started working on her hair, scrunching the untamed curls into controlled disarray. If she had any family, she'd be gone already. If her father were still alive ...

If wishes were horses, she chided herself. If her father were still alive, she never would have been slinging beer in a sports bar in the first place, would she? Stabbing her fingers through her hair, she gave up on the style and put the dryer away. She picked up the lingerie and walked into the bedroom.

Voices rose from the room downstairs, but she ignored them. Hitch's business deals quite often grew loud. She wasn't altogether certain what he did, but she knew most of it wasn't legal. She slipped on the bra and panties and went searching for the jeans, but a loud

crash from downstairs stopped her. What the hell was he doing now? She paused for a moment, listening, then shrugged as she heard nothing else.

She found the jeans and shimmied into them, struggling to pull the zipper up. It wasn't a weight issue. In fact, she'd lost about five pounds in the last couple of months. Pounds she didn't really have to spare. It was just that Hitch liked her clothes so tight, defining her body.

As she headed toward the dressing room to choose a blouse, the voices grew loud again. She couldn't make out the words, but she heard the anger in the tone. She crept toward the bedroom door, listening. There were sounds of furniture scraping on the marble tile, and then a door slammed.

Marissa opened the bedroom door and peeked out. The voices were farther away now, but running footsteps came toward the foyer. Another loud crash drew her out into the hallway. Another shout and then the staccato crack of a gunshot. She stepped to the railing and looked down. Saw Hitch holding the gun. Saw the man sprawled on the marble tile. Saw the dark red pool oozing from his body.

Her eyes widened as her heart raced. Hitch looked up at her. "Get back in the bedroom!" he barked at her.

Without taking her eyes off the dead man -- and he was surely dead -- she nodded slowly, backing up, reaching behind her for the door. Her fingers found the smooth wood, and she stumbled into the bedroom and slammed the door.

Trembling. Her body was trembling all over. She couldn't stop it. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She wanted to scream, but wasn't sure she had the air to make that happen. Then adrenalin kicked in. She had to get out! Hitch had just killed a man, and she had seen it. He'd kill her next!

Looking wildly around for a blouse, she spotted Hitch's white dress shirt lying across the bed where he'd tossed it. She scooped it up and headed for the balcony even as she scrambled into the garment, sparing no time for shoes. The drop to the ground was too far,

but the workout room next door had its own balcony with stairs to the garden below. Problem was, the chasm between the two balconies was wide.

She heard noises behind her, knew Hitch was coming up the stairs, knew he would stop her. She closed her eyes briefly, flashing to a moment in her childhood. The trampoline her father bought her for Christmas. How far she could jump. You can do this, she told herself. She scrambled onto the railing, didn't look down.

Without giving herself time to think about it, she flung herself across the space to the balcony on the other side. Her long limbs finally came in handy as she grabbed the opposite railing and pulled herself up and over. She scampered down the stairs, leaping the last four or five and hit the ground running.

"Marissa!" Hitch shouted from the balcony. But she didn't look back. He wouldn't try the jump, she was sure of it. She only had to make it to the edge of the garden and through the gate. Safety waited on the other side. She could make it.

"Marissa!" he screamed again.

Then she heard the pop. Something hit her, forcing all the air out of her lungs, and she fell to the lawn, her hands before her, grabbing onto clumps of grass, pulling. The pain in her back was unbearable. She thought she screamed, but she didn't hear any sound.

And then in the next instant everything changed. The pain left. She felt as if she were drifting, floating.

A new kind of terror gripped her. *He's killed me!* she thought. And she screamed again.

Strong hands gripped her shoulders, shaking her, but she screamed and screamed. The hands were insistent, would not leave her alone.

"Marissa!"

She heard her name, but it wasn't Hitch. She struggled to place it and finally realized. Tyler! Her eyes flew open. Tyler held her upper arms, shaking her, trying to get her to wake up.

She stared at Tyler, at the deep green of his eyes, reflecting the golden glow of dawn. Looking around, she fought to mesh this scenario with the one she'd just seen in her dreams. Both were real. This was now, that was ...

“He killed me,” she whispered.

And then, gaining her voice, “That son of a bitch killed me!”

Chapter Eleven

Tyler couldn't warm her up. After telling him what she remembered, she just sat on the bed, shivering. Finally he went outside and stoked the fire, threw on the biggest logs he could find. He pulled the palm frond chair up close, then carried her outside and put her in it. Kneeling beside her, he held her two hands between his and rubbed back and forth.

But she was still cold.

And worse than the chill was the vacant look in her eyes.

He understood. It was a lot to assimilate. Not just that her fiancé was that big of a snake. But that she was dead. No longer living, gone from the earthly plane. He had a hunch that it wasn't quite as final as popular custom taught but she wasn't ready for any more revelations today.

"It's okay," he said for the millionth time, moving his hands up to her arms and rubbing the cold, cold flesh there. It might have been wishful thinking, but she seemed to be warming up a bit. "That's better?"

Her gaze was fixed on the flames of the campfire, but after a few seconds, almost as if she wasn't sure she'd heard him, she turned her head and looked at him. "So you're dead, too?"

“It would seem so.” He sat back on his heels and sighed. “I think it was an accident, though. He just wanted to hit me, but he knocked my head into a bookcase.”

“Well, that doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Guess not. What does matter is that we’re in a really wonderful place, with plenty to eat and company we enjoy. All things considered, it could be a lot worse.”

She turned back and stared at the fire, rubbing her bare arms with her hands. “Why are we here?”

He had a theory about that, too. This seemed as good a time as any to tell her. He dragged a log up to the fire and sat down beside her. “It’s hard to say how or why I have these ... feelings ... but I’m pretty sure I’m right. At least, so far my intuition has proved true. Like when you came ... I didn’t expect you, exactly. But I knew a change was coming. And I knew it would be that night.”

She kept her gaze on the fire, staring vacantly, as if the pieces had not yet fallen into place in her mind. He continued, “I think there was a mistake. Neither of us was supposed to die yet.”

She didn’t look at him, but her eyes brightened with interest, so he kept going. “It’s almost like the universe knows something is wrong, so now it has to be fixed. This island is a holding area where we wait until things settle.”

Now she turned her head and nailed him with that bright blue gaze. “Settle?”

“Yeah, until the time is right.”

“The time is right for what?”

It took more control than he possessed not to touch her. He reached out and ran the palm of his hand down her lovely cheek. “We’re going back.”

“How? When?”

“I don’t know how, and I certainly don’t know when. I just know it.”

She nodded slowly, as if she were able to make sense of the things he said. As if they weren't as absurd as being on a desert island and -- oh, by the way -- dead. She turned back to him. "Where's our Clarence?"

"Our who?"

"Clarence. The angel who talked to Jimmy Stewart. Or Buck Henry in that movie where Warren Beatty was dead. Why don't we have an angel? Someone has to tell us what to do."

He smiled just a little. Clearly she had accepted it now. Things would be all right. "Well, we kind of know what to do, don't we?"

"I don't know. I've never been dead before. At least not that I remember."

He let his muscles relax. The edge of hysteria was gone from her voice. She'd stopped shivering. "Well, that's the thing, isn't it? We probably wouldn't remember."

"Regardless!" She stood up, thrust her hands into her pockets and began to pace. "I want an angel! I think we deserve that much."

Tyler stood up, too, and took her arm to slow her down before she wore a rut around the fire ring. "Well, you do have a guide, don't you?"

Jerking her arm out of his grip, she nailed him with her bright blue eyes. "Where? I haven't seen any grandfatherly little old men coming forward to tell us what happens next. What do you mean we have a guide?"

Patience was easy to summon in this tropical garden. He didn't even have to work at it. "I didn't say *we* have a guide. I said *you* have a guide. Me." When she just stared at him, he continued, "For some reason, I was sent here first so I'd be able to help you understand when you got here."

"But you've been here for months. The universe knew months later I would be accidentally killed, too?"

“I think you need to suspend what you believe to be true about time. I think wherever we are right now, time is irrelevant.”

“But time is passing! The sun rises and sets every day.”

He ventured a hand to stroke her shoulder and down the length of her arm. “Because that’s what we know. That’s what we would expect to happen. Just like we expected to see pineapples here, so suddenly we do.”

“Okay.” She nodded slowly. “I need some time to think about this. I need to be alone.”

He thought she absolutely did not need to be alone, but he was willing to give her space -- as long as he could keep an eye on her. “Sure.”

As she moved away, he let his hand glide down her arm to her hand, keeping the warmth of her skin beneath his fingers for as long as possible. Then he watched her walk toward the shore.

Marissa found the flat rock where Tyler usually went to fish for dinner and sat down, staring at the sea. The warm stone felt good against her skin. She turned her face up to the sun and let the heat seep into her as the tropical breeze skimmed through her hair. There was just too much to comprehend right now.

And yet ... knowing that she was dead was the least of it. All of a sudden her world had become *that* crazy, that being dead was not at the top of her list of bad things to deal with. No, the whys and the hows were far more troublesome.

She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs, watching the waves crash onto the shore. Every now and then, one crest splashed the rocks where she sat, spraying her with the salty foam. It felt good. Just the fact that she could feel it was good, she figured. If death was eternity on a tropical island with a gorgeous hunk, bring it on!

The problem was, she knew he was right. They couldn’t stay. She understood exactly what Tyler meant when he said he “knew” things. She knew things, too. There was no way

to explain how she knew, she just did. So when he said he knew, she believed. They were going back.

To what, though? That's what frightened her. Not back to Hitch. Please not back to that. It had only been a matter of time before he killed her. She just didn't get out quickly enough. Now she had to go back?

She sat just that way while the sun rode across the sky and started to sink behind her. And by the end of the day, she knew it was all right. For whatever reason, the universe was giving her a second chance. She wasn't going back just to get killed again. She was going back because she deserved a shot at a better life.

And that was something she could accept.

* * * * *

Tyler had foregone the daily fishing, probably so that he wouldn't invade her space. When she walked back to the bungalow, he was sitting by the fire ring cutting the pineapple into pieces. Her earlier fear of eating the fruit was gone. Now she understood it was there for her pleasure. She sat down beside him and took the chunk he offered her.

She closed her eyes and savored the burst of flavor in her mouth, as she did every time they ate. It was as if the universe wanted to make amends for their circumstances by making everything else as pleasurable as possible. Was that why the sex was so good, too?

Opening her eyes just a bit, she stole a glance at Tyler. He handled the knife like a pro, slicing the pineapple into neat wedges. He wore only his cut-offs today. No shirt. She watched the muscles on his back ripple beneath his golden-tanned skin as he worked on the fruit. No, the sex was good because this man was perfection. He had the most incredible body she'd ever seen.

He stabbed the knife into another chunk and offered it to her. "You feeling better now?"

“Yes.” She let him put the fruit in her mouth.

“When I first figured out that I was dead, I was surprised at how many things were left to be afraid of,” he said.

She nodded, wiping pineapple juice from her chin. “I think I’ve decided I have nothing left to fear. I mean, what else can go wrong? Hitch killed me, and what I got for it isn’t that bad.”

“Really?” Tyler finished the pineapple and got up to wash his hands from the rain barrel. “You feel that confident already?”

“Sure. Don’t you?”

She watched him dry his hands on the denim of his shorts. Then he poked the fire to new life and sat down beside her on a log. “No. Not really.”

“Why not?”

The silence that stretched out between them lasted for so long that Marissa thought he was ignoring the question altogether. When he finally spoke, his voice was smooth, quiet. “I guess you had already decided to leave Hitch when he killed you. My situation was a little bit different.”

She sat quietly, willing him to continue though she could see the conversation was unpleasant for him.

“I didn’t know Deborah was cheating on me until seconds before I died.”

She laid a cautious hand on his denim-clad thigh. “That must have been hard to take.”

“I’ve had some time to think about it.”

“But you aren’t reconciled to it yet.” She moved her hand to his arm, trying to get him to look at her. “You know, don’t you, it’s entirely possible the cheating wasn’t about you at all?”

He shrugged, still staring at the fire. “I’ve thought of that. But it doesn’t really matter. If she had been getting all she needed from me, there would never have been another man.”

Marissa knew she was probing, pushing him to a place he clearly did not want to go. But it seemed really important for him to get all this out. He had been so kind to her, she wanted to help him in return. “So what do you suppose you’re lacking?”

That got him to turn his head toward her. “I was too rigid. There was no spontaneity in my life. Everything had to be planned to the last detail. I had a spreadsheet to document almost everything in my life. If I couldn’t chart it, analyze it, I didn’t want it.”

Marissa couldn’t hold back a smile. That explained why he went to the fishing place every day at exactly the same time. He needed structure. He defined himself by the boundaries he knew and expected. “You just wanted control of your environment.”

He shook his head. “I was afraid.”

“Afraid! You’re the bravest man I’ve ever known!”

“Well, I don’t have a choice here, do I?”

“Of course you do. There’s always a choice. You could have crawled under the quilt and never come out. But you didn’t. You took stock of the situation, saw what you had to do, and you did it. And thank the universe for sending you here before me. I would have been a raving lunatic without your help!”

Patting her hand on his arm, he gave her a brief smile. “Well, that was easy, wasn’t it? You needed help in the beginning. I had the experience. That didn’t take any courage.”

“No courage! Are you kidding me? You fished me out of the water, took me in, made sure I was warm and fed. And I could have been the Devil himself. How would you know?”

Taking a breath, she calmed her voice and laid her head against his shoulder. “The only reason I have the strength to get through this is because you give it to me.”

He reached up and covered her cheek with his hand, speaking quietly. “No, Marissa. This does not take courage. I’ve never been a risk-taker. This doesn’t qualify. It’s almost like playing *Survivor* at a five-star resort.”

Closing her eyes, she leaned against him and sighed. How could he not see how incredibly strong and brave he was? She didn't miss the stark contrast between this man and the one she'd just left in the other dimension. Night and day. But this one, yes, this one was the good one. She knew it down to her bones. And he would see. She would make sure of it.

Chapter Twelve

The sun was almost gone. Marissa went inside and lit the lantern, preparing for bed, while Tyler banked the fire and put the food away. He was silent when he came into the bungalow; going about the business of preparing for bed, Marissa let him brood. For now, anyway.

When he climbed into bed, he hugged the outside edge of the mattress, clearly sending Marissa the signal that he wanted to be left alone, perhaps to move it around in his mind a bit longer. She turned toward the window and let him be.

She'd seen this a hundred times. She'd talked to enough of them, crying in their beer. Rich men, poor men, old and young. Genius and jerk. There was one thing they all had in common. They took it personally when their women cheated. Tyler was no different. Oh, he might be blaming himself a bit more than most, but it still came down to the territorial guy thing. *His* woman. Some other man was fucking *his* woman. It wounded his pride.

Through the window she saw the stars blinking in the dark sky. This had been one hell of a day. Next to her, Tyler sighed, indicating that his thoughts were in the same place. Turning over, she laid a hand on his chest, intending to soothe him, to offer some comfort.

But the moment she felt his hardened abs ripple beneath her fingers with each breath he took, she wanted more.

Seduction had never been difficult for her. But it had never been as important as it was tonight. She wanted to show him how very much he meant to her. She wanted him to know, just as much as she did, that she loved him.

Moving her hand on his torso, she let her fingers glide over his skin, tingling at the touch. Immediately, her pussy clenched in anticipation. He sucked in a breath and held it, then exhaled on a long sigh. "Marissa," he whispered.

"Shh." Turning, she threw one leg across his thighs, moving her foot up and down his calf, feeling the coarse hairs on his leg against the arch of her foot. Her nipples grew hard and achy, longing to be touched, sucked, but it was all for him right now.

He moved his hands to her shoulders, to her back, caressing her lightly, ever so lightly. It would be gentle tonight. Quiet. They both needed it as a balm on the raw edges of the day.

She laid one palm against his cheek and turned his face to hers. A pale golden light from the lantern flickered in his eyes. She curled her fingers against his cheek, and he bent, seeking her lips. The moment their mouths touched, she melted. Her pussy filled with moisture, and she gripped his leg with her thigh, urging him to join with her.

The kiss was slow and sweet. His tongue was light against her, inside her, filling her, filling the void in her heart. He wound his hands into her hair and brought her closer, framing her face in his fingertips. Then he moved one hand down to caress her breast, and she gasped. Swollen nipples strained forward to receive the strokes. He brushed his thumb across the bud, back and forth, sending shivers down to the pit of her stomach, to the lips of her seam. She wanted him inside her, stroking her, owning her. She wanted him now.

Playing her hands across his chest, she let her leg rest on his swollen cock. He was thick and hot and ready to take her, but not yet ... not yet. She traced a lazy path down his abdomen to his crotch, circling his dick with her fingers, closing them tight around him,

stroking, stroking. He broke the kiss and moved his mouth to her nipple, laving the hardened nub with his tongue, his lips. He sucked and caressed, driving her wild with the pleasure. From tits to pussy to the soles of her feet, she vibrated with desire for this man.

And he knew it. He wanted her as desperately as she wanted him. She felt it in the urgency of his hands, the fierceness of his kiss. There would be no gentle lovemaking between them. Not tonight, not ever. The passion would not let them take it slowly.

Breath intensified. Pulses thrummed. Neither could be still as the desire coiled and snaked between and around them. Marissa held his throbbing cock in her hand, rubbed her thumb across the top, slid her fingers up and down. He groaned and left her breast for the dark folds between her legs. With one finger he parted the slick flesh while his thumb pressed on her clit.

Marissa almost screamed, so intense was the pleasure. No man had ever played her body like this, knowing exactly where to touch and when, knowing how to drive her to the edge of pleasure, only to let her hang for a moment before sending her higher and higher. She moved her leg, trying to get him into her pussy, but he pushed her back.

His hands on her waist now, he turned her around, splayed his fingers across her belly, then pulled her backwards toward his crotch. She gasped again, fighting for a settling breath as his cock rubbed against her ass. Moving his hands up to her breasts, he found her seam with his dick, pushed into the slick wet folds of her aching pussy, and began to pump.

Marissa pushed back against him, taking him deeper and deeper with every thrust. Reaching behind her, she gripped his ass, as if she could push him harder, faster with her light hands. He tangled one hand in her hair and let the other slide down her body to find her clit, stretched tight as she strained against him, meeting his thrusts.

Already about to explode, she ground her ass against him as he fingered her clit, circling it, rubbing it, bathing it in her own wetness. Then finally, when she thought she could stand it no longer, she started to come. From deep inside her pussy, the tremors

radiated, intensifying as they spread outward. No orgasm had ever rocked her this deeply, and she screamed his name at the very moment that he came in her.

Gasping, she lay against him, his arms holding her close to him, feeling his breath against her neck as gradually they both returned to reality. Their breathing slowed and evened out, matched in rhythm and depth. Marissa closed her eyes against wayward tears that threatened to spill, so deeply had he touched her with the intensity of his lovemaking. How could he possibly doubt himself?

Slowly she turned, keeping his arms around her, until she lay against his chest, felt his heart thrumming beside her head. She moved one hand across his chest, his arm, up to cradle his cheek. Looking up at him, she whispered, "Tyler ..."

"Hmmm?"

"I love you."

The arm that encircled her tightened. He moved his other one to lay a hand against her face. Slowly, he stroked her cheek, smoothing stray tendrils of her hair. He drew a long breath and let it out slowly, speaking on the whisper of breath. "I love you, too, Marissa."

Smiling, she snuggled more deeply into the curve of his well-muscled arm. Perfect peace began to settle over her. And then he spoke again.

"So much that it scares me."

She lifted her head. "Nothing to be afraid of with me, Tyler."

"Everything to be afraid of," he answered, but he kissed the top of her head and tucked her back into the spot near his heart.

Chapter Thirteen

When Tyler woke up the next morning, he left her sleeping in the bed, though he doubted that she'd be asleep long. The wind had kicked up and was banging the shutters on the bungalow. She'd hear that soon enough.

He went to the rain barrel and splashed water on his face, then looked up at the sky. Overcast. White clouds tinged with gray covered all the blue. The sun was up, but not visible through the cloud cover. Taking the bowl, he went into the jungle to gather fruit for breakfast, the wind whipping the palm leaves into and around him, making the trek difficult for the first time since he'd been there.

When he returned, Marissa was at the fire ring, struggling to get the flame going with the brisk wind opposing her. "Rainstorm?" she asked when he knelt before her to help shield the fragile spark.

The flint caught, and they huddled around the tiny flame until it ignited the kindling. When it was safe to lay the larger wood on the flames, Tyler stepped back and looked at the sky again. "This doesn't look like any storm I've seen so far."

He turned toward the beach. The water was choppy, with fierce waves pounding hard on the rocks. "This must have been building all night. If it keeps up, we won't need the fire. I won't be able to fish."

Marissa rose and stood beside him, looking out to sea. "I'll find some bigger wood, just in case."

Tyler went with her to pick up branches, plentiful since the wind had knocked some of the smaller ones down. The lean-to that covered the cooking area was not going to be much protection against the rain with this wind, but he'd not seen a severe storm on the island yet. And why would there be? Everything since he'd arrived had been easy and peaceful. He'd be very surprised if these clouds yielded more than enough rain to replenish the drinking water.

But by the time they'd finished breakfast and cleaned up the fire ring area, he was about to change his mind. There hadn't been more than a sprinkle of raindrops yet, but the sky was growing more ominous by the moment. The clouds billowed and rose, as if they were the smoke from some massive fire. Not a patch of blue remained.

Tyler gathered their meager supplies and leftover fruit to take inside to the relative safety of the bungalow. But Marissa walked toward the beach. He watched her stride lazily toward the water, then comfortable that she was safe, he ducked into the bungalow and started stowing the food.

When she hadn't come back in a few minutes, he followed her. She was on the shore, letting the water rush around her ankles as her feet sank into the sand. The waves were turbulent, he thought. High and fast.

He put an arm around her, the wind whipping her shirt against him. "Rough surf," he said.

She kept her gaze on the water. "This is no regular rainstorm, Tyler."

"What do you mean?"

"I grew up in Houston." Now she turned, and he saw worry in the deep blue of her eyes. "This is the edge of a hurricane."

He looked up at the sky, at the thick clouds covering everything, then he looked back out to sea, as if the answer could be found there. "You're sure?"

She nodded and looked back out. "You can almost feel the pressure lowering. Doesn't it bother you?"

He wouldn't have known how to describe it, but there was definitely something different in the air. A hurricane. All those horrible pictures of New Orleans flashed across his mind. If she was right, this was nothing to be casual about. "Let's get back and batten down, then."

They hurried back to the bungalow. Tyler dismantled the lean-to and carefully folded the tarp. He coiled the ropes and took everything inside. They might need it later. He hoped not, but better to be ready. While Marissa put away any loose objects inside, he closed all the shutters and secured them as best he could with the flimsy hooks attached to them. All the while, the wind whipped over and around them as they worked. Every now and then, a burst of rain would beat on him and then subside.

Satisfied that they'd done all they could for protection, they stood on the porch and watched the palm fronds thrashing in the wind. The rain became more intense now, sweeping across the beach and into the jungle. They stepped back from the edge, but continued to stand on the porch and watch. What else was there to do? Tyler wondered. There was no CNN. No Weather Channel. Any information about this storm was going to come from their own observations.

Standing behind Marissa, he wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on the top of her head. After all the days he'd been here in this perfect setting, why now was the weather threatening? He was a man who looked for meaning in everything that happened. Surely there was something to this as well.

In a few minutes, the rain subsided. They stood and watched it dripping from the roof of the porch. "Is that it?" Tyler asked. "Just a windy rainstorm?"

"No." Marissa turned in his arms and looked up at him. "These are the outer bands of rain. It will get worse and worse as the center approaches. The gusts are getting stronger. Can't you feel it?"

He'd been naïve in his optimism. "Let's go inside."

There was nothing to do but ride it out. Marissa paced -- if you could call it pacing in the small bungalow -- because nervous energy was taking over. She felt as if she'd had a six-cup coffee morning. She searched her memory for absolutely everything she could remember about hurricanes. Growing up near the Gulf of Mexico, she'd gotten used to them coming and going. Even the worst ones hadn't had much effect on her. It was just part of their summer. Buy canned goods and water. Be prepared.

Here, they didn't have much chance to be prepared. She wasn't overly scared. It was more like a frisson of unease that she couldn't shake. She and Tyler would be all right. How could they not? They were in some kind of limbo-land. What could happen to them?

As the day wore on, the rain and wind intensified. She and Tyler took nervous turns moving from the bed to the chair to the porch to the window. He couldn't sit still, and neither could she. The wind whistled through the eaves and made the rafters creak. Every now and then, a gust would find its way beneath a shutter and slam it against the side of the house.

Finally, one persistent burst of air found its way beneath a shutter and ripped the latch free. Rain beat in through the screen. Tyler jumped up to go fix it. There was no way he was going out in this storm alone! Marissa ran out right behind him.

Wrestling with the wooden shutter in the fierce wind was no easy task. Marissa helped him hold the piece in place while he struggled to secure the latch. Just a small piece of wood

on a pivoting nail, the fastener was fragile enough in good weather. Working against wind and driving rain made it almost impossible.

“Hold it!” Tyler shouted. “Can you hold it for a second?”

She nodded, standing on tiptoe and stretching her arms to keep the shutter against the house while he fought with a length of vine in the bush by the window. Her muscles ached while she waited for him to work the twine free so that he could try lashing it around the latch. It was a great plan. She just wasn’t sure she could hold on for as long as he needed.

A roaring gust hammered its way against the house and ripped the shutter from her, gouging the palm of her hand in the process. She squealed with the sudden pain, but she fought the wind and held on.

“Are you okay?” Tyler shouted above the wind.

She nodded again. “Just hurry!”

As quickly as possible, he closed the shutter and wound the vine around and around the small piece of wood. It held. For now, anyway.

They dashed back inside, shaking the water from them like dogs coming out of a romp through the sprinklers. Tyler grabbed her hand and turned it palm up. “You’re hurt!”

“It’s not bad. Just a scrape.”

But it did sting like the dickens, despite the brave front she tried to show him.

Tyler reached for the covers on the bed and found a frayed corner. He ripped a strip from the edge and then took her hand again. He dabbed gently at the abrasion, then wrapped the cloth around her hand, tucking the end under to secure it. Tiny drops of blood seeped through the cloth, but it wasn’t bad. She couldn’t worry about it now anyway. They had bigger problems.

“Tyler, did you see the water?”

He looked up from her hand. “What about it?”

"The waves were high. I hadn't even been thinking of this, but we really need to consider it. The worst thing about a hurricane isn't always the wind."

His hand curled slowly around hers. When he spoke, it was barely more than a whisper. "Storm surge."

"Exactly. The waves are a lot higher now. Almost covering the fishing rock. We could be in trouble here."

Tyler opened the door and stared out. Wind sailed in through the opening, bringing stinging drops of rain with it. For several long seconds, he let the weather beat on him and the doorway of the bungalow. Finally he closed the door and turned back to Marissa. "It's moving further inland with every wave. How far will it come?"

She sank down on the side of the bed. "I don't know. I can't remember. The backside, I think, is the most dangerous." She looked up at him. "Or is it the front? Tyler, I'm sorry. I don't remember the details!"

"It doesn't matter. We don't know what we've got. The eye could be passing above us or below us. Or even parallel to the shore. It doesn't matter which piece is the strongest. We don't know which piece we have."

He sat down beside her on the bed and wiped the drops from his face with his shirtsleeve. "We have to expect the worst."

"We've done everything we can. The shutters, the food. What else is there?"

"We have to get to higher ground." He thought about it for a moment. "The cave beside the waterfall. It's better shelter than what we have here. And farther away from the coast."

"Don't be ridiculous!" She couldn't keep alarm from her voice. "We can't get to the waterfall in this weather. We could hardly stand outside by the windows!"

"We have to."

"But why? Why do we have to be careful? We're already dead!"

She felt as if she'd just told him the most obvious thing imaginable, but he didn't seem to mind. Slowly he reached for her hand, turned it palm up, ran his fingers gently across the bandage. "You were hurt. You bled."

He took her hand and placed it flat against his chest. "My heart is beating. You can feel it, can't you?"

She nodded.

He raised his other hand and laid it just above her breast. "I can feel yours, too. We may be dead, Marissa, but we're not finished."

She stared into his eyes, deep green now in the near dark of the bungalow. He was right. They had both met their own mortality, but for some reason they'd been spared. Their hearts did beat. She could feel hers even now, pounding inside her chest, hammering because she was afraid to go back out in the storm, to make that trek to the waterfall.

Everything he said made sense, but she was frightened. "Are you sure we need to do that?"

He was already looking around, forming a plan. She could see it in his eyes. "Do you want to take the chance?"

"Tyler." She laid a hand on his arm to get him to look at her.

He patted her hand, but stood up. "We don't know what we've got out there. It's possible that the ocean will completely cover this cabin by nightfall. We have to get out."

The fear of trekking through the jungle in the storm was nothing like the fear of being swept away on a storm surge. She finally got it. They couldn't take the chance. The greater fear mobilized her into action. "Okay, let's go."

He was pacing around the bungalow, looking in every corner. "We need to take supplies with us, but I don't know how to do it."

She started gathering the food and the matches while he picked up the tarp. "We need something ..." He looked around again, at the bed, at the table. "We can't carry all this."

“Tyler, think about it.”

He stopped his frantic pacing and looked at her. “What?”

“When we need something, it’s here.”

He ran restless hands through his wet hair. “Yes.” He turned slowly in a circle, looking. Then a smile started across his face. He went to the bed and lifted the edge of the quilt. Bending, he peered under the wooden frame. “Aha!”

She leaned over him. “What is it?”

Instead of answering, he reached under the bed and pulled out a large hiker’s backpack made with a lightweight metal frame and -- wonder of wonders! -- waterproof fabric. She started to laugh, not the least bit surprised when he reached under again and pulled out a second one, exactly the same as the first.

“Okay, let’s hurry.” He stood up and took one pack with him toward the food table. “Fold up the quilt and the sheets. Stuff them into yours.”

She complied, working quickly, making the bed clothes as small as possible to get them all into the pack. No telling how long they would have to stay in the cave. They needed to take everything they had. Or as much of it as they could carry.

The wind whistled around the eaves, as if teasing them while they packed. They had all the covers, all the food, the lantern, the matches, all the tools. Everything they could fit into the packs or in their pockets, they took with them.

Tyler rolled the tarp up into as small a package as possible and tied it around his waist with the ropes. Then he lifted her pack and helped her get into the shoulder straps. Taking a last look around the bungalow, he picked up his own pack and secured it on his back.

Marissa’s heart was pounding like the bass drum in a marching band. She was terrified, but at the same time, there was an uplifting excitement to the adventure. She looked at Tyler, drawing on his strength. If he was scared, he didn’t show it. He went about his chores

with a calmness that she'd learned to expect from him. Nothing ruffled him now. He just performed what he intuitively felt to be the right acts.

She caught his eye as he checked around the bungalow one more time. "Ready?"

"One more thing."

Taking another length of rope from the tarp bundle, he tied one through his belt loop and the other end through hers. He laid a hand against her cheek. "Just in case," he said.

Then he kissed her.

Chapter Fourteen

Tyler opened the front door. Immediately the rain hit them with the force of the cruel wind behind it. He glanced back at Marissa, at the little bungalow, for one last look before plunging out into the weather. He wished she had better shoes. He wished they had rain gear. He wished for a lot of things, but there was no time to wait around for some invisible genie to grant them.

“Ready?” he called against the sound of rain hitting the roof. He watched her bite her lip, take a breath, and nod.

Gripping her hand, Tyler stepped out the door and into the storm. No more than six feet from the porch, the wind became a dangerous factor. He tightened his grip on Marissa’s hand and struggled against the forces of nature.

It had to be tougher for her, he thought. She was so lean and light. He bent slightly forward, hoping to keep his body lower to the ground and lessen the storm’s power against him.

Within seconds the rain saturated them. He could feel it running down his arm and into their joined hands, making it more difficult to hold on to her. That’s why he’d tied

himself to her with the rope. Anything to increase their chances of making it through the storm to the cave together.

Speech was impossible now. The howling wind and driving rain drowned out any attempt at communicating with words. Tyler lowered his head against the rain and set a steady pace along the path, keeping Marissa as close to him as possible, hoping to shield her even a little with his body.

The wind came across the water, forcing them to cut a path straight through it. When the trail turned left up ahead, the wind would be at their backs. He wasn't sure whether that would help or hinder.

The rain came in sheets and spurts carried on the gusts. Each drop was like a pinprick to his skin, needles flung from afar to penetrate every pore. He glanced at Marissa and saw the brave determination on her face. No fear. Just a strong will to get through this and get on with whatever came next.

The bushes edging the path that normally lent their flowery fragrance to the morning trek were bent nearly parallel to the ground. Some of the smaller ones were already uprooted. The trees would be next, he thought.

Even as he formed the image in his mind, the roaring winds kicked up. Instead of swaying gracefully from the tropical breezes, the palms fought valiantly to stand their ground. Fronds, ripped and shredded in the wind, tore loose and flew across the jungle. Bananas and coconuts swirled in the air becoming dangerous missiles in their path.

Tyler looked toward the beach and saw the waves leaping higher and higher, churning against the rocks, rolling and pounding onto the beach, farther and farther. Marissa's hammock whipped in the wind, waves breaking just beneath it. The tide would reach the bungalow soon.

He looked back at Marissa just as she shrieked. Grabbing his arm with both hands, she wrenched him toward her a nanosecond before a huge palm came crashing across their path inches from where they stood.

Taking a deep breath, he hugged her close to him, but only for a moment. They had not a second to waste now. The storm grew stronger, threatening every footfall. Tyler picked his way over the fallen tree, helping Marissa along with him. The heavy pack and tarps strapped to his body made every step awkward, but still he pressed on.

They took the turn into the jungle toward the waterfall and found their path all but destroyed by the storm. The roar of the wind grew louder and louder as the jungle closed in around them. With the hurricane at their backs, it became a struggle to pick through the debris.

Four times he had to pull the machete from his belt and whack through fallen branches. Twice the wind tore Marissa from his grip. Each time he pulled her back, hand over hand along the rope.

Deeper into the jungle, it became more difficult to see. The sky was dark. Driving rain obscured his vision. The howling wind and pounding rain made it impossible to listen for the rush of the waterfall. But he knew they were close. They had to be. Whatever Force kept them alive after death could not be so cruel as to destroy them this way.

Acting only on instinct now -- instincts he never knew he possessed -- Tyler made careful steps through the jungle, dragging Marissa along with him. She never hesitated, never complained. He drew strength from her quiet courage and kept on.

Finally they broke free of the bushes, so abruptly that Tyler almost plunged into the pool, taking Marissa with him. He'd misjudged the distance to their right, but what did it matter? They had reached the waterfall. The safety of the cave was just beside it.

Smiling for the first time all day, with rain streaming down his face, he grabbed Marissa to him and hugged her as best he could amid the packs and the water and the raging storm. "We made it!" he shouted near her ear.

She looked up at him, rain dripping off her nose, and smiled. "I never doubted you."

A powerful feeling flooded through him at those words, and he hugged her tighter. But he released her quickly at the insistence of the beating wind. This thing was not over yet. He led the way over the rocks on the edge of the pool, managing to keep steady footing until they arrived at the mouth of the cave.

Just inside the opening to the cave, Marissa stood still and watched Tyler untie the rope that held them together. She never would have imagined such a measure to be necessary, but the moment she'd been buffeted by the wind, she'd been thankful for it.

With the exception of her father, no man had ever cared for her so. Oh, sure, she'd had boyfriends who *cared* for her, but none of them -- least of all Hitch -- had ever *taken care*. With Tyler, she felt as if her well-being was just as important to him as his own. And with that feeling came the knowledge that he was equally important to her. She wondered why she'd ever settled for less.

She shook her head, brushing water from her face. The most significant thing, she realized, was that she was able to take care of herself. It was nice to have Tyler on her side. But she could do this now. She was not afraid.

Free of the rope now, she let the backpack slide down her arms to rest on the ground. She rolled her shoulders, stretching the aching muscles. She'd never known how good that could feel. The pack wasn't especially heavy. A tray of full beer pitchers weighed as much. But the storm had slammed it against her body again and again.

The wind still screamed around them and blew rain into the mouth of the cave. They were in the thick of it now, she guessed. And it would no doubt get worse before it got better.

Tyler struggled to secure the tarp over the opening, tying it to roots and branches that might or might not last for the duration. Marissa worked to set up as nice a living space as possible with the bedding she'd packed. She emptied Tyler's backpack, too, arranging their meager supplies.

And then there was nothing to do but wait.

As the day wore on, the storm worsened. They ate fruit when they were hungry, paced around the small enclosure when they were restless, and kept each other's spirits bolstered with every loud snap that indicated another tree had fallen nearby. And finally, whether because night had come or they were simply exhausted, they slept.

Marissa had fitful dreams of Hitch chasing her across the yard, always catching her, not with a bullet, but with his hands. Each time she was strong enough to fight him off, but each time she awoke with a start to the comforting embrace of Tyler and the worrisome howls of the storm.

Then finally she woke to what was undoubtedly morning. The first thing she thought was how quiet it was. Then she heard the waterfall. Sitting up, she saw Tyler standing at the mouth of the cave, holding the tarp to one side. Filtered sunlight danced around him.

"It's over," she said, standing up.

Tyler turned around at the sound of her voice and smiled. "We survived."

Chapter Fifteen

Marissa walked over to the opening of the cave to stand beside Tyler. Peering around his side, she looked outside. What she saw caused her to gasp. The waterfall still rushed from the stream to the pool beside them, as naturally as it always had. But beyond that, she recognized nothing.

Where before she had seen a thicket of trees, she now saw only scattered standing trunks, stripped of their vegetation. The edges of the pond were littered with leaves, flowers, and small branches that had flown there and gotten caught on the banks. If she didn't know with absolute certainty that she was in the same spot, she'd think the cave had been lifted up and set back down in a different place on earth.

She touched Tyler's arm. "Should we go back to the bungalow?"

He kept his gaze on the destruction outside their door. "Yes."

"I'll start packing up."

"No." He turned and followed her back inside the cave. "No need to take anything with us now. I'm guessing this is our new home."

For a moment she stared at him as his meaning sank in. Unbelievable. "You don't think it's still there?"

"I don't see how it could be."

She knew he was right, but the thought sickened her. That little bungalow had been the happiest home she'd known since her childhood. It would hurt her to lose it. But she was no stranger to hurricanes. They should be glad they'd been spared.

They put on their clothes, still wet from their trek in the storm, and started out through the jungle to the beach. It was almost as difficult to pick their way through the aftermath as it had been in the turmoil of the storm. Tyler wielded the machete, trying to stick to the existing path, but it was nearly impossible to follow the trail.

Finally Marissa thought she heard the rhythm of the surf and knew they were near the beach, but the familiar line of the bungalow's roof was not in sight. The lower palmetto bushes and other shrubs remained where they lined the edge of the jungle, but she saw no standing palms. Only the occasional downed trunk. They had to be somewhere, though. How far inland would the winds have carried them?

They came to the clearing where the path turned out of the jungle and toward the beach. Marissa's stomach lurched as she looked at the spot where the bungalow should be. The cabin, the porch, the wash area -- even the fire ring -- were reduced to a pile of rubble. A small sob escaped her, despite her effort to hold it in.

Tyler put an arm around her shoulder and held her close to his side. "It was home," he said quietly.

She nodded, allowing the tears to spill silently down her cheeks. But only for a moment. Life would not be quite as easy for them now as it had been before the storm. She needed to save her energy for survival.

While her first instinct was to begin picking through the rubble to see what could be salvaged, they were both drawn to the shore. This tranquil beach had been a source of peace while they explored exhausting personal tragedies. She was not surprised that they both turned to it now.

Tyler led the way, past the stubs of palms where they had gathered coconuts, past the spot where Marissa had swung in the hammock, to the fishing rock. It was amazing to her that the ocean could be so calm today, so different from the churning anger that had pounded their home last night. They sat down on the rock, letting the sun's heat seep into their waterlogged skin and into their bones. Tyler drew up his knees and formed a space for her to sit, leaning back against his chest, surrounded by his strong arms.

She could not have said how long they sat that way, mesmerized by the movement of the ocean, basking in the warmth of the sun. When at last Tyler shifted and stood, pulling her up by the hand, her clothes were dry. Completely dry for the first time in over a day. Such a simple thing, but it made her feel so good.

Tyler turned her toward him and held her close, gazing into her eyes. He put his hands in her hair, brushing it back from her face. His expression was so intense, she just stood and waited for him to speak, searching his eyes, waiting. At last he lowered his head and took her mouth in a gentle kiss, as delicate as the sea spray that even now misted around them.

He lifted his head, still framing her face in his hands. "We need to go back to the cave."

She didn't understand why, but she knew he was right. With an overwhelming sense of sadness creeping into her, she nodded. They had to go back.

So many emotions swirled within Tyler that he could not begin to identify all of them as he picked their way back through the tangled jungle to the cave beside the waterfall. Sitting on that rock, he'd been filled with a sense of understanding. This entire adventure on the island had been a lesson for him, a chance to examine his life as he'd lived it and look for changes that would make him happier. He understood now that everything had happened for a reason. He'd lost his life by accident, but the universe was more than fixing its mistake. It intended to send him back a changed man, improved in many ways. He wondered whether Marissa felt the same way. Her calm acceptance of the situation seemed to indicate

to him that she did. But there would be time to talk of that later. Now, he focused on getting them safely back to the cave.

When they arrived at their new home, Marissa went to the stash of fruit and began preparing a meal for them. "I didn't see any fruit on the way back here, Tyler. This is all we have. It won't last long."

He took a banana from the bowl and began to peel it. "It's all we need."

"It's true, then." She looked at him, her eyes searching. "We're going back. Soon."

"I think so."

And his "feelings" had never been wrong. They ate in silence, both contemplating the import of what they felt to be true. But when the last piece of fruit was gone and the peels buried in the soft dirt outside the cave, he knew they had to talk about it.

Tyler straightened the blankets where they had slept and made a comfortable spot against the cave wall.

Marissa joined him, leaning into his arms, their legs stretched out before them on the quilt. "Something happened while we sat on the fishing rock."

Relief was a welcome release of tension in Tyler. "I was hoping you felt that, too. It was almost as if some curtain was pulled back to reveal all the answers we didn't have before. I'd been thinking we were being given a second chance, that we weren't supposed to die yet, so we just had to wait while the universe found the right spot to drop us back in, but it's more than that ..."

Marissa shifted against him to look into his eyes. "We're getting our lives back, but with improvements. We had to stay here while we realized the changes we needed to make. Ever since my father died, I've been looking for a man to replace him, someone to take care of me the way he did. But now I know that I am capable of taking care of myself. That what he gave me was the intelligence and the courage to live without him."

“That’s good.” Tyler raised one hand and ran it down the length of her cheek, cherishing the feel of her sweet skin against his work-roughened hands. “And I’ve learned a lot about myself, mostly that I need to stop analyzing so much and just live.”

Marissa took his hand and placed a kiss in the palm. “And that you don’t have to doubt yourself. You are a risk-taker. You didn’t think you had the courage, but you’re the bravest man I’ve ever known. Weathering that storm was your proof.”

“No.” He pulled his hand away from her and shook his head. “I’m not brave at all right now, because I know that when we go back, we won’t remember any of this. And the possibility of a life without even a memory of you in it absolutely terrifies me.”

She threw her arms around him, and he let her body press against his. He felt her shoulders shake with silent sobs and knew she mourned the loss of this life they’d had together as well. And while he knew it was true that they would be parted soon, they had now. And now he could cherish her. Surely they had time for one last chance to blend their two bodies into one.

He placed a hand beneath her chin and lifted her face to receive his lips on hers. He kissed her with a tenderness he’d not known he possessed, so fragile were the moments they had left. As he moved his hand to her shoulder, her ribcage, his blood heated and surged. His balls grew heavy and his cock strained to find her opening, but he forced himself to go slowly. As intensely passionate as their lovemaking had been before, he wanted tenderness and calm this last time. He wanted to savor every tiny detail, making it last as long as possible.

Marissa’s sigh against his neck was nearly his undoing, but he forced his fingers to move slowly as, one by one, he unfastened the buttons of her shirt. He moved his hand across her belly to find the snap of her jeans and felt her skin tremble beneath his touch.

Her thoughts were one with his as she traced lazy circles across his abs to the waist of his worn out cut-offs. She edged one finger beneath the tattered fabric and pulled the catch. His cock sprang free, and she took it in her hand, just holding it, not moving.

Tyler groaned and turned her, laying her flat on the quilt. His hands moved, worshipping her skin, her curves as he removed the scraps of lace that covered her breasts and her sex.

Then they were naked on the quilt, holding each other, stroking each other. Tyler took one breast in his hand and heard her gasp. He teased the nipple to pebbled hardness, then took it in his mouth, sucking softly as his tongue encircled the sensitive tip. Marissa moaned and moved beneath him, opening her thighs, seeking the union they wanted to both enjoy and prolong.

His instinct was to possess her, to move on top of her and enter her sweet velvet depths, but not yet. Not yet. If this was to be their last moment together, then he had no wish to hurry it, no matter how insistent his throbbing cock became. Rolling to his side, he circled one arm around her, trying to hold her as close to his heart as he could possibly get her. He laid his free hand against her cheek and looked into her eyes.

What cruel Fate would allow him to hold this woman so briefly? Forcing that thought out of his mind, he kissed her, gently at first, then more insistently as passion grew and took control of his actions. He nipped at her lips and felt her sigh against him. Moving his hand to her breast, he dragged his thumb across the nipple, knowing how it drove her wild. She moved her legs, sliding one thigh between his, rubbing against his cock, his balls. He thought he would explode, but still he tried to wait.

Skimming his hand across her rib cage, her waist, he felt her suck in her breath and move her leg, rubbing her clit against his thigh. He knew what she wanted. He needed to give it to her. He burrowed his hand between their bodies and found her slick folds. She was so hot, so wet, he wanted to bury his cock so deeply inside her that he couldn't tell where he ended and she began.

He moved his fingers up and down her wet flesh, spreading her juices from one end to the other. He found her clit, swollen and protruding from its hiding place within her lips. He rubbed it, circled it, fondled it while she made soft whimpering sounds. He had learned to read her body and knew she was close to coming. It had been his thought to make her come with just his hands and make her come again when he fucked her.

But he couldn't wait. He moved above her, his knees between her thighs. The tip of his cock skimmed her belly, and he nearly shook with the sensation. She arched her back and lifted her pussy, seeking him. Braced above her, he looked at her, at her beautiful face, her luscious breasts, her exquisite blue-diamond eyes. She watched him, too, watched his expression as he moved.

And finally, when he could stand it not a second longer, he parted her cleft with the tip of his cock and found his paradise. Slowly, so painfully slowly, he slid into her wetness. She was slick and warm, waiting for him to fill her. Fill her he did, sliding to the very depths of her pussy. And when he could not move another fraction of an inch, he slowly pulled himself back out of her, hanging on the very edge, never letting the tip of his dick leave her warmth.

Her eyes grew large and luminous, watching him as he stroked her. Slowly, he pushed back in and out, and she rose to meet him each time. He felt as if they moved in slow motion, but the pleasure building in him was more intense than he'd ever imagined. Each time he entered her, he felt her walls close around him, as if she tried to hold him there, to never let him go.

Her nipples were rough against his chest, her thighs tight around his ass. Her arms wound around his neck as her hands roamed lightly across his back. Everything was slower, calmer, lighter. But the orgasm building in him was fierce.

He set a leisurely rhythm of strokes, but her breath grew short, gasping as the tension rose. Her muscles tightened, her pussy grabbed him. Her fingers stilled on his flesh, and he

knew she was about to come. Dipping his head, he found her ear. "Remember me, Marissa. Remember us."

The sound of her orgasm was less her usual scream than it was a whimper. He joined her, thrusting for a final time, his seed spurting into her. The orgasm flooded his body, not only from head to toe, but also from the inside out. Nothing in his life had ever felt this way. He was afraid nothing ever would again.

Spent, breathing in short harsh gasps, he pulled her close to him, cradled her in his arms, stroked her body still trembling from the orgasm. He couldn't keep his cock inside her, so wet was her seam. He slipped out, but held her against his heart, stroking her hair.

She put a hand aside his face and stroked him lightly. "I love you, Tyler," she whispered.

His heart thudded in his chest, skipped a beat, thudded again. "I love you, too, Marissa."

Then he thought his heart stopped altogether. He closed his eyes and held his breath, waiting, hoping it would be swift. He couldn't lie with her naked in his arms and be at peace with what was to come. Please let it be swift.

Slipping into darkness, he hovered on the edge of consciousness. The last thing he knew was a loud crack, as if lightning struck beside them in the cave. Then there was nothing.

Epilogue

Tyler downshifted his BMW and took the last corner toward his townhouse on Baltimore's Inner Harbor. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and he was headed home. Believe it! Three fucking o'clock! If JB knew he'd cut out of the tax seminar, the old man would have his balls on a silver platter tomorrow morning. It was almost worth it.

Tyler was a good guy. He always had been, at least. He never left the office before seven. He worked most weekends. He understood that hours billed to the client equaled revenue for the firm equaled Beemers and townhouses on the Inner Harbor.

But something happened to him in that damn tax seminar today. CPAs aren't known for their vitality, but this one was near corpselike in his translation of new tax code. Trying to listen, Tyler had felt as if he were suffocating. Loosening his tie hadn't helped. A double espresso hadn't fazed him. The only thing that had made him feel better was getting into the Beemer and speeding home.

He'd emailed Deborah on his Blackberry, but she didn't respond. He hoped she'd be home soon. He had a vision of sitting on the balcony, looking out at the harbor, drinking something tall and cool, then heading out for crab cakes.

He whipped into the underground garage and into his personal parking space. Deborah's car sat in the space next to his. Perfect. She was there. Maybe there would be time for a quickie before the balcony, the drink, and the crab. Life was good.

He rode up in the elevator, jabbed his key in the lock, and tossed his briefcase on the credenza, all the while whistling some tune he'd just made up. Something jaunty. Yeah, jaunty. What the hell was that all about? Didn't matter. He was in a good mood for the first time in ... years!

He didn't see Deborah right away, so he headed for the bedroom, pulling his shirttails out of his pants along the way. He loosened one French cuff then the other and shrugged out of the shirt. Unzipping his pants, he leaned on the door, and then he froze.

At first his mind denied what his eyes told him he saw. But it was true. Deborah lay on the bed, her hands gripping the ironwork of the headboard, her legs wrapped around the pumping ass of some man who was, no doubt, buried as deeply into Deborah's pussy as a man could possibly get.

"Holy shit, Deborah!"

Startled, she opened her eyes and screamed when she saw him standing in the doorway.

"If you must cheat on me, could you at least do it in your own apartment?"

Deborah scrambled to sit up, pulling the sheet around her as if Tyler hadn't seen her naked a thousand times, hadn't in fact paid for those exquisite make-believe tits. The man stood up, making no move to cover himself. "Don't hurt her!" he warned.

Tyler dismissed the man and looked at Deborah, trying to feel angry, hurt, something. But all he felt right now was disappointment that his happy mood was gone before he got the drink on the balcony. At least he could still have the crab cakes. Scooping up a pair of jeans and yesterday's tee-shirt from the floor, he turned toward the door. "I'll be back in one hour," he told her. "Don't be here."

He changed quickly and switched his dress shoes for the sneakers he kept by the door. There was a bar within walking distance. A quaint little place that the tourists hadn't found yet. Tyler took a seat at the end of the bar and ordered Chivas on the rocks. That tasted so good, he ordered another. And one more because, although the buzz was good, his mind still held the image of a strange man in his bed fucking his girlfriend.

He probed around in his mind for a bit, trying to see whether it hurt. But surprisingly, the thing he felt most was relief. He'd been on the verge of taking the big step with this one. The first time he'd ever thought about marriage with any woman. Thank goodness she'd spared them both that embarrassment.

The hour he'd given her was well past, but he flipped open his Blackberry and gave her another one. By the time he walked back up the hill to his townhouse, he'd emailed his boss a letter of resignation and asked an agent to list his home for sale.

He wasn't sure where he was going, but he was *positive* there would be a beach.

* * * * *

Marissa sat in the plush office of the downtown Houston lawyer. The furniture was rich and thick, sedately reminding anyone who entered that there was much money to be made in lawyering, and this man had most of it.

It had been no surprise that Hitch's lawyer wanted to see her. She just hadn't expected it to be so soon. The house still had yellow crime tape sealing it off. She couldn't even go back in to get her toothbrush. She was lucky that Elizabeth, the next-door neighbor, had seen her climbing over the fence to get away from Hitch and pulled her into her house. They'd sat in her living room, knuckles white from clenched hands, all the while that the police arrived, surrounded the estate, tried to talk Hitch out of the house, and then -- finally -- ended the whole ordeal with a sniper's shot when Hitch came out guns blazing.

Her nervous fingers smoothed a wrinkle in her skirt. Elizabeth's skirt. What an angel Elizabeth had been, letting her spend the night, loaning her clothes, driving her to the high-rise office building. Even now, she sat in the Starbucks downstairs, waiting for her.

But she couldn't rely on the kindness of strangers forever. She didn't know how long it would take the police to let her get her clothes out of the house. She wouldn't even want them if she had any means to purchase new ones. She only hoped Elizabeth's hospitality would last a couple of days longer. Until she could find a job, at least.

The heavy door opened, and a dark-suited man walked in. His hair was brown, graying at the temples. He wore wire-frame glasses and carried a thick, legal-size folder.

He approached her chair and held out a hand. "Harvey McMillen," he said, shaking her hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Her loss? She decided to let that one lay. No need to display the utter relief she felt at Hitch's death. At least not in his lawyer's office. "Thank you," she murmured.

He sat down at the polished desk and opened the folder. "Hitch cared very deeply for you."

She nodded.

"Some time ago, he came to my office to move some assets into your name."

Marissa thought her heart might have stopped beating. "Excuse me?"

McMillen shuffled papers. "In advance of your marriage to Hitch, he put some of his holdings in your name. It was a tax advantage, really, but he wanted you to be cared for in case ..."

He slid a packet of papers across the desk toward Marissa. "Here's a list of the things that you own. Mostly real estate, but there's a bank account to which your name had been added. I took the liberty of obtaining the balance for you this morning."

Her mind whirling, Marissa picked up the paper and looked at the seven-figure balance in the account. "Oh, my God!" she said on a whisper.

“You knew he was a wealthy man.”

She looked up at the lawyer whose face held a kindly smile. “Yes, but ...”

“If you’d like, I can have my staff manage the real estate for you. But you have access to the cash right now.”

“Right now?” The voice that she heard didn’t sound like her own, but that was understandable.

“Yes. I just wanted to be sure you know what’s what.”

“Thank you.”

McMillen talked some more, about equity and interest. He said he’d give her the names of some good wealth managers. She barely heard what he said. Her thoughts were already on the future. And she refused to feel bad about it. By damn, she’d earned this money!

She met Elizabeth in the coffee shop and gave her an abbreviated version of the meeting.

“So if you wouldn’t mind running me by the bank,” she explained, “and then the airport. I’ll mail your suit back to you later.”

“It’s no problem,” Elizabeth said in her deep Texas drawl. She hugged Marissa. “I’m just glad you got what you deserve. Where are you flying to?”

“I don’t know yet,” Marissa said. She thought for a second, and then she smiled. “Someplace with a beach.”

* * * * *

Tyler got off the airplane and headed toward baggage claim. Maybe this time, he thought. Maybe now he’d found the right place.

Unbelievable, he thought as he watched his bags come toward him on the conveyor. Everything he owned fit into those two bags.

Well, not everything, he amended, hefting one in each hand. The stock portfolio was tucked safely into the keeping of his financial manager. Sure had been a good tip on the Internet stock that had skyrocketed last week. Managed carefully, that little windfall could keep him a happy beachcomber for the rest of his life.

He smiled, hailing a cab. He got in, gave the address, and looked out the window at Hawaii. Yeah, this time he was pretty sure he'd gotten it right. Since leaving Deborah and liquidating his assets, he'd wandered aimlessly, restlessly from beach to beach.

Florida had been nice, but it just wasn't right. California was better, but still not exactly what his soul craved. Hawaii felt good. This was the right place. He wasn't sure how he knew that, he just did.

The cab pulled up to the little bungalow on the beach. He got out, retrieved his bags, and paid the driver, looking around. He could smell the ocean. It was a comforting, familiar scent. The breeze blew his hair into his face. He hadn't bothered cutting it since he didn't go to an office anymore. His body was taking on a nice shape, too, now that he had time to workout every day.

Before going inside, he walked around the bungalow to the beachside. A couple of palms bracketed either side of the little cottage. Frangipani grew in showy splendor around the porch. Cheerful white shutters framed the windows.

Yes, this is it, Tyler thought. He set his bags on the porch, kicked off his shoes, and started walking.

* * * * *

With a red-lacquered toe in the sand, Marissa set the hammock to swinging. She hummed a little tune as she rocked there, the wind off the ocean blowing her hair in wild disarray around her face. Something was about to happen. She knew it. She didn't know how she knew it, but in the months since she'd left Texas, she'd learned not to question her instincts.

It was more than the satisfaction of the goal she'd achieved this afternoon, cutting the ribbon on the Island Oasis for Women. Her money -- or more accurately, Hitch's money -- had established a shelter for abused women and their children. It was small now, but she had a five-year plan to expand the facility into classrooms to teach women basic skills for surviving in the real world along with a dormitory where they could live until they were able to support themselves and their children. It was just the sort of place she'd needed before Hitch did her the favor of committing suicide by cop.

Yes, it felt good to use his money for that. But there was something else. Something in the breeze that blew along the beach and stirred the leaves of the palms above her, making the shadows dance in lacy patterns on the sand.

Sitting up, she looked out toward the water. A man walked along the beach. He wore khaki pants rolled up almost to his knees as he strolled through the edge of the breakers. He'd taken off his shirt and tucked it into his waistband, letting it fly behind him like an abbreviated version of Superman's cape. When he turned toward her, she gasped. He was too far away for her to see the color of his eyes, but somehow she knew they were green.

Deep green with flecks of gold.

She got up slowly, the wind whipping her colorful sarong around her knees as she stood. For a heartbeat they just stared at each other. Then, as if they read each other's minds, they both started walking. When she was close enough to reach out and touch him, Marissa stopped.

The wind blew her hair into her face. He lifted his hand to tuck it behind her ear. “I didn’t know what it was I was trying to find,” he said.

A breaking wave rushed across her toes. “But you found it anyway.”

She held out her hand, and he took it. They turned and started walking along the beach, side by side, toward sunset.

 THE END 

Delia Carnell

Delia Carnell has been making up stories since she was old enough to hold a Barbie in one hand and a Ken in the other. While on the journey to novelist, her employers have included a community college, a computer leasing agent, an upscale department store, a meat packing plant, a CPA firm and a food distributor. Her positions ranged from entry level customer service agent to CEO.

An avid reader, she first began writing when she didn't like the ending of a book she read and set out to create one she thought better suited the story. She believes the first step in writing a book is to choose the music that underscores the setting and theme. It could be anything from Mozart to Aerosmith to Celtic Harp, as long as it fits the mood.

Delia lives in Florida in the middle position of a three-generation household. Having never outgrown fairy tales and magic, she holds a well-worn Annual Pass to a nearby castle and its surrounding worlds. Her interests include cross stitch, movies, travel and football.