



The Prey

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Chapter One

Emerald Green knew the moment she swam toward consciousness in a sickening wave that she'd been chloroformed. She tried to open her eyes and found that she couldn't. Something was tied around her head ... fabric she realized. It felt thick—a T-shirt, maybe? It occurred to her quite suddenly that it was probably the knit dress she'd worn to the dance. Cool air wafted around her, trickling over parts of her body where it would not have touched her if her dress had still been on her instead of tied around her head.

Her mouth was covered too. Her lips and cheeks felt compressed against her teeth. Tape, she realized from the smell of it.

She remained perfectly still, trying to master the nausea. She was in real trouble if she threw up.

To distract herself from the threat of strangulation by her own vomit, she concentrated on trying to conjure her last conscious memory. After a few moments, it came flooding back to her. She'd been chaperoning the seniors' graduation dance. Someone—Mike Todd?—had told her he thought Chrissy Stevens might have OD'd, that she'd gone into the teachers' lounge and collapsed. Alarmed, she'd rushed to check on the girl, never

considering it might be nothing more than a ruse to get her away from the crowd.

She hadn't made it to the lounge, though. She'd barely stepped three feet into the darkened corridor when someone had grabbed her from behind and smothered her with a cloth coated in a sickly sweet liquid. Beyond that, she couldn't remember anything except the feel of the body that had pressed so tightly against her. It had been male ... probably Mike ... although he'd been beside her, she thought. One of his lapdogs?

The more real question, though, was why had they done it? And, more importantly, what did they have in mind for her?

She was afraid she was going to find out. The nausea, which had mostly subsided, threatened once more and she forced herself to take slow, calming breaths, turning her mind to the task of trying to figure out where she was, how dangerous her situation was, and how imminent the threat—no easy task when she could hear little and see less.

She lifted her head slowly, realizing as she did so that she was sitting upright—there was something hard and painfully unyielding behind her, something soft beneath her. The muscles in her neck protested as she lifted her head. Obviously, she'd been unconscious for a while, her head hanging down against her chest.

The stilted movement seemed to elicit a chorus of snickers and her heart jumped into her throat, thundering in her ears until she had to strain to hear above the clamor. She twisted her head, trying to figure out if she had interpreted the sounds correctly, or if the cloth wrapped around her head had distorted some other noise.

But she knew it hadn't and a shiver skated along her spine at the thread of malice in the laughter.

Unnerved by the realization that she had an audience, she tried to sit up higher, to move her arms, her legs, and found she couldn't move any part of her body except her head. Panic wafted through her, accelerating her heartbeat, and she struggled harder for several minutes until she realized that her efforts were not only useless, they seemed to be exciting whoever was watching her.

As the panic subsided fractionally, she realized the snickers belonged to four different people. One sounded female. She was almost certain the other three were male.

"Snotty bitch!" someone said, their voice vibrating with hatred.

"You fucked up our lives. Now we're fucking yours up. How does payback feel, bitch?"

She was certain she recognized the last voice. It was Mike Todd. The first one had sounded like his girl friend, Chrissy Stevens. There were still two she hadn't quite figured out, though their malicious snickering sounded very familiar.

She conjured a picture of the class troublemakers who always congregated at the very back of her classroom, talking, laughing, heckling her when they felt nifty enough—Mike, his girlfriend, Chrissy, David Bennings, Charley Moyer, Tina Patterson and Jeffery Miller. Mike was the only one of the group that had graduated—by the skin of his teeth, which wasn't going to take him far when it came to college—and it was probable he wouldn't even have managed graduation at all except that he was better at cheating than the others, although he was bright enough he might not have had to, even though he rarely paid attention and never handed in homework assignments.

As the accusation sank in, her fear yielded to anger. *She'd* screwed up their lives? By delaying graduation a year? Because *they* were too spoiled and lazy to do their work?

It occurred to her, however, that she really didn't know what this group was capable of. They were students, she was certain of that much, but she didn't know whether to be more frightened, or less. It was hard to believe any of the teens she knew, that she'd taught, might cause her serious injury—but she wouldn't have thought they would use chloroform on her, and it certainly would never have occurred to her that they would abduct her. They might be satisfied with merely humiliating her—and they might not.

Mike had a cruel streak—all but two members of the gang—Jeffery Miller and David Bennings—were from wealthy, over-privileged families--the kind who produced offspring that had had everything handed to them all of their lives, never paid the price for any infraction because mommy and/or daddy always bailed them out of everything, and therefore had come to believe that the world and everything in it was already theirs. All they had to do was take whatever they wanted. They didn't have to work for it. It was supposed to be handed to them because it was theirs by right.

Regardless, it was hard to understand how they thought they'd get away with this. Surely they had to know that she would recognize their voices? Or, maybe they didn't. Maybe they thought she was too stupid to figure it out? They'd ambushed her from behind, knocked her out. They'd tied her up, blindfolded her.

She wished she felt safer, but the truth was, she didn't really believe her reasoning. She was quite sure they thought they were going to get away with it or they wouldn't have decided to do it. The threat to her was in just how they thought they were going to manage it.

A click, followed by a bright light made her jump. It took her several seconds to realize it was the flash of a camera.

The surface beneath her moved. She felt the heat of someone's breath moments before that someone spoke in a harsh whisper near her ear. "Nice pussy for an old woman," he said, and snickered. She felt something hard brush her femininity, running along her cleft, then parting the flesh surrounding her body opening and thrusting up inside of her, which lacked even a drop of moisture to ease the way of the sudden intrusion. Pain and fear rushed through her as he dug around inside of her with a rough finger.

Until that moment, she hadn't fully realized her situation. Blinded by the cloth, numb from having been tied so long, her body had given her little to go by. He'd gouged her with his finger, however. There'd been no tugging her panties aside, no forcing her legs apart. The only conclusion was that they'd stripped her completely naked, bound her so that her legs were spread wide in some obscene way. She tried to envision what they'd done to her, trying to focus her mind on the puzzle rather than the intrusion of his finger, but she could barely feel her arms and legs.

She couldn't ignore what he was doing to her, couldn't escape it. No matter how hard she concentrated, she could not pull her legs together to protect herself. He became more frenzied, she supposed because he wasn't satisfied with her reaction. Finally, unable to contain it, she moaned in pain. He grunted in satisfaction. "Yeah, bitch. I knew you liked it." He snickered, either because of her feeble attempts to draw her legs together, or because he was enjoying himself so hugely—she wasn't certain.

The flashing continued, however, and she knew most of his actions, and reactions, were for the benefit of the camera.

Despite the pain and fear, it made her realize that they weren't quite as stupid as she'd thought. They were taking pictures. No doubt they figured it would be insurance against her talking—it wasn't hard to imagine how the pictures might be interpreted. Pictures of her tied naked to the bed while one of her teenage students performed sexual acts 'with' her. For all she knew they were filming it as well, catching her 'moans of pleasure'.

She had no idea whether it would prove to be important or not, or if she would even have the chance to use it, but she had managed to recognize the third voice—Jeffery Miller was the one violating her body. The fourth

was almost certainly his shadow, David. He proved it the next moment by biting her on one nipple almost hard enough to draw blood and then snickering when she screamed against the gag. “Nice tits, too. How old are you, teach? Thirty?”

She was too frightened, and in too much pain, even to register his insult, much less be disturbed by it. In any case, her students were well aware that she was only a few years older than they were. She suspected that was the reason many of them resented her, maybe even hated her, her status as an authority figure over them when she was only in her mid-twenties.

Their prodding, pinching—painful abuse of her sensitive areas galvanized her into renewing her efforts to protect her body by covering herself. She struggled, trying to close her legs. She couldn’t move her feet, but she finally managed to put her knees together and she realized they’d tied her somehow with her knees drawn up. There wasn’t enough slack to straighten her legs in any direction her body was capable of, or to pull her feet together.

Her relief in covering herself was short lived. In the next moment, she felt someone grip her knees brusingly and pry them apart until her groin tendons protested. Despite the pain, her heart leapt suffocatingly against her chest wall and she braced herself, certain rape would come next.

One of the two that were tormenting her moved close. She could smell him, feel his body heat. Something nudged her nose and she tried to twist her head away. He grabbed two handfuls of hair, forcing her head back so that she was facing him. She didn’t have to be able to see to know what was thrust in her face. She could smell the musky odor of his cock, could feel the prickle of his pubic hair as he crushed his groin against her face.

“Maybe I should take the tape off her mouth and stuff my cock in it?”

“Stupid! You want to give her the chance to bite it off? This is good. Can’t see the tape from here. Looks like she’s giving you a blow job.

Abruptly, the door slammed open and Emerald heard a new voice. “What the fuck? Son-of-a-bitch! Get the hell away from her before I break you in half!”

For several heartbeats it seemed everyone was too frozen with surprise at being caught even to move. Suddenly, however, the mattress beneath her shook violently as the two teens dove off, landing on the floor at a run. She heard the stampede of footsteps, followed almost immediately by grunts, thuds, cussing, falling objects and bodies. Chrissy screamed.

Emerald's heart was hammering so hard she thought she'd pass out. Hope had surged through her when she heard, and recognized, the new voice as Reece Yeager's. Although he had his own 'bad boy' image at the school, he was not malicious, merely more interested in school as a place to party and socialize than an institute of study. He was big—well over six feet and muscular enough he might well have played football at the school he'd attended before, though he'd shown no interest in sports since he'd transferred—not sports of that nature, anyway.

Regardless, no matter how big, it was still three against one and she didn't know whether she was more afraid he'd be hurt trying to rescue her, or that he'd be defeated, leaving her once more at the mercy of a group that obviously had none.

He might have engaged in some sparring with the two boys who'd been on the bed with her, but she thought David and Jeffery had managed to elude him and run ... either that or he'd hit them so hard they weren't currently in any shape to move. The scuffling sounds had been reduced to the grunts and blows of two. Unlike Jeffery and David, who were cowards, Mike was the sort who could take punishment, and would, if it gave him the chance to mete out some.

To her knowledge, Reece had not been involved in any fights since he'd transferred. He seemed far more interested in making love, not war, and was so big that that alone seemed to intimidate most of the other students. Perhaps Mike thought Reece was a physical coward, despite his size—or too slow and clumsy to be much of a challenge. Apparently, he'd been wrong. It sounded as if Reece was hell bent on breaking everything breakable in the room—with Mike's body. She assumed so, anyway, because it was Mike who was cursing and grunting. Reece wasn't doing anything but growling.

He was not one of her students, not in any of her classes. She shouldn't have been able to recognize his voice, much less have known his name, but he was not the sort of man, even at nineteen, that any woman could ignore, and his voice—deep, husky, drawling—was not only memorable, it elicited tingles of sensual awareness in every female near enough to hear it. Since he was perfectly willing to flirt with any female that was interested in flirting with him, and nine tenths of the female student body was interested, she'd become all too disturbingly familiar with that lazy drawl even before he'd begun to take an interest in her.

She would never have admitted to anyone that she found him attractive, not even to herself if she could've avoided it. She'd done her

best to convince herself that she wasn't attracted, not as a woman, that she held a purely subjective appreciation of a young man that was well above the ordinary in both looks, physical appeal and animal magnetism. It was nothing to concern herself about.

That worked right up until he decided to toy with her—She was certain of *that* much any way, that his interest in her was purely mischievous, spawned by the fact that he was well aware that she found him attractive when she shouldn't have and that she was struggling hard to ignore it.

It seemed to draw him like catnip ... her determination to resist his charms ... as if he felt challenged by it and needed to prove to himself that he could win her, be she ever so reluctant. For all that, he had never shown her anything but the sweet side of his nature, had always behaved in a gentlemanly way, and spoke respectfully, and a twinge of embarrassment skated along the fringes of her mind that he would see her in such a state, despite the pain, the fear, and her hopefulness of being rescued.

Finally, the sounds of battle resolved into the meaty thud of a body slamming against the wall and more running feet as Mike departed, screaming profanity and threats of retribution for Reece's interference.

Emerald thought for several horrifying moments that Reece had departed on his heels, giving chase, that she'd been abandoned. Finally, as her heart slowed to a more normal rhythm, she realized she could hear heavy breathing that was not her own.

Her heart began to accelerate again as she heard the person approaching. A heavy weight settled on the bed. If she hadn't been tied, she would have pitched forward. Several moments passed. "Sorry," Reece said, his voice raspy. "Guess this is what I get for smoking, huh?"

She had the uncomfortable feeling that it was more than the need to catch his breath, no matter how reasonable it sounded. Something about the tone of his voice told her he'd been studying her for several moments. Abruptly, she dismissed the suspicion. If he had been, she didn't want to think about it.

She felt a tug on the cloth around her head and a sharp sting as several hairs were plucked from her scalp. He was leaning close. She could feel the heat from his body. His cologne, or aftershave, tickled at her nostrils, sending a dizzying thrill of relief through her.

She was certain that was what it was that made her feel hot and close to fainting.

The blindfold came off. She blinked. A face swam into her vision, blurry at first, but quickly coming into focus.

Reece tossed the piece of cloth aside, never taking his gaze from her.

His hair was mussed, his right cheek swollen and red. He'd be lucky if he wasn't sporting a black eye by tomorrow. His expression was ... strained ... full of concern ... but there was a gleam in his eyes that accelerated her heart rate once more.

His fingers were shaking slightly as he began picking at the gag. He pulled one edge loose, but then stopped. "This is going to hurt like hell, baby," he said gruffly.

She nodded, closed her eyes, bracing for it.

She gasped when he snatched it off. She opened her eyes again, blinking against the stinging tears as she felt his warm fingers along her jaw, cupping her chin. With a large index finger, he traced the chaffed skin around her lips. He released her when he saw she was looking at him and came up on his knees.

She felt a tug at her wrist. Vaguely, she realized he was untying her, but she had a hard time focusing on anything beyond the huge bulge in the jeans that he'd pressed almost to her nose as he leaned over her to reach the restrains. Closing her mind and her eyes to that hardened ridge of flesh, she turned her head, feeling it brush along her ear as she looked to see what he was doing.

He was frowning as he struggled with the cord that had been knotted around her wrist. His expression was more of anger, however, than concentration. After a moment, she glanced down and saw that the cord they'd used to secure her wrist had been tied to the post of the headboard, looped down and wound around a lower turning on the bedpost and then was threaded back through and tied to her ankle. Turning her head, she saw she was bound similarly on the other side. It explained why she hadn't been able to put her ankles together.

Embarrassment flooded her. They'd displayed her with a blatant sexuality that had not left her one ounce of modesty. No wonder Reece had had to nerve himself to release her. He was probably as disturbed at having a teacher posed before him like a female in a porn magazine as she was to find herself on display to a student ... one she'd previously been far more attracted to than she should have been, but whom she hoped now that she would never see again.

Defying all logic, the combination of her awareness of her vulnerability, the blatant sexuality of her position of submission, the heat of

Reece's body and the impossible-to-ignore erection, brought a flood of wetness to her femininity.

She closed her eyes again, trying to ignore it as she felt the cord slacken finally and her arm drop limply to the bed. In a moment, he had her ankle freed as well.

He stopped, adjusted his erection and reached for the other tie.

Emerald did her best to pretend she hadn't noticed that surreptitious adjustment, but the ridge that had strained against the fly of his jeans until it looked as if it threatened to pop the teeth from the zipper, now formed a straggleingly large ridge down one jeans clad leg.

Thankfully, she was distracted from both embarrassment and desire by the incredible pain of returning blood flow. She could barely lift her arm or move her leg, but the circulation assured her that she hadn't permanently lost sensation. She bit her lip, but groaned.

He glanced at her and she reddened. "Stings."

He nodded. "I'll have this loose in a minute."

She would have fallen when he finally released her, but he caught her against him, lowered her carefully to the bed and began rubbing her arms and legs. As the pain of returning circulation slowly subsided, she found herself shivering.

"Cold?"

She shook her head, but he was already half way out of his shirt. Draping it over her shoulders, he gathered her close to him, pulling her across his lap. She hadn't realized until he did so just how big he was. She felt dwarfed by him. It unnerved her and she stiffened, trying to pull away.

"Hey. It's OK. I'm not going to hurt you, baby."

Emerald looked up at him, startled, trying to decide how to handle the situation she'd found herself in. It was the second time he'd called her baby. Could it possibly be that he didn't know who she was? Was the lighting that bad in the room?

"Do you know what they did with your clothes?"

She shook her head and, to her horror, felt tears rush to her eyes as the realization struck her suddenly of just how close a call she'd had. They'd intended to frighten and humiliate her, perhaps even to blackmail her—but it could easily have escalated way out of hand if Reece hadn't shown up.

"T..thank you for helping me," she stammered finally.

He cupped her face in one huge hand that was big enough it could have covered her whole face, threading his fingers through her hair. “Did they hurt you?” he asked, his voice carrying an edge of fury.

The question brought her closer to tears. She sniffed, shook her head. He studied her trembling lips for several moments and then, before she even realized his intention, he covered her mouth with his own. Startled, she gasped and his tongue invaded her mouth like a conquering warrior, exploring every inch of the sensitive inner flesh. Faintly, she tasted cigarette and rum as his tongue raked along hers. It alarmed her—the realization that he’d had any alcohol at all. It alarmed her far more that, far from being repelled by his taste and touch, the caress of his tongue along hers sent a blinding wave of unexpected heat through her, sapping the strength from her limbs, bringing a flush of acute sensitivity to her skin. Her nipples tightened, hardening into two sharp, pouting points, throbbing for his touch. Her clit began to throb in anticipation, as well, gathering moisture into the walls of her sex for him.

She put her hands against his shoulders, intent on pushing him away, but he used the opportunity to pull her flush against his chest. She could feel the thunder of his heart against her breasts and it sent a fresh wave of heat through her. Her nipples, rubbing against his chest with each gasping breath, throbbed harder, making her breasts feel swollen and achy.

She was dizzy and breathless by the time he released her mouth, so weak she couldn’t seem to lift her head. Instead of pulling away, he nuzzled her cheek, nibbled his way down her neck and then up again, thrusting his tongue in her ear, tracing the whorls of flesh that formed the shell. A shudder went through her, a rash of goose bumps lifting the fine hairs on her body in search of more stimulation.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I didn’t have a clue. When I noticed you’d disappeared and went to look for you they’d already snatched you. I had to beat the shit out of Charley to find out what was up.”

“You looked for me?” Emerald asked, wondering why she couldn’t make any sense out of what he was saying. Her mind had gone to mush as his hands began to skate over her skin in a restless caress, tracing the column of her spine from her neck to her buttocks, the curve of her waist. He reached around, cupping one of her full breasts and massaging it gently and she bit her lip to keep from moaning.

He twisted, lowering her to the bed and she looked up at him in confusion.

“God, baby! You’re so beautiful. So beautiful.”

She cried out as his mouth covered the pebbled tip of one breast and the muscles in her sex clenched almost painfully in reaction. “Don’t! You mustn’t do this,” she managed to gasp as he suckled her nipple, trying to ignore the pleasure that cascaded through her with the scalding heat of his mouth, the spasming muscles of her sex as he tugged on the sensitive tip, flicked it with his tongue and then sucked again.

His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, touching off waves of pleasure as they stroked her restlessly, learning every inch of her flesh. She felt the nudge of his hand between her thighs, and then his finger sought and found the little nub of her clit, sending a shaft of need through her that was almost painful. He grunted in satisfaction when he delved inside her and felt how wet she was. Shifting, he caught her mouth in another searing kiss as he pushed her thighs apart and settled over her, almost crushing her with his weight, insinuating his hips between her thighs, forcing them wider. Something very hard, and very big nudged her cleft and her heart almost suffocated her with its painful flutter of excitement.

She gasped, breaking the kiss. “We can’t ... you can’t.”

He caught her lips again, lifting off of her. She was so dizzy, so disoriented, it was several moments before she realized he was fumbling for his zipper. She pushed against him, but in the next moment felt the head of his cock nudging her cleft, parting the petals of flesh.

Again, she broke the kiss. “Don’t!” she gasped shakily, but it didn’t sound convincing even to her own ears.

“Shhh, baby! Let me,” he murmured coaxingly, grinding his hips against her so that his cock nudged and stroked her clit, sending debilitating waves of pleasure through her.

“I can’t,” she gasped. “You can’t.”

“I’ve wanted you so bad ... so long. I get hard every time I look at you.”

Her body responded, ignoring the warnings flashing in her brain. Moisture flooded her sex even as the head of his cock nudged her, finding the haven it sought at last. The hot moisture eased his way inside of her, but he was huge, stretching her to her limits, threatening to stretch her beyond her limits. She gasped, panting in an effort to force her body to relax and yield to his invasion, digging her fingernails into his shoulders as he pushed slowly, inexorably until she felt his cock plumbing her depths.

He went still then. She lay gasping, fighting the tension she knew would cause her pain, feeling her body struggling to accept his girth. Slowly, he pushed his upper body up to look down at her, gasping hoarsely

as if he'd run a mile, tension in every muscle of his body. He was shaking with the effort to hold himself still, to allow her time to adjust, moisture beading his brow, his face taut as if with agony.

As she looked up at him, he groaned. "You're so tight, baby. So hot." He closed his eyes, fighting a battle. "I can't hold it, baby."

The words sent another flood of moisture through her, made her muscles clench around him. He groaned again, as if she'd mortally wounded him and began to move as if he couldn't control himself any longer, jerkily at first, pulling away slightly, then thrusting again, pushing her up the bed with the power of his thrusts, filling her so tightly that not one inch of the sensitive inner surface of her vagina lacked for stimulation.

"Oh God," she gasped, twisting her head from side to side as mindless bliss filled her, forcing little moaning gasps of pleasure from her throat as she felt her body rushing toward an explosive release. She lifted her knees, dug her heels into the bed as her body began to buck against him with a will of its own, meeting each thrust.

The movements sent him into a mindless sort of frenzy. Scooping his arms under her, he gripped her shoulders and pumped his cock in and out of her in short, hard thrusts.

He bent his head, sucked a love bite on her throat, then sought her mouth, kissing her deeply, mimicking the thrust of his cock with his tongue. She whimpered as her body convulsed around him in waves of ecstasy that rocked her to her core, her sex clenching his cock as tightly as a fist closing around him. His cock jerked inside of her as he growled his release into her mouth, spilling his seed in a hot tide inside her body.

She went limp when the tremors finally, slowly, began to fade, leaving her only semi-conscious. His body lay hot and heavy atop her, crushing her. Finally, he gathered himself and moved away.

He'd just adjusted himself and zipped his pants when the door of the room burst open, slamming back against the wall.

"Police! Freeze where you are!"

Chapter Two

The hot Florida sun beat down on Emerald as she left the air conditioned building and headed toward the staff parking lot. Within two minutes her clothes were clinging to her uncomfortably and she was struggling to breathe the hot, moisture laden air.

It had been as hot, and sometimes hotter, in north Georgia, but the humidity had not been as high. After five years, Emerald began to wonder if she'd ever get used to the north Florida climate.

She still missed home—missed Georgia, but not nearly as badly as she had when she'd first fled the sly looks and thinly veiled innuendoes that had followed her through out the trial and dogged her steps even after she'd left Atlanta to settle in Augusta.

She was lucky even to have a teaching job after that debacle.

As she rounded the corner of the building heading toward her car at the back of the lot, the growl of a motorcycle startled her. Jumping, she whirled in time to see the leather and jean clad rider whip into the driveway behind her. She was so startled, she merely gaped at him as he drove past her.

After a moment, she started walking again. School was out. Friday would see the last of the seemingly endless rounds of meetings that followed the yearly grind and then she would have nearly four weeks of vacation before the pre-school planning and meetings began.

He was no student from the school. It was impossible to tell how old the man was, but it occurred to her that he might be a college student, without a parking pass, and looking for a place to park his cycle.

She decided if the security hadn't run him off by the time she caught up with him, she'd give him a nudge.

As she cleared the first lot and crossed the raised median strip between the student parking lot and the staff lot, true outrage surged through her, however. The rider pulled the motorcycle up behind her car, parked it and shut the engine off.

She strode toward him purposefully. "You can't park that here. This is the school parking lot."

As if he hadn't heard her, he flicked the kick stand down with one boot shod foot, and pulled one leg over the seat, then settled back on the seat sideways, watching her approach, one leg splayed casually, his boot resting on the ground, the other propped on the motorcycle, his arm draped

over it. “You’ve blocked me in!” Emerald said a little breathlessly as she came to a halt less than a yard away from him.

He lifted one hand to his chin strap and unsnapped it, then gripped the helmet with both hands, pulled it off and set it on the back edge of the long leather seat. His expression was impassive, his stance appeared relaxed, but his whole attitude was watchful and tense with waiting.

Emerald stared at him blankly for several moments, but it was the shock of recognition that held her rooted to the spot, not the lack of it. Unable to stop herself, she searched his face. If anything the years had only made him more devastatingly handsome than ever. He was heavier than he had been before, but there was nothing about him that suggested it was anything other than more muscle. The protective lightweight jacket he wore was open, revealing only a thin T-shirt beneath that faithfully followed every contour of his muscular chest. His jeans fit him like a second skin, cupping the bulge of his sex in a way that made it impossible for Emerald to ignore, even though she managed to refrain from looking directly at it. Memories tumbled through her brain, most of them painful, embarrassing, or both, but superseding all of them, to her dismay, was the memory of his body moving inside of her. Her belly clenched almost painfully in remembrance. She felt blood rush to her cheeks.

“It’s been a long time, Em.”

“Emerald,” she corrected automatically, speaking with an effort, then shook her head when she realized, belatedly, that he’d called her by her first name. “Ms. Green.”

One dark brow rose. His sensual mouth hitched up a notch at one corner.

Irritation flooded through her, ousting her embarrassment, but she wasn’t about to inform him she wasn’t married because she liked it that way. Men could say such things and no one ever doubted it, but just let a woman claim she preferred to be single and everyone around her smirked, certain she was secretly devastated that she hadn’t been claimed by a male.

“I missed you.”

The blush returned. “Reece ... there was nothing to miss. There never was anything between us except a ... mistake, which we both paid for dearly.” She almost choked on the lie, because the truth was he had not just claimed her body that day, he had touched her so deeply no man had ever been able to even come close to arousing her interest since.

He flushed. “Did you?”

Guilt prompted a surge of anger, though why she should feel guilty, she was at a loss to know. None of what had happened had been of her doing. “I didn’t leave Georgia because I wanted a change of scenery. Don’t ... please don’t ruin this for me.”

He cocked an eyebrow, but his eyes narrowed.

“I came a long way.”

Emerald looked at him skeptically. “Your parents live in Florida, don’t they?”

Pain flickered through his eyes. “Did. They were killed in a crash a couple of months ago, less than a month after I got out. Anyway, you and I both know I’ve been ... residing in north Georgia.”

Dismayed, Emerald could only stare at him for several moments, could think of nothing at all to say to such a terrible tragedy.

Again, the flush of guilt mounted her cheeks. “I’m so sorry ... about your parents, about everything. I tried. You know I did.”

He looked away from her. “Have dinner with me. You owe me that much.”

It was an outrageous demand, and completely unjustified. She was surprised to discover, however, that she was torn. She wanted to talk to him. Just being near him made her heart rate accelerate. Moreover, she felt the need to talk about what had happened to her with someone, and she had never dared to speak of it for fear that it would bring the new world she’d built for herself tumbling down around her ears.

One the other hand, she wasn’t certain she dared risk being seen with him in public. The incident might have happened far away, but his parents had lived in Florida. She couldn’t risk the chance that someone might know him, might know that he’d spent time in jail. A teacher’s reputation was everything if she wanted to keep her job.

“You’ve got no right to ask it of me,” she said numbly.

“Don’t I?”

Sighing her defeat, Emerald glanced around. “I’m headed home. Leave the motorcycle. You can ride with me.”

He shook his head. “Come with me.”

“Not on your life!”

He shrugged. “I’ll follow you then.”

She was about to argue with him, but it occurred to her that they’d been talking for some minutes and that, any moment, one of the teachers still in the building might come out. Moreover, she could no more stop him from following her than she’d been able to fend him off the day he’d

forcibly seduced her. It would be like trying to stop a train with a pickup truck.

“Fine. Follow me.”

* * * *

The neighborhood she lived in was one of the older neighborhoods in Tallahassee. Tremendous live oaks festooned in long, trailing moss, lined both sides of the streets, their branches nearly meeting overhead to form enormous green canopies, casting deep, cooling shade over the street and the front yards of the homes. Grand old Victorians, carefully restored during that period of budding awareness of the historical significance of such architecture, created a parade of architectural beauty. They had faded somewhat in the years since, but they were still beautiful, providing Emerald with a sense of comfort and permanence that she craved to the depths of her soul. The house she lived in had been divided into half, forming a duplex. Her friend and fellow colleague, Maureen Steiger occupied the other half.

It had been Maureen who'd helped her to get her teaching job at the high school. She'd transferred to Florida herself about the time Emerald's world had fallen apart and when another teaching position had opened up, had called her up and offered to put in a word for her if she was willing to relocate to Florida. By that time, Emerald had been desperate to escape the reputation that she'd failed to shake, even by moving to another town. She'd seized the offer eagerly, packed up her few belongings and left north Georgia.

She'd looked back, though, with yearning. She supposed she was always going to miss home.

And she hadn't been able to escape her memories by leaving.

Reece turned into the driveway behind her, pulled his cycle up beside her car and parked it.

Emerald glanced at him nervously, gathered up her files and paperwork, and headed for the door. Acutely conscious of Reece's long-limbed stride behind her, she moved rapidly, trying to put a little distance between them.

Reece leaned against the door frame as she struggled to get her key in the lock, grinning down at her. “In a hurry?”

She blushed. “I always walk fast,” she retorted stiffly. “It comes from having short legs.”

He straightened away from the wall as she finally managed to get the door open and pushed inside, following her into the front parlor.

“Make yourself at home,” she murmured at about the same moment he sprawled on her love seat, taking up most of it. She stumbled over a boot the size of a small cooler on her way to the desk, and he snatched his foot back.

“Sorry,” they murmured at the same time.

“This is a nice place,” he said, tossing his jacket aside and gazing around while she dropped her purse on the desk top of her secretary and deposited the files she was carrying next to it.

She turned, gazing around as well, trying to see it through a stranger’s eyes. “I love it. Just wish it was mine ... but I rent. Someday, maybe.”

“It’s an awful big house for a little gal like you,” he murmured in amusement.

Emerald shrugged. “I know, but they didn’t build small Victorian’s ... not very small ones, anyway. This one was remodeled into a duplex. I just have the half.”

“No live-in boyfriend I should know about?”

Emerald blushed, mostly from irritation. “If I had, I wouldn’t have invited you here.”

Both of his dark brows rose and Emerald felt her blush deepen. “What I meant was....”

He chuckled. “I know what you meant.”

Emerald looked away. “I should go see what I’ve got that I can put together to make a meal. You can watch TV if you like.”

He didn’t, though. He followed her into the kitchen, leaning against the counter while she scouted the refrigerator in hopes of finding something that would be relatively quick to fix. The freezer was full of freezer meals and little else.

“Eat alone a lot?”

Emerald turned and glared at him. “Actually, I do. Look, I’m sorry. I don’t really have anything to fix, unless you’d be interested in an omelet?”

He studied her for a long moment and finally reached out and grasped her wrist, tugging her toward him. As if she was mesmerized, she allowed him to draw her forward until she was standing between his spread legs.

“I’ve got a better idea,” he murmured, looking down at her, his eyes glittering with an emotion she couldn’t begin to fathom.

She moistened her dry lips. “What?”

“We’ll order in.”

It took several moments for the comment to sink in. When it did, Emerald didn’t know whether she was more tempted to slap him or laugh.

“Good idea!” she said on a nervous laugh, pulling away from him. “I’ll grab the phone book.”

They ended up ordering Chinese, and then settled in the front parlor while they waited for the delivery.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them once they’d placed the order.

“How have you been, Em?”

“What did you mean...” She stopped when they both spoke at once. “I’m OK. I’ve managed. What about you?”

He shrugged. “I managed.”

Unnerved by his gaze, Emerald rose from her seat. “Look ... Reece ... I don’t mean to sound cold and unfeeling, but I’ve put that whole ... everything behind me. It took a lot of work to do it. I just want to get on with my life.”

“Are you?”

“What?”

“Getting on with your life?”

She moved to the window, chewing a fingernail as she watched for the delivery man. “Yes. Actually, I haven’t even thought about ... about it in years now.”

“Liar.”

Startled, she glanced around at him. He rose and moved toward her. Unnerved, she backed up a step. “What do you mean?”

“The moment you looked at me, I saw all of it in your face, Em. You haven’t forgotten a thing, and it’s for damn sure you haven’t forgotten me.”

Chapter Three

Emerald was saved from having to respond to his uncomfortably accurate observation by the arrival of the delivery boy. As she glanced away from Reece, she saw the guy coming up the walk.

“It’s the delivery boy,” she said quickly and scooted around Reece, heading for her purse. The doorbell rang while she was still fumbling to get her wallet out. She heard Reece stride from the room and the sound of the front door opening. Grabbing her wallet quickly, she headed for the hallway.

“How much is it?” she asked, digging for a twenty.

“I took care of it,” Reece said, closing the door.

“Did you tip him?” Emerald asked without thinking.

He gave her a look. “A quarter. Think that was enough?”

Emerald gaped at him.

“I’ve been in prison, not on the moon,” he said dryly. “I’ve been out for months. I’ve got a pretty good idea of how the outside world works.”

Emerald turned bright red. It was something those who hadn’t been born blond didn’t properly appreciate ... the fact that very fair skin generally went with very blond hair and when she blushed, she looked like a neon sign lighting up. It was the bane of her existence that ‘poker faced’ wasn’t a part of her anatomy. Her students had always taken great delight in making her blush at every opportunity.

“I guess I still think of you as a kid,” she said uncomfortably.

“Anyway, I invited you. It’s my treat.”

He glared at her a long moment and finally strode past her towards the kitchen instead of commenting on her remark. “I invited myself. It’s my treat.”

It was true, of course, but she had a feeling he didn’t have much money. Even if he’d been out as long as he claimed, he had a record and he’d only graduated from high school. Getting a job couldn’t be easy. Finding one that paid would be even harder.

On the other hand, she'd already stuck her foot in her mouth. She didn't really want to insult him again by suggesting he couldn't afford to pay for the take out.

He was digging the containers out of the bags when she arrived in the kitchen and setting them out on the small island. "We forgot to order anything to drink," he said as she came in.

"I've got tea and cokes."

"No beer?"

She gave him a look.

"I'm twenty seven, Em, not nineteen."

In spite of all she could do, a faint blush tinged her cheeks. "I know ... well, I hadn't thought about it. But I don't drink beer."

He shrugged. "I thought you might have some for male friends."

She whirled abruptly and went to the cabinet to get plates out, hoping he wouldn't notice her color fluctuation. The truth was, she hardly dated. She had hardly ever dated, at all, even before the abduction.

It wasn't that she didn't get plenty of appreciative looks from the opposite sex. She did. There'd been men from time to time who'd asked her out, and, occasionally, she went. She was devoted to her teaching career, however, which didn't leave her a lot of time for extra curricular activities. Most of the male teachers who'd been single when they began teaching out of college had long since settled down with a wife and one point five kids—her hunting grounds had been virtually hunted out long before it had occurred to her even to consider marriage—and meeting someone outside her chosen field was even harder. Aside from work, there were only two places for singles to meet—bars or church-- and she hadn't been interested in either extreme. "I don't have one at the moment," she said, with perfect truth.

"I always wondered about that."

She set the plates down on the counter and went to get eating utensils and glasses. "What?"

"You didn't date back then, either."

Emerald threw him an amused look. "How would you know?"

"I knew."

She put her hands on her hips. "How?"

He moved around the counter, grasped her around the waist and, before she could protest, sat her on the countertop so that they were almost eye to eye when he braced an arm on either side of her and leaned toward her. "Because I watched you."

She stared at him, feeling blood creep into her cheeks.

“You know I had a hell of a crush on you from the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

She considered pretending ignorance, but she could see he wasn't in the mood for coy answers. “Did you? I thought you might, but then I decided it had either passed or I was wrong to begin with and you were just flirting to gauge my reaction.”

A gleam of amusement lit his eyes. “When did you arrive at that?”

The blush was back. “I ... uh ... well, it was impossible not to notice you had half the females in the senior class mooning over you from afar and the rest stalking you.”

To her surprise, he blushed. She stared at the dark tide that crept into his cheeks, intrigued.

“I wasn't *that* much of a player,” he said irritably.

“I wasn't suggesting you were, only ... Well, I knew you'd just transferred and I know how hard that usually is on kids-- leaving all their friends behind and having to start over somewhere else. I figured you were just ... lonely when I noticed your interest, but you made a lot of friends fast, and you didn't lack for female companionship. When you stopped hanging around, I figured you'd gotten over it or I was mistaken.”

He stared at her a long moment. “If I'd been ‘over it’ I wouldn't have ended up spending seven years in prison as one of your abductors ... Anyway, I only did it for your benefit ... obviously, if you noticed, it worked.”

Emerald gaped at him at the admission, but guilt swamped her at the comment about why he'd ended up in prison. “I'm sorry. I told them you had nothing to do with. I tried to keep you out of it. I *lied* to the cops for you. I told them we'd been seeing each other for weeks before that!”

“Why?”

She was taken aback. “What?”

“Why did you risk your whole career by telling them you and I were lovers?”

She looked away. “To keep you out of jail!”

“Why was that so important to you?”

She gaped at him. “Because you were innocent! I knew you were. And I ... couldn't bear to think of your whole life being ruined, only because you'd saved me from God only knows what.”

He leaned back, studying her. “That's all it was?”

“That wasn't enough?”

His gaze searched her face. She wasn't certain of what he was looking for, but she had an uneasy feeling that he would find it if it was there to see. After a moment, he lifted one hand, cupping it beneath her chin and moved closer. "I could almost believe that was all there was to it. I know you've got a good heart, Em. I know you have a strong sense of what's fair, and what isn't, but I also know you're fiercely loyal to those you care about, even if it means you have to sacrifice for their sake.... Why would you fight so hard to protect me when I raped you?"

Emerald swallowed. "It wasn't rape."

"If I recall correctly, you said no. I wasn't in the mood to listen, but I heard it just the same."

She tried to look away from him, but he wouldn't allow it. "I was ... I was as caught up in the moment as you were. After everything that had happened, or almost happened, I needed ... needed the comfort. It wasn't your fault. You were just a kid, a slave to raging hormones. I was old enough to know better. It was my place to stop it. I didn't and you paid for it," Emerald said quietly.

"I was nineteen, Em. I was a slave all right, but it had nothing to do with being a kid. I'd had a hard on for you for almost a year. I just couldn't resist seizing the opportunity that presented itself, even though I'd gone to help you with the best of intentions. The problem was, I could never be certain afterwards whether you'd wanted me as much as I wanted you, or if it was just a matter of needing a warm body after what you'd just experienced."

Emerald stared at him a long moment. "Is that why you came? Because you felt we had something ... unfinished between us?"

He stared at her a long moment and finally shook his head slowly. "I came because I *knew* we had unfinished business between us. And we do, don't we, Em?"

She couldn't think of anything to say. It occurred to her that she should tell him there never was anything between them, and never would have been, even if not for that disastrous night. The problem was, she wasn't a very good liar ... and she knew it would be a lie. She had convinced herself that she looked upon him as a cute kid, because she knew it would mean throwing her whole career away if she even considered taking him up on his none too subtle hints and allowing herself to be swept away by his considerable, youthful charm. Deep down, she knew she'd made excuses for herself for yielding to him that night, had lied to herself that she had 'really tried' to stop him, when she knew better. If she'd shown

herself unwilling, he never would have forced her. Her weak protests had fallen on deaf ears because he'd known they lacked conviction, that she was merely paying lip service to morality.

"It wouldn't have worked then. It won't work now. I'm eight years older than you. People would talk about me as if I was a child molester ... and I can't afford gossip!"

He frowned. "If I was eight years older than you, neither you nor anyone else would even give it a second thought."

"If you think I like the way things are stacked in men's favor, you're wrong, but it's the way of the world. I'm not in a profession that allows me to be a free spirit, or a radical thinker ... and, despite the fact that I don't always agree with it, and I've felt stifled by the restrictions more than once, I love what I do."

"And that leaves us?"

Emerald swallowed. She knew what she needed to say, but she also knew it wasn't what she wanted to say. Crazy as it seemed, insane as it was, she'd had just as huge a crush on Reece as he claimed to have had on her. She might have been able to deny it back then, but it was as alive today as it had been then and she found it very difficult to ignore. "Nowhere. There is no us. There can't be."

His eyes narrowed. "No?" he said, leaning toward her again until his face was mere inches from hers. "I think there is. I think there always was. I think you were just as stuck on me as I was you and more than that, you still are."

The wall cabinets behind her prevented her from putting as much space between them as she needed. She put her hands on his shoulders. He caught them, curled them behind her back and handcuffed both wrists with one hand, pushing on the middle of her back until she was forced to arch it, thrusting her breasts out as if she were offering them to him. With his free hand, he captured one weighty globe, squeezing it gently. Her breath caught in her throat. "Reece...."

He'd been studying the distended nipple that had grown so hard it was evident even through her blouse and bra, poking up at him as if trying to entice him to have a taste. When she spoke, he looked up at her and for the first time she realized his eyes were a deep, emerald green, they were also hot, glazed with need. Moisture gathered in her sex at the expression on his face.

"Don't," she said without any conviction whatsoever.

He bent his head, opening his mouth over the tip of her breast and nudging her nipple with his tongue. The fabric was no barrier or protection at all. The heat of his mouth stirred currents of desire she'd thought she'd buried eight years ago. "Don't what?" he asked huskily as he lifted his head.

"Don't," she said again.

"Don't make you want me? You do, don't you, Em?"

She swallowed with some difficulty, licked her lips. "I'm a woman, Reece. It's just as natural for me to have a reaction to an attractive man as it is for your body to react to an attractive woman."

He toyed with her nipple, flicking it with his thumb while he studied her. "Teaching sex ed these days, Em?"

She was having difficulty breathing. Desire wafted through her system, heady as wine, and normal brain function seemed to have gone dormant as the sensations running through her body overloaded her circuits. "Sex ed?" she repeated blankly.

He moved closer, brushing her lips lightly with his own. "I know the difference between when a woman wants *me* and when a woman just needs to get laid."

"I ... don't understand," she said breathlessly.

He caught her upper lip, sucked it and released it, then sucked her lower lip gently. "Don't you?"

She grew tired of the teasing and caressed his lips with her tongue, hoping to encourage him. His breath came out in a rush, but he did not kiss her as she'd hoped. Instead, he blazed a trail of kisses along her cheek to her ear, traced the shell of her ear with his tongue, and then, just below her ear, he fastened his mouth over the tender flesh and sucked. The sensation sent another dizzying rush of desire through her. Her panties grew damp with want.

"Tell me," he whispered.

For the life of her, she couldn't figure out what he was asking. "I want you?" she said a little doubtfully, not because she didn't, or because she was in any doubt that she did, but because she realized, dimly, that he was looking for something else.

"Why did you give in to me all those years ago?"

The question was enough of a distraction that Emerald sat back abruptly. "Uh ... the food's getting cold. We should eat."

He didn't look disconcerted at her abrupt change of subject at all. He looked amused ... and hungry. "You're right. I'm starved. Floor or bed?"

Emerald blinked at him in confusion. “What?”

“Floor,” he said, covering her mouth in a heated kiss that singed her to her toes. She couldn’t think beyond his scent, his taste and the feel of his tongue as it raked along hers in a rough caress, beyond the heat that tightened the muscles in her belly and the throbbing ache of her vagina for the feel of his cock embedded deeply inside of her. She didn’t even realize he’d released her hands until she felt the silkiness of his black hair between her fingers and realized her arms had come around him to clutch him close of their own volition. Wrapping her legs around his waist, he scooped her off of the counter, held her tightly a moment as he thoroughly explored her mouth and then broke the kiss and headed for the door.

“Bed,” she said, breathily, her head lolling weakly on his shoulder.

He turned abruptly and headed up the stairs. “Which door?”

“Second.”

He kicked the door to behind them, releasing her and allowing her to slide to the floor, reaching for the buttons on her blouse the moment her feet touched the floor. His fingers were shaking. He frowned, fighting the tiny buttons, and finally gave up. “Take it off,” he said impatiently.

He grabbed her before she’d done more than release the buttons, tossing her onto the bed and following her down, kissing her deeply while he thrust aside the clothes that impeded his access of her body. Shoving her skirt up to her waist, he slipped one hand inside her panties while he scooped one breast from the cup of her bra. His mouth covered the distended nipple at the same moment his questing finger discovered her clit.

Emerald cried out as pleasure jolted through her from the suction of his mouth and the teasing stroke of his finger, colliding in her belly and making it clench in anticipation.

He rubbed his finger along her slit, grunting in satisfaction when he found she was wet for him. Cupping her mound, he pushed a large index finger slowly inside of her as he released the nipple he was tormenting and nudged aside her bra, captured the other nipple gently between his teeth and then sucking it. Emerald groaned, arching her hips and pushing against his finger.

It was all the encouragement he needed. Gripping her panties, he tugged them off and pushed her thighs apart, moving between them. She gripped his shoulders, and then shoved her hands down his chest, gripped his T-shirt and burrowed beneath it, peeling the fabric up so that she could feel his bare chest against her own.

He leaned away from her only long enough to unfasten his jeans and free his erection. Taking his cock in his hand, he nudged her wet cleft with it, moistening the head of his cock with her body's juices and finally aligning their bodies. He looked up at her as he breached her opening with the head of his cock.

Emerald gasped as she felt him spreading her flesh almost to the point of pain. She'd forgotten how big he was—had thought it had been her imagination. She hadn't expected to feel her muscles protesting the penetration she wanted so badly. Panting, she spread her thighs wider, pushing up against him anxiously. He dragged in a shuddering breath, clamped his hand on her hip to hold her still. "Be still. I don't want to hurt you."

She clutched his shoulder when she sensed he was gathering to withdraw. "Don't. Please. Don't stop."

He closed his eyes, groaning as her kegel muscles gripped him reflexively, tugging at the head of his cock. Burying his face between her breasts, he gripped her hips and pushed. Slowly, he sank a little deeper and stopped again, waiting for her body to adjust to him before he pushed again. Emerald panted, her heart thundering in her chest until she could scarcely breathe, fighting the urge to lift against him and force her body over his erection.

Realizing she was digging her nails into his shoulders, she released him, gripping the sheets in white knuckled fists. "Oh god," she gasped as he sank his flesh to the hilt inside of her at last and went still, panting with the effort to hold himself still and allow her body to adjust to him.

His head jerked up at her outcry, his face twisting. "I'm hurting you," he said through clenched teeth.

Emerald wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling his head down and kissing him feverishly. "Don't you dare stop now!" she gasped against his mouth, biting his lower lip. A shudder went through him and then, as if he couldn't hold himself back any longer, he pulled away and thrust again.

"Oh god!" Emerald gasped, struggling to push him away from her so that she could thrust against him. "Like that! Yes!"

Gritting his teeth, he rose up on his knees, grasped her knees and thrust into her again and again, moving faster and faster as she lifted her hips to meet each pounding thrust. She writhed in ecstasy, her body on fire for him. He groaned, went still for a moment, shuddered and then his body convulsed, his hot seed spewing into her in a fiery stream. His jolting thrusts

sent her over the edge. She screamed as her climax caught her and tumbled her into mindless oblivion and then went limp beneath him.

Gathering her to him, he rolled onto his back. She lay draped over him, panting as she strove to catch her breath, her ear pressed to his chest. Finally, the thunderous pounding in his chest subsided to a more normal rhythm. Her own heart slowed, and still she was reluctant to move. She could still feel him inside of her. She was a little amazed to realize just how welcome the feel of him inside of her was.

“Em?”

“Mmm?”

“You OK, baby?”

“Mmm.”

He caught her face, forcing her head up so that he could look at her. With an effort, she opened her eyes. Lifting his head, he kissed her tenderly on the lips, so sweetly, a knot of tears appeared from no where, tightening her throat.

With an effort, she dismissed it, kissing him back.

When he broke the kiss, she leaned down, kissing his chest. “I hope you’re not going to make me wait another eight years for a return performance.”

He stiffened, then, chuckling, grabbed her and tossed her onto her back on the bed, moving up so that he rested on his elbows, hovering just above her.

He became serious, however, as he studied her face. “I missed you, Em.”

Emerald reached up, caressing his cheek. He had been a devastatingly handsome boy. If possible, he was even more handsome now, and yet it made her ache to think of all the years he’d lost between boyhood and manhood that should have been his. They’d been stolen from him by Mike Todd’s lies, naming him as one of the conspirators—the leader, in point of fact—and the police had refused to accept her testimony to the contrary. “I missed you, too, Reece,” she said finally.

He turned his head, kissing her palm, then leaned down, nuzzling his face between her breasts, breathing deeply of her scent. “I’ve thought of this every day for eight years,” he murmured. “I was afraid I wouldn’t have the patience to make it good for you.”

Warmth filled her at his words, and at the doubt in them. Her heart tightened almost painfully. She wrapped her arms around his head, cradling him to her for several moments before she pulled away, placing a hand on

each of his cheeks and urging him to look at her. Honesty deserved the same. "It's been a long time for me, too."

Something gleamed in his eyes—fire, triumph. He looked down, tracing a finger around and around one nipple until it stood erect. "But not eight years."

Emerald swallowed, wondering if she dared tell him the truth, but when he looked up at her again she found she couldn't do anything else. "Yes."

He glanced away. "Waiting for me?" he said almost jokingly.

Emerald swallowed with some difficulty. "I don't think I realized it till now ... but, yes. I believe I was."

The look he gave her was doubtful and hopeful at the same time. After a moment, he rolled to his side, propping his head in one hand and running his hand lightly down her body. "You're beautiful, Em. More beautiful than I remembered. That first time ... I wanted you so bad I hardly spared the time to look at you ... and then they took me away and all I could do was try to imagine."

"Didn't you?"

He glanced up at her sharply.

"I thought ... I felt that you studied me while I was bound," she confessed.

He reddened slightly, swallowed with an effort. "I could not drag my gaze from you, could not think." He slipped his hand between her legs and slid a finger along her slit, parting the folds of flesh, seeking the nub of pleasure. Emerald gasped, her eyes sliding half closed as his questing finger sent a jolt of pleasure through her.

"I saw this pretty little thing and I couldn't think beyond filling it with my cock. I didn't trust myself to touch you at first. Finally, I thought I'd mastered it, but the moment I held you I lost it." His lips curled faintly. "I didn't really take the time to look my fill at you."

Emerald couldn't help but wonder if she was a sucker for pretty words, if he was merely telling her what he thought she wanted to hear ... and still it moved her. "We've got all the time in the world now ... But I want to see you too. Twice we've made love and both times you were still fully clothed," she added teasingly, tugging at his twisted T-shirt.

He reddened, but slid off the bed and tugged the shirt over his head, tossing it aside. His jeans and shorts were halfway down his hips. He hooked his thumbs in them and pushed them down, stepping out of them, then, propping on the edge of the mattress, peeled his socks off and tossed

them aside. When he stood erect once more, Emerald saw his cock was hard and ready. It took an effort to drag her gaze from it and study his body. She came up on her knees, placing her palms on his chest and skating them over the hard bulge of his pecs and down along the washboard of his belly.

She clasped his cock, pushing the foreskin down as she stroked it slowly. He jerked slightly as she grasped him, sucking in a breath, but held perfectly still as she caressed him. Moving to the edge of the bed, she lowered her head and took the head of his cock into her mouth. He caught her hair, groaning as she sucked him. Pleased with his reaction, feeling excitement thrumming in her own veins, she took him fully into her mouth, caressing him, sucking him more greedily as her passion mounted.

She was disappointed when he stopped her.

"My turn," he said hoarsely.

Obediently, her heart thundering in her chest, she lay back on the bed.

Placing a knee on the bed, he shook his head. "Not like that."

Pulling her to a sitting position, he urged her back until she was leaning against the headboard then took her hands and spread her arms wide. Understanding dawned, and she grasped the headboard on either side of her. Taking her ankles, he spread her thighs wide. He settled on his stomach then, examining her femininity with one finger, lightly parting the petals of flesh. "It is beautiful," he murmured thickly, moving forward and placing his mouth over it.

Emerald gasped at the heat of his mouth, reaching to grasp his head and cup him to her. He tugged her hands loose and placed them on the headboard again, then caught first one breast and then the other in his mouth, sending mind numbing waves of pleasure shooting through her. She was so weak by the time he began to make his way down her belly that she had to hold on to the headboard tightly to keep from falling. Sprawling between her legs again, he scooped her buttocks into his hands, lifting her hips from the bed and tilting them up to his mouth, as if serving himself a dish, and opened his mouth wide over her pussy, sucking her. Emerald gasped at the hot abrasion of his tongue as he explored her cleft from her clit to her body's opening, sending a rush of sensation throughout her body, felt as if she were falling into an abyss of pure sensual delight when he returned his attention to her clit, sucking, teasing it with his tongue. She was nearing climax when he withdrew.

Rising up on his knees, he pulled her to him so that she was straddling his lap and pushed his cock into her, impaling her. She gasped, gripping his shoulders, squeezing her eyes closed as he imbedded himself so

deeply inside her she thought she might be rent in two. Slowly, her body adjust and as it did, she began to move, lifting and lowering herself, glorying in the near pain of being stretched to her limits. On her third downward stroke, something glorious exploded inside of her, shaking her to her core. She cried out, flinging her arms tightly around his neck as her climax spasmed through her. He caught her hips, lifting her and pounding into her hard and fast until his own climax burst explosively inside of her.

When the quakes finally subsided, she lifted her head with an effort and kissed the side of his neck, stroking his back. He kissed her, but chuckled shakily. “OK, lady. One more like that tonight and I’ll die of a heart attack.”

Emerald laughed. “Poor baby. I should have fed you first.”

He lifted her away from him and collapsed on the bed. “I’m not sure I’ve got the energy to make it down the stairs.”

Emerald leaned toward him, kissing him in the middle of the chest. “Wait here. I’ll bring sustenance.”

Chapter Four

Emerald was a little alarmed when she woke the following morning and tried to get out of bed. The moment she stood up her legs shook as if she had palsy and her femininity throbbed painfully, as if it had been used for a punching bag—which she supposed, in a way, it had. Her first step almost brought her to her knees as her groin tendons screamed in protest. She sat back on the bed, holding herself, torn between the urge to laugh and the need to cry.

Reece had left after they'd eaten their belated dinner the night before so she could at least be thankful he wasn't lying in her bed, watching her creep around like an old woman.

Upon reflection, she had to be glad, too, that she'd been so sated by two bouts of lovemaking she'd begged off on thirds ... but he'd been oh so sweet, and she'd been oh so tempted. It was nice to know that at some point her brain had kicked into gear again and saved her from making things any worse.

After a few moments, she rose determinedly, crept into the bathroom and ran a tub of hot water. The first dunking of her badly abused femininity almost made her faint, but she finally managed to settle and soaked until the water cooled and the throbbing eased off.

She wasn't quite as stiff when she climbed out, but she still ached enough that it was impossible to drag her mind from her soreness long enough to concentrate on anything else.

She was running late by the time she'd managed to grab a bite of breakfast.

As luck would have it, her friend and neighbor, Maureen, was also running late.

"Emerald! I thought you'd be gone by now!"

With an effort, Emerald turned and smiled. "I overslept," she lied.

Maureen's brows rose, but she merely nodded. "You OK?"

"Why do you ask?"

Maureen frowned, but finally shook her head. "I could've sworn I heard ... something last night. I was tempted to check on you, but I thought if there was any kind of problem you'd call...."

"No," Emerald said quickly. "No problems."

"I couldn't help but notice you had a visitor last night. Someone new?" she prodded teasingly.

Emerald made an effort to walk to the steps without flinching. "Uh ... no. Actually, it was a very old friend. Someone I hadn't seen in a while. We were up till all hours catching up. Guess that's why I overslept."

Maureen was studying her as she made her way around the car.

"Sure you didn't fall ... or anything? You look like you're in pain."

Emerald forced a smile. "I ...uh... slipped in the shower. Must have thrown something out."

"Maybe you should call in sick today?" Maureen suggested, pausing beside her own car, which was parked behind Emerald's, with her key in her lock.

“It’s tempting, but I think I’ll be fine in a little while. I just need to walk it off.”

Maureen nodded and opened her door. Something in the edge of the flower bed caught her eye and she left the car again and reached for it. “You didn’t get the paper this morning.”

Emerald had managed to get into the driver’s seat. She looked up as Maureen shoved the newspaper under her nose. “I overslept,” she reminded her. “Thanks. Guess I’ll have to read it later.”

Tossing the rolled paper onto the seat beside her, she closed her door and started the car. After a moment, Maureen took the hint and got back into her own car. Emerald watched her back from the drive from her rear view mirror.

Ordinarily, she never gave Maureen’s nosiness much thought. Today, it irritated her. It was just as well Reece *had* left, not that she’d made any attempt to convince him to stay. She had, in fact, been relieved when he’d said he had to go. The fact was that as much as she enjoyed his company—and his lovemaking—she was in no position to allow any man to stay with her. Tallahassee was a city, but it had not completely lost its small town ways—something she ordinarily found very charming about the north Florida city—but it also meant that her neighbors would notice, and talk, if she allowed a man to stay with her, increasing the chances that the school board could get wind of it, which could get her fired.

And Reece was not just any man. She shuddered to think what might happen if it was ever discovered just who her male friend was and that he had served time in prison.

She knew he was innocent of the crime he’d been convinced of, but she hadn’t been able to convince anyone else of it.

She didn’t want the two of them ‘on trial’ again, and the best way to avoid that was to make sure she used discretion in seeing Reece ... always assuming he intended to hang around for a while.

She frowned when she realized he hadn’t said anything about the possibility of staying a while. All he’d said when he left was that he had some things to take care of. She’d assumed he would get in touch with her again, but she’d had the impression when they’d first met that he was merely traveling through.

It was a daunting thought. She’d spent so much time worrying about anyone finding out she was seeing him and the potential for trouble, the possibility that he had no interest in seeing her again hadn’t even crossed her mind ... until now.

Would she see him again? Or would she be left to wait and wonder until, finally, she had to face the fact that he'd breezed through her life and gone away? And the realization sank in that she was merely a one night stand?

She felt a little sick at that thought, mostly because she'd wanted that 'forbidden fruit' as long as she'd known him and it hadn't taken more than a little encouragement from him to push her over the line into an emotionally devastating infatuation, even though she'd thought she was way too practical and sensible for such a thing to happen to her—and why shouldn't she? She'd never been in any danger of it before in her life.

She'd known the first time she ever laid eyes on him, though, that Reece Yeager wasn't just a teen heart throb, he was a heart breaker. He'd done absolutely nothing after that first impression to dispel it, moving from one female to another throughout that long ago school year as if he was the only stud in the kingdom and required to service all the mares.

Not that she had any certainty that he'd slept with the females she'd seen draped over him, but she couldn't see any of the girls fighting him off ... *They* had been following him around as if he was catnip, not the other way around. On the other hand, Reece was a young man at the prime of his life. There were few, she didn't doubt, that could resist sex when offered.

When she'd parked her car at the school, she merely sat, staring out the windshield, thinking back over everything that had happened the night before.

After some minutes, she arrived at a very unpleasant conclusion.

Reece Yeager must be laughing his ass off right about now.

It wasn't bad enough that she hadn't made any attempt to fend him off. She'd told him, like a complete moron, that she'd been waiting for him.

It was the truth, of course, even though she'd never realized it before, but even a young, inexperienced girl knew better than to tell a man he'd conquered, particularly with so little effort. *She* certainly should have known better, even with her slight experience.

Blood flooded her cheeks. She dropped her head to the steering wheel, trying to fight off the awful sense of shame, embarrassment—and if she was honest with herself, the pure misery of the lovelorn—that flooded her at the realization that she'd been a complete and utter sucker for a modern day Casanova.

She didn't know whether she wanted to cry or scream curse words worse, but she realized she couldn't afford to do either. Pride aside, she was supposed to be a mature, responsible woman. She couldn't afford to behave

like a thwarted, lovelorn teenager. After a moment, she lifted her head, smoothed her hair and got out of the car. It was Casanova's revenge, however, that filled her mind with every step she took on the way to her classroom and it wasn't until she was able, finally, to settle in a chair, that she managed to—mostly—put Reece from her mind and concentrate on her work.

Maureen tapped on her door at lunch. "Coming down to the cafeteria to eat?"

Emerald smiled wanly. "Actually, I forgot my lunch this morning, but I'm not really hungry."

"Probably just as well ... I've kind of lost my appetite. Did you see the paper?"

Emerald glanced at her, a little surprised. "I didn't think you read the paper."

Maureen shrugged. "You know I don't ... ordinarily. But I heard this on the radio on the way to work and stopped to grab one." She plunked the paper down in front of Emerald.

Emerald stared at the headline blankly. *Tallahassee woman found brutally murdered.* A shiver went through her. "How awful! Was it someone you knew?"

Maureen stared at her. "God no! What made you think that?"

Emerald frowned. "It's just ... well, you usually avoid this sort of thing. I was just wondering what there was about it that caught your attention."

Maureen tapped the paper. "Read it. I'll see you later."

Emerald nodded, waving absently as she folded the newspaper so that the story was facing up.

A Tallahassee woman was found murdered this morning in her home. A native of Florida, the petite blond was a former Miss Florida and was employed by Winton Marketing at the time of her death.

Police place her time of death sometime before dawn today. Although the police declined to give out any more information pending further investigation, an unidentified source indicated that there was a possibility that the death of the thirty five year old woman might have been the result of sexual games gone terribly wrong. The victim was discovered tied to her bed, brutally raped and strangled.

Emerald stared blankly at the paper as the words blurred before her eyes.

There was far too much about the piece that reminded her of her abduction eight years earlier.

She shook the thought off.

She was imagining things. Except for the fact that the woman was small, blond and had been tied up, there was nothing even remotely similar to her own experience, and, statistically, small women were more often victims than larger women for the simple reason that they were easier prey. She'd seen enough forensics shows to know that she fit the perfect profile of 'victim'—five foot nothing, a hundred ten pounds—an average sized man could grab a small woman, drag her into the bushes and rape and strangle her in under fifteen minutes.

Wadding the newspaper up, she stuffed it in the trash can and went back to work.

Despite her earlier doubts regarding Reece, she found as she left the building that afternoon that she was glancing around hopefully as she walked to her car. It wasn't until she got in her car and started it to head home, though, that she realized that that had been uppermost in her mind, the reason she'd kept glancing around, the reason she'd been in no real hurry to get to her car.

It angered and embarrassed her all over again when she realized just how disappointed she was that he hadn't been waiting for her. Why was it that she'd never noticed before how needy she was? What was wrong with her? She'd managed to get along just fine before without a man in her life. She couldn't ever remember actually thinking that she was lonely, or that she wished someone would be waiting for her when she got home. If she had, she'd have gotten a cat or goldfish ... or something.

She'd have gotten a man.

It wasn't like she couldn't. She'd turned down plenty of offers for short term and even for longer term relationships ... because she didn't want it badly enough to settle for what she could get if she couldn't get what she wanted.

She just hadn't realized before Reece had showed up that *he* was the one she'd wanted and had never expected to have ... and he was probably cruising down I75, heading for Palm Beach right about now.

Shaking off her depression, she went by the grocery store on her way home and stocked up on junk food, then went by the video store and rented a handful of movies.

The special 'treats' lifted her spirits. She was feeling pretty darned cheerful until she got home. The moment she walked through the door, however, the silence nearly deafened her. It was amazing that she'd never thought of the place as being big and empty until Reece had filled it with his presence, then vacated.

Dropping the movies on the love seat in the front parlor, she took the bag of junk food to the kitchen, tossed the ice cream into the freezer and dragged a freezer meal out, stuffing it into the microwave.

While she was waiting for the buzzer, she went into the front room and turned on the TV set, flipping through the channels until she found the local news. The piece about the murdered woman was running.

She sat down, listening, feeling her stomach tighten with nerves as the news woman gestured toward the house behind her and described, in gruesome detail, the crime scene. The woman had been found tied to the posts of the headboard. There appeared to have been something unusual about the way she'd been tied, but the police weren't releasing that information.

According to the coroner's report, the woman had died of strangulation. The news woman went on to speculate on the possibility of the victim having been accidentally strangled while engaging in autoerotic asphyxiation with the perp, who had yet to be identified.

There had been no signs of a break in which had led the police to believe that the woman had invited her killer into her home.

Emerald turned the TV off and went back into the kitchen. After staring at her dinner through the glass door of the microwave for several moments, she moved to the drawer where she kept the silverware, collected a spoon, the half gallon container of Butter Pecan ice cream she'd bought and went upstairs to her bedroom.

She'd eaten almost a quarter of it before she began to feel distinctly ill.

Making her way downstairs again, she scraped the last of her temptation into the sink, washed it down the food disposal and tossed the empty container. After locking up and turning off all the lights downstairs, she grabbed the bag of movies and went upstairs to watch TV in bed.

After two days of pure hell, Emerald finally took herself to task for behaving like an over-sexed teenager. It was Friday ... her last day of drudgery before her vacation. She made up her mind to load up her car and head for the beach first thing Saturday morning. The prospect perked her flagging spirits right up.

When she pulled into her driveway that afternoon, however, her whole world turned upside down again.

Reece, his back propped against one of the porch posts, was lounging on her front steps ... talking to Maureen.

If a bomb had gone off in her head, her brain couldn't have been more rattled.

Maureen was the very last person on earth she had wanted to see, or to know, that Reece had been to see her.

She was at once elated, and furious, to find Reece waiting for her.

She hadn't a clue of how she should handle the situation, but one thought took hold of her and wouldn't be shaken. She had to get Reece inside, out of view of all the neighbors, and most particularly, she needed to get him away from Maureen.

Climbing out of the car, she pasted a smile on her face and headed for the house. She had no idea what she said to either Reece or Maureen, but somehow she found herself inside with the door firmly shut behind her.

She was shaking, she discovered, when she turned around to face Reece. "I ... uh ... could you excuse me?"

She locked herself in her bedroom and paced the floor, trying to decide how she should handle the situation. It wouldn't have been so bad if she'd had the chance to decide how she would behave, what she'd say ... if she'd considered how she would feel if he actually did show up again.

He'd been gone for days. She'd come to believe he wouldn't be back. She'd convinced herself that he wouldn't, that she'd been 'had' and that she had to put it from her mind and get on with her life.

It wasn't as if he was her boyfriend, fiancé, husband or long time lover. She had no rights to him. She couldn't yell at him like a shrew and demand to know where he'd been, chastise him for worrying her.

But he had fucked her senseless on her bed less than a week ago—she couldn't go down and pretend they were just friends—or act as if he was a stranger she felt compelled to be polite to.

She jumped when he tapped at the door.

"Em?"

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

She thought, for several horrifying moments, that she was going to burst into tears. She cleared her throat, took several deep, cleansing breaths. "Yes. I'll be down in a few minutes. I ... uh ... I just wanted to change."

She wanted to change into someone else, but she didn't think she could manage it in ten minutes. Moving to her dresser, she dragged out the first thing that came to hand, tossed her work clothes onto the bed and changed. She made it a point not to check her appearance.

She wasn't trying to look good for him. She was just trying to stall for time ... Which was a waste of time, because it wasn't likely she was going to be able to pull herself together when the cause of her chaotic state of mind was standing outside her bedroom door demanding to know what was wrong with her.

Reece met her on the landing outside. "What's wrong, baby?"

Emerald had to suppose her smile looked as artificial as it felt. "Nothing. Just surprised to see you again ... uh ... so soon. Did you mention you'd be over tonight?"

She started down the stairs. "I don't think I have a thing in the house to cook."

Reece caught up to her at the bottom of the stairs, grasping her and pulling her to a halt. "Something's happened."

Emerald blinked up at him, dismayed that her state was so blatantly obvious, hoping he was referring to something else. "Give me a clue."

He frowned. "Baby, you're the worst actress I've ever seen. Why don't you tell me what the hell's wrong with you? You turned white as death when you pulled up in the drive and saw me sitting on your front porch."

Emerald chewed a nail, thinking. "I don't think I know," she said finally.

He studied her a long moment and finally pulled her against him. "You didn't expect to see me, did you?"

She closed her eyes, breathing in his scent. His was right about one thing ... well, a couple. She wasn't worth a shit at subterfuge ... and she hadn't expected to see him again, at all, ever. She'd almost convinced herself she was glad. "It did occur to me that you might not come back," she said, deciding on a half truth. No commitment there. No complaining. Just a straightforward--'I was surprised'.

"Why would you think that?"

"Because you left?"

He gripped her shoulders, holding her slightly away from him. "I told you I had some things to take care of."

She nodded. "Yes. I remember. I'm not complaining. It's none of my business."

He released her abruptly, frowning. “What do you mean it’s none of your business?”

Emerald looked up at him. “I mean, I understand that you were just passing through and stopped by to see me. It’s not like ... uh....”

“It was just a pretty good fuck, right?”

Emerald felt the blood rush from her face and then back again with a vengeance. “Don’t say that, please.”

“Why not? It’s what you were thinking, isn’t it?”

Emerald rubbed her temples, but she realized she was fighting a losing battle with her tumultuous emotions. “No. But I figured it was what you were thinking.”

He studied her a long moment, then slipped an arm around her waist and led her into the front parlor. Sprawling on the love seat, he pulled her down on his lap. She tried to climb off again, but he held her, tipping her chin up so that she couldn’t avoid his gaze.

“I didn’t look you up in hopes of a quick lay on my way home, Em. I came because I want you to be a part of my life. I just figured ... all things considered, we should take it slow, take the time to get to know one another ... to figure out if it was what we both wanted.”

Emerald nodded, forced a smile. “Of course. You’re right. You know how things are for me. It’s difficult, but I figured you were thinking of a here and there sort of thing anyway ... when you were in town. And we could be discreet.” She was babbling. She knew she was. Most of what she’d said was like computer garbage—bits and pieces of information from a hundred different thoughts.

He pushed her off his lap abruptly and got up, glaring at her.

Emerald gaped up at him.

“Ashamed to be seen with me, Em?”

She didn’t have to answer. The neon flash on her face told him what he needed to know. He studied her a long moment, whirled on his heel and headed for the door.

Emerald watched him, knowing it was for the best. She’d been certain he didn’t really want her in his life anyway.

But she knew he wouldn’t be back. If she let him walk out that door, thinking what he thought and he really did care anything about her, he’d never forgive her for it. He’d be too proud to be with a woman who was ashamed to be seen with him.

She clenched her fists on her lap, telling herself she’d live through it. She’d get over it. They’d both be much better off. She had no business

even wanting a relationship with a man eight years her junior ... and in the long term, it couldn't work out. He'd get tired of having an 'old lady' and want a fresh young model. Didn't men do that anyway? Even when they married women their own age, the minute they turned forty, or fifty, they wanted to dump them and find a twenty something lover.

She heard the doorknob turn.

Her heart felt as if someone had ripped it out of her chest.

She leapt to her feet and rushed into the hallway, skidding to a halt when she saw he'd already opened the door. He glanced at her, his face set, angry ... hurt.

Tears filled her eyes. "I thought it didn't mean anything to you. I was just trying to cope."

He looked at her piercingly.

Emerald thought about how badly she wanted him and leapt off the cliff. "I love you."

He turned pale and for several moments Emerald thought she was going to be ill. She'd said the wrong thing! Men didn't want to hear that! It meant commitment, responsibility ... the drudgery of having the same piece of ass night after night.

Could she fix it? Was there any possible line that could follow that one that would keep a man from running for his life?

"No strings!" she added quickly.

"No strings?"

He shut the door. Relief flooded her. He was willing to negotiate. She nodded.

"I can come and go as I please and you won't question me? Or complain? Or give me the cold shoulder because you're pissed off about it?" he said, advancing toward her.

She hadn't expected him to outline the terms so specifically, or thought he'd expect her to agree before she'd had time to really consider them. She nodded, though.

"What about other women?"

Emerald felt the blood rush from her face. Was he talking about playing around? Or was he asking if she was willing to do a threesome? "Other women?"

He nodded, coming to a halt when he was almost toe to toe with her. "You have a problem with that?"

Emerald swallowed. She had a problem with it, a big one, but beggars couldn't be choosers, could they? "What I don't know won't hurt

me,” she said feebly, knowing it was a lie. Now that he’d firmly planted the idea in her head she wouldn’t be able to think of anything else when he was gone.

“Interesting. You’re not jealous?”

She’d never thought she was jealous-natured, but the idea of Reece seeing someone else, anyone else, made her feel sick to her stomach.

He caught her jaw in an almost bruising grip. “I *am* jealous. I *have* strings. I love you, Em, but if I find out you’re cheating on me don’t think for one minute that I won’t walk out the door and never look back. Understand?”

Relief was her undoing. Emerald burst into painful, wrenching sobs. He looked taken aback.

“You haven’t, have you?”

Emerald shook her head, throwing herself against his chest. “You’re almost as big a fool as I am, Reece. I love you. I’ve no interest in anyone else.”

He hugged her tightly, then pulled away enough to kiss her. Emerald kissed him back, briefly, then excused herself to go wash her face. He was sitting in the front parlor when she returned, gazing morosely at his hands.

She studied him a moment, then pushed him back and climbed on his lap. He looked at her a little doubtfully. “I’m not sure I understand what just happened. I thought, when I left, that everything was settled ... or pretty much settled ... between us.”

Emerald kissed him, then lowered her head to his shoulder. Pulling his arm around her, she held his hand, studying it. “You don’t understand women nearly as well as I thought you did, darlin’.”

He stiffened. “What did I do wrong?”

“You left me to wonder whether you meant to come back or not. When it didn’t seem like you intended to, I thought it had just been a one nighter for you. You didn’t tell me you cared for me.”

“I told you I hadn’t thought of anyone but you since I left,” he said, a trace of indignation in his voice.

Emerald sighed. “But that could have meant anything ... could’ve just been a line to get in my pants. It wouldn’t be the first time a guy came up with a line like that.”

He grabbed her face, forcing her to look at him. “I ... love ... you. Is that plain enough?”

A smile curled Emerald’s lips. “You look so angry.”

“I am, damn it!” he said, but his lips twitched on the verge of an answering smile. “I was looking forward to a warm welcome all the way back from Palm Beach, and instead I meet this female with snakes in her head.”

Emerald gave him a look. “Excuse me?”

“Oh no you don’t,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her thoroughly. “You’re not starting another argument with me until I get my warm welcome.”

Emerald chuckled. “Well you aren’t going to get it here.”

He stood abruptly, taking her with him and Emerald squeaked in surprise, tightening her arms around his neck. “You first ... then food.”

Chapter Five

Emerald bounced when she hit the bed. She braced herself for impact as Reece dove for her. The side rails of the bed groaned under the impact.

Obviously, the guy just didn’t realize he was big as all outdoors.

To her relief, however, Reece didn’t land on top of her. He landed beside her, depressing the bed so that she rolled toward him, slamming against his shoulder.

He raised up, grabbed the knit shirt she was wearing and shoved it up, exposing her bra. “You’ve got on too many clothes,” he complained, burying his face between her breasts and breathing deeply.

“You didn’t give me time to take them off,” she pointed out a little breathlessly.

“Because I like to unwrap my pretty thing myself,” he murmured, nuzzling his way past her bra and licking one nipple, which he could just reach with the tip of his tongue.

Her breath caught in her throat. She went still, focusing on the budding desire his teasing caress elicited. “Did you mean it?”

“What?”

“What you said,” she prodded.

“Which thing I said?” he murmured without much interest.

Emerald sighed, but she wanted to hear it again. “The part about the way you felt about me.”

He raised up on his elbows, studying her seriously, but a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “No. If I catch you cheating on me, I’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch.”

Emerald gaped at him. “You don’t really think I would!”

He frowned, all signs of amusement vanishing. “No. I don’t think you’re like that, but it’s been a long time, Em. It occurred to me that you might have changed since I knew you before.”

She touched his face. “And you?”

His lips flattened. “Prison has a way of changing people ... and rarely for the better. Does it bother you that much?”

“Of course it bothers me! I hate that it happened to you. I hate that I had anything to do with it.”

“You didn’t put me there. You did your damndest to keep me out. I’m going to be pissed if I find out this has got anything to do with guilt you’ve been carrying around.”

Emerald swallowed. “I can’t help the guilt.”

He frowned. “I did it to myself, Em. That’s one of the things that pisses me off the most ... that I did it to myself. But I don’t blame you for it. It was my stupid mistake.”

“A stupid mistake you wouldn’t have made if you hadn’t decided to play hero and rescue me,” she said tartly. “And you wouldn’t have had to if I hadn’t been so naïve as to fall for Mike Todd’s clumsy setup.”

Reece sighed and turned over on his back, staring at the ceiling. “Is it guilt, Em?”

Pulling her T-shirt over her head, Emerald tossed it aside and moved over him, straddling his waist. Slowly, her gaze holding his, she reached behind her, unfastened her bra and shrugged her shoulders, allowing the bra straps to slip down her arms. Tossing it aside, she cupped her heavy breasts in her hands, massaging them, watching Reece’s reaction. “Is that what you think? When I get wet for you the moment you touch me? When I scream in ecstasy every time you make love to me? You think it’s guilt that makes me quiver all over when you stroke me with your hands? That makes me

gasp and moan like someone dying when I feel your tongue caressing me, tasting me?"

He reached for her, pushing her hands aside and caressing her breasts, then allowed his hands to slide along her rib cage to her waist. "I can almost reach around you," he murmured, his eyes glowing with heat.

She should have just accepted the compliment, but honesty compelled her to say, "It'd be more flattering if your hands weren't as big as my head."

He glanced at her and then chuckled, flipped her onto her back and came up on his knees. Grasping the snap of her jeans, he unfastened them and began tugging them from her hips. When he'd tossed them aside, he pulled his shirt off and threw it to the floor as well, then ran his hand down her stomach and slipped it under the edge of her panties, cupping her.

She was wet ... but she was also still sore. She winced.

He frowned. "What's this?"

She blushed to the roots of her hair. "I'm just a little tender, that's all."

He looked torn between sympathy and amusement. "You saying I fucked you bow-legged?" he murmured, settling beside her.

Emerald rolled her eyes. "Something like that."

He chuckled, stroking the abused area gently. "Poor baby. Want me to kiss it and make it better?"

Emerald gasped, spreading her legs wider as his caressing finger found her clit and began stroking it, sending jolts of pleasure through her. "Anything," she gasped.

His eyes darkened and all playfulness vanished. He moved over her as if he would consume her, lathing every inch of her body with his tongue, sucking a trail of love bites from her throat across her breasts and along her belly. Emerald writhed beneath his hungry caresses, intoxicated by rapture, oblivious to anything beyond the feel of his mouth and tongue ... stroking every part of his body she could reach. Finally, when she felt she couldn't wait any longer, when she began to fear she'd climax without him ever entering her, she began to clutch at him, urging him wordlessly to penetrate her.

Instead, he grasped her hips, lifting them off the bed and placed his mouth over her sex. She cried out, jackknifing off the bed. He raised her hips higher, overbalancing her, and she collapsed back against the bed, pleading with him to stop, fighting desperately to hold her climax at bay.

"Now! Please, Reece!"

He lowered her hips and moved over her, caressing her cheek. “Shh, baby. I just wanted to make sure you were ready for me.”

“I’m ready,” she gasped, reaching for his jeans, tearing at the snap and zipper. He pushed her hands away, shoved his jeans and shorts down his hips and grasped his cock in one hand, guiding it toward her body’s opening. She spread her thighs wide, lifting her hips for him, gripping his shoulders and holding her breath as she felt the first tentative probing of his cock head.

She was still tender. She realized that the very moment his cock began to stretch her body. Anticipation of pain overwhelmed her expectation of pleasure and, abruptly, her body’s juices abandoned her.

Reece thrust at about the time Emerald discovered her hair was trapped beneath her shoulders. She twisted her head, trying to dislodge it, but it only tightened painfully, pulling her head back. It was several moments before she realized Reece wasn’t making any progress in penetration, he was pushing her up the bed. Her head cracked against the headboard.

Reece noticed immediately.

Grasping her around the hips, he dragged her back down the bed and thrust again. Emerald dug her heels into the mattress and grasped Reece’s shoulders tightly, but she could feel herself slipping. Again, they waltzed their way up the bed until she sensed impact with the headboard was imminent. She twisted her head to one side. This time it was her shoulder that slammed into the headboard when he thrust.

She could’ve cried in frustration.

Reluctantly, Reece withdrew and flopped on the bed beside her, staring up at the ceiling.

“Why did you stop?”

He said nothing for several moments, but finally rolled onto his side, gathering her against him and stroking her back. She couldn’t help but notice his cock was only semi-erect—still hopeful and unsatisfied, but doubtful of welcome.

She reached for it.

He grabbed her hand, kissed it and placed it firmly around his waist.

“Damn it!”

“No!”

“Why not?” she demanded.

“You know why not. You’re too little for me. We need lubrication. I don’t suppose you have any?”

Emerald glared at him. "On the off chance that you'd show up some day? I told you I hadn't been with anyone else," she said crossly.

He sighed. "I don't want to hurt you."

Emerald sat up and glared at him. "If you think for one minute that I'm going to let you walk out of here with that thing still cocked and loaded, you are mistaken, Reece Yeager!"

He stared at her for several moments and then burst out laughing. "I'll live, Em. Let's find something to eat."

Emerald sighed, but then a thought occurred to her. "We can go out ... stop by the drugstore on the way back."

Reece frowned. Sliding from the bed, he adjusted himself and fastened and zipped his jeans once more before reaching for his shirt. "We can't go out ... not yet, anyway."

"Of course we can go out!"

"I didn't come here to wreck your life all over again, Em, regardless of what you might think. I don't like the thought that you might be embarrassed to be seen with an ex-con, but I'm not stupid. I know what it would do to you if it became common knowledge that you were fraternizing with an ex-convict, and what would happen if I demanded to move in with you ... which is why I didn't suggest it. Not because I don't want to.

"We can't go out, because you can't afford to be seen with me until we've decided what we're going to do."

Emerald sighed, hugging her shirt to her, feeling close to tears once more. "It's going to fall apart again, isn't it? There never really was a chance that it would work out."

Reece knelt beside the bed, gripping her arms. "All I needed to know, Em, was that you love me. I'm going to make things work out for us. I promise. I'm not going to do anything stupid this time."

* * * *

Emerald was staring at the back fence, but her mind was focused a few hundred miles away. Reece had left before mid-night, promising to be back in a few days. He said he had 'things' to take care of.

She couldn't help but wonder what sort of 'things' he needed to take care of. He'd implied that first day that he was passing through on his way home. She'd assumed he hadn't been home yet. She supposed she should also assume that, after an eight year absence, there would be a great deal that needed his attention, but she still couldn't imagine what it would be. She supposed he might be looking for work, but if that was the case she

couldn't figure out why he'd go to Palm Beach to look for work if, as he claimed, he intended to be with her.

She didn't like the idea of him running up and down the interstate on his bike, but he'd refused to take her car. He didn't know how long he'd be gone. He didn't want to leave her stranded. She'd told him she wouldn't be stranded. She could beg a ride from her neighbor, or even call a cab.... Or walk, perish the thought!

He'd been immovable.

She was just beginning to see how stubborn the man was. Funny, but she'd never noticed that before. He'd always seemed so laid back, so easy going—of course he hadn't been but nineteen, which probably explained a lot.

Hovering near the back of her mind was a piece of advice her mother had given her years ago. "You might not be able to keep your man faithful if you give it to him every time he asks for it, but if you don't, I can practically guarantee he's going to be out hunting."

He'd been immovable about that, too ... damn him.

She'd bought an extra large tube of lubricant first thing this morning. The nasty man behind the counter had given her a look.

"What are you doing?"

Emerald nearly jumped out of her skin. Bending, she retrieved the book she'd been holding open on her lap and then looked around. Maureen was peering at her over the fence that halved the backyard, allowing each of them 'privacy'. "Just trying to unwind," she said with a smile, feeling guilty about the train of her thoughts.

"I thought you said you were heading out to the beach today?"

Emerald shrugged. "Changed my mind. I love the beach, but I just didn't feel up to fighting the crowd today. I spend nine months out of every year struggling through crowds of teens like a salmon trying to make it up stream to spawn every time class changes. I decided I'd rather have some quiet time. How about you? I thought you said you were leaving for that cabin of yours in the mountains as soon as vacation started."

Maureen shrugged. "I had a few things to tie up before I left ... Guess you don't want company right now?"

"I wouldn't mind a little," Emerald responded, smiling, although she didn't particularly want Maureen's company at the moment. She had a feeling Maureen wasn't just looking for company. She had a feeling her friend wanted to talk about Reece, and Emerald wasn't in any mood to listen to a lecture.

Maureen beamed at her. "I'll bring refreshments!"

She arrived on Emerald's side of the backyard a few minutes later, carrying two glasses filled with ice and two cans of coke.

Emerald accepted the refreshment gratefully. The patio where she was lounging was shaded and there was a fairly good breeze, but it was hot just the same. "Thanks!"

Maureen nodded. "I was wondering if you'd be interested in a backyard cookout tonight?"

"That'd be nice! I haven't had a steak off the grill in a while."

Maureen frowned pensively. "Should I get extra?"

"Extra what?"

"I only picked one up for each of us. I was just wondering if your friend would be back tonight?"

Despite every effort, Emerald blushed ... mostly from irritation. "Not tonight. He said he had some things to take care of."

Maureen nodded. "That was Reece Yeager, wasn't it?"

Emerald sat up, laying her book aside as she raised the back of her lounge chair. "Yes," she said flatly.

Maureen didn't take the hint. "I was pretty sure it was him ... but I'm surprised you encouraged him, Emerald. Aside from the fact that he's a dangerous man ... which you certainly ought to know if anyone does, it's ... robbing the cradle!"

"He's twenty seven years old! He's no baby!"

"He's eight years younger than you!"

Emerald's lips tightened. "I may be a history teacher, but I can add and subtract," she snapped. "If it doesn't bother him, why should it bother me?"

Maureen shook her head. "Fine! Forget that! He's dangerous, Emerald."

Emerald sighed. "I told you he had nothing to do with that."

"Yes. I know you were determined to protect him, despite the fact that he'd brutally raped you ... and that he'd involved those other boys in abducting you."

Emerald rolled her eyes, seeking patience. "Reece never did anything to me that I wasn't willing ... No! ... eager, for him to do!" she snapped. "He's a good man, Maureen. He didn't have anything to do with what those punks did to me. He tried to help me and ended up spending eight years of his life in jail! I owe him for that."

"Is that what this is about? You feel like you owe him?"

Emerald blushed. “No. It’s about, I love him. I *always* loved him. I know I had no business feeling that way when he was a student, and only nineteen, but I can’t help how I felt then anymore than I can help how I feel now. And I don’t want to help it!”

Maureen blushed fiercely. She rose abruptly. “Sorry. I was just trying to help, not make you mad. I’d really hate to see you wreck your life again.”

Emerald thought about it for several moments and some of her anger dissipated. “I owe you, too. I know that. If it wasn’t for you I’d never have gotten this teaching job. I’m grateful. Really I am. But I love Reece. I don’t care what the cost is.”

Maureen had paused at the gate. She shook her head. “You think that now. I think you’re going to deeply regret your decision.”

Emerald stared after her as she left, frowning. She was tempted to go after her friend and try to smooth things over. She knew Maureen was only trying to help, to make her ‘see reason’.

It occurred to her, though, that the only thing that was likely to satisfy Maureen was to agree with her, and she couldn’t do that.

Even if everything hadn’t gone to hell back home, she knew it would never have worked out for her and Reece back then. She had another chance. She wanted it. Reece said he wanted it. She damned well wasn’t going to pass up a chance for happiness because of what everyone else thought about it.

* * * *

Turning on the TV for company, Emerald went into the kitchen, fixed herself a fruit salad, grabbed a spoon and headed back to catch the evening news. She’d just reached the doorway to the front parlor when the news woman made the announcement.

Although the police are saying it’s too early to determine whether there’s a connection between the two crimes, another local woman was found murdered in her home today. According to police reports, the crime was reported by an anonymous caller.

A picture of an attractive blond appeared on the TV screen in the upper corner.

According to our sources, Ms. Grayson, who worked for Clausen Motors on Capitol Circle, was found bound to her bed in a manner eerily

similar to the previous victim. Police have refused to release any information regarding this latest attack on a local woman, but there is some speculation that Tallahassee may have a serial rapist prowling our streets.

Emerald dropped her bowl. It shattered as it struck the floor, sending pieces of fruit in every direction.

The phone began ringing. It had been ringing for some moments before Emerald realized that the annoying noise wasn't in her head. She turned, staring at the phone blankly for several moments and finally moved toward it and picked it up.

"Yes?"

"It could've been you," someone said in a hissing whisper.

Chapter Six

Emerald was drowsing on the love seat when the phone rang the following evening. She wasn't certain she really felt like getting up to answer it. She'd had very little sleep the night before, had spent all day cleaning the house frantically to keep her mind off of things she didn't want to think about—and no one ever called anyway except telemarketers ... and breathers.

She was no longer drowsy, however. Rolling off the love seat, she headed into the hallway. The phone stopped ringing as she reached for it. Letting out a gusty sigh of relief, she started toward the kitchen. The phone began ringing again before she reached the kitchen door.

Angry, Emerald whirled and stalked to the table that held the phone, snatching the receiver up. "Hello?"

“Em?”

It took Emerald several minutes to change gears. “Reece?”

“I’ve got a problem, baby. I wondered if you could pick me up.”

Emerald’s heart dropped to her toes. “Were you in an accident? Are you hurt?”

He grunted. “I’m at the police station.”

* * * *

Emerald sat staring at the building for a full fifteen minutes before she managed to gather up the nerve to go in. She’d had enough experience with the police eight years ago to last her a life time.

Shock had made it impossible to remember much of the details of that long ago night, but it hadn’t spared her everything. She could still remember the looks on the faces of the cops that had burst into the room—disgusted, angry, avidly curious, even amused, depending upon their various personalities. Reece had been seized by a half dozen men, slammed against the floor and beaten when he’d instinctively tried to defend himself. No one would listen to anything she said until after she’d spent hours at the hospital waiting for the staff to do a rape kit—which had been nightmarish all by itself. And then, finally, she’d been returned to the police station and grilled for hours and hours while they’d picked apart every word, look and gesture as they forced her to tell her ‘story’ over and over until it had begun to sound rehearsed even to her.

And in the end, after everything that had been done to her by everyone, they had not ‘needed’ her to testify in the trial—the prosecution had declined to use her on the grounds that she was ‘confused’ over the role of the leader in the plot against her—though they’d also hinted they feared putting her on the stand would allow the defense to put her morals in question when she kept insisting Reece hadn’t forced her to have sex with him. She’d never been able to find out why the defense had had no interest in using her as a witness—they wouldn’t even speak to her on the grounds of ‘conflict of interest’. In the end, she’d been left feeling almost more violated by the police and the prosecutors than she had by her abductors.

She hadn’t been able to drive by a police station since without feeling violated.

It made her feel ill just thinking about having to go in.

But she’d told Reece she would come and get him.

Taking several deep breaths to gather her courage, she pushed the car door open and, holding herself stiffly erect, marched inside.

It might have been a different police station, a different state and many miles away from the one that still gave her nightmares, but it looked and smelled the same. Emerald had to fight a panic attack as she made her way through the main lobby, looking around for Reece. He was collecting his belongings at the window of the property room when she spotted him.

The scene was so reminiscent of that other time that her knees went to water, almost depositing her on the floor.

When Reece turned, however, the look on his face was enough to drive out all the disturbing memories. He'd looked angry that other time, but there'd been no real tension in him because he'd known he was innocent and believed it would all be over soon and he'd be allowed to go home. She saw in his face that the boy he'd been was long gone and the illusions he'd nursed with them. He was well aware that innocence would not necessarily gain his freedom. "What happened?" she asked a little breathlessly when she reached him.

He frowned, shook his head ever so slightly. "Let's go."

There was fury in every line of his body as he strode from the police station. Emerald had to jog beside him just to keep up with his ground eating stride.

She glanced at him once they were seated in the car, but he looked so tense, and so tired, she decided to wait until he felt like telling her about it.

She didn't ask where he wanted to go. She drove straight back to her place. When she parked the car, he merely stared at the house for several moments, as if awakening from a dream. Finally, he opened the door and got out.

"Mind if I take a shower?" he asked as soon as they were inside. "I've been in that stinking hell hole for nearly twenty four hours."

Emerald nodded. "Hungry? I could fix you something to eat," she offered.

"Thanks. I haven't had anything since they picked me up."

Emerald watched him climb the stairs, gnawing on the one fingernail that remained on her left hand.

Twenty four hours. Her head hurt, but she managed to do the math. They'd picked him up the day after the last murder. Before he left town? Or when he'd come back?

She had a very bad feeling that the two were connected, but couldn't decide whether it was her own anxiety over the apparent similarity of the crime scenes and the fact that the murders had begun after Reece had arrived in town, or if it was pure paranoia.

Shaking off the worrisome thoughts, Emerald went into the kitchen to find him something to eat. She was cutting the sandwich she'd made for him in half when it occurred to her that he had no clean clothes to change into. Somehow, she doubted he'd want to put on the same clothes ... which meant he was going to be running around naked, or in a towel.

She took the sandwich and the glass of tea and went upstairs. He'd just come out of the bathroom. He was wearing a towel.

Under the circumstances, she couldn't help but feel like a nymphomaniac for even noticing how appealing he was, but it was the first time she'd ever actually seen him the next thing to naked. Somehow, they never seemed to make it to the point of undressing each other before they made love.

The flesh she'd caressed and kissed more by feel than sight, was as beautifully sculpted as her mind had told her it was. There was a tattoo on his left biceps, just below his shoulder. She hadn't noticed it before. She saw now that it was 'prison' blue, not colored like those acquired in tattoo parlors, which she supposed was one of the reasons she hadn't noticed before.

It was small, but it looked like a gemstone.

It could have been anything, meant anything, but Emerald had a feeling she knew what it represented, and couldn't help but wonder if that was why he was always so 'caught up' he didn't take the time to strip before he made love to her—he felt self-conscious about having an emerald tattooed so near his heart.

Unsettled by her thoughts, she set the plate and glass down on the bedside table and went into the bathroom to collect his clothes. "I'll throw these in the wash for you."

He nodded, but his expression told her he hadn't really heard what she'd said. When she returned she saw he'd eaten the sandwich and was standing at the front window, staring down into the street. "What is it?"

He glanced toward her. "Patrol car. I shouldn't have let you bring me here."

Emerald frowned. "I wish you'd tell me what's going on."

Reece scrubbed his hands over his face and raked his fingers through his hair. "The cops picked me up. They do that, you know. Anytime anything happens, they check out everybody with any kind of record first. My name came up when I got pulled over, so they took me in for questioning."

Emerald was almost afraid to ask. "About what?"

“Haven’t you guessed yet? The murders, Em.” His expression was grim.

A shock wave went through her. “They don’t think you had anything to do with it?” she asked shakily. “I mean, they released you, right?”

He rubbed his neck, grimacing. “My alibi checked out. They had to let me go. They didn’t have anything they could hold me on ... but you can be damned sure they aren’t satisfied. Somebody tipped them off about me. And they really like me for prime suspect.”

Emerald’s heart skipped a beat. “What makes you think that?”

“They pulled me over on a trumped up *probable*.” He shook his head. “They were watching for me.”

With an effort, Emerald moved to the bed and sat down, feeling weak and more than a little sick to her stomach. “The murders ... you mean the strangler?”

He nodded, turned and paced to the window. “The cops flung the photos down in front of me. They were tied the same way you were, Em ... which I gather is pretty unique. What do you think the chances are that the strangler is somebody that was there eight years ago?”

For several moments Emerald thought she’d hyperventilate. She’d suspected the MO was similar because of the news reports, but she’d thought it was paranoia feeding an overactive imagination. She hadn’t really believed it could be the same, hadn’t accepted the possibility that someone who’d been involved in her abduction might have something to do with the current attacks ... and why should she? She was separated from that other crime by eight years and several hundred miles. “Who?” she managed to ask.

He turned and strode toward her abruptly and Emerald flinched. He hesitated, but then continued as if he hadn’t noticed, taking a seat on the end of the bed. “You think I’ve got something to do with it?” he asked quietly.

Emerald glanced at him quickly, but she was already shaking her head. “It unnerves me that it started when you got here, that’s all. Do you think it’s somebody trying to set you up? That they followed you, maybe?”

“It certainly looks like it, doesn’t it?”

Emerald gnawed her lower lip a moment, considering the possibility, but finally moved toward him, wrapping her arms around him. “It’s so unbelievable, Reece. You must be wrong. It must just be a coincidence. The guys that did it are in jail. And, even if somebody else was involved that neither of us knew about, and knew enough to copy the crime scene ... It’s still a strange coincidence that they’d show up in the same place we

are. Anyway, they were stupid, mean ... total assholes, but they'd have to be completely insane to kill innocent strangers just to frame you. It'd make more sense if they came after me again. Besides, what reason could they have to even want to get even with you badly enough to do something like this? *Who* would?"

Reece wrapped his arms around her, giving her a squeeze, but then released her and got up to pace once more. "Mike Todd. And, as for insane ... Jesus, Em! What they did went a long way beyond a teenage 'prank'. I'm not so sure they were 'sane' then."

Emerald was taken aback by the name from her past. "Isn't he still in jail?"

Reece shook his head. "The police made him a deal to testify against the 'ring leader', which was when he named me. I think he was in two years, then probation ... He spent less time in that the others. A hell of a lot less than me."

Anger surged through Emerald. "You'd think the bastard would be satisfied that he'd gotten even with you when it was his testimony that got you convicted."

"I broke up his party ... named him and his buddies. Mike Todd likes to think of himself as somebody nobody fucks with. I doubt he was satisfied ... especially since my lawyer got me off ... finally."

Emerald frowned. "What about the other two, David and Jeffrey?"

He shook his head. "Maybe. I don't suppose they could be totally ruled out. They're out too. But they were just Mike's flunkies. They never did anything without direct orders from him."

"I don't suppose you mentioned Mike to the cops?"

"They said they'd check it out, but if it is Mike, he was pretty good at covering his tracks eight years ago—if I hadn't shown up, I doubt very much he'd have been caught—and I'm betting he's a lot better now."

"But ... I recognized their voices. I would've told the police myself, even if you hadn't shown up."

He gave her a look. "Maybe ... if you'd been able to."

Emerald swallowed with some difficulty. "You think ... You're saying the same thing that happened to the two women here would've happened to me?"

He studied her a long moment and finally looked away. "I think he expected the photos he was taking would be his insurance that you wouldn't say anything."

A shiver skated along Emerald's spine. "No you don't. You think what was done to these two women--that's what was intended to happen to me, what had been planned from the start. Maybe the photos were intended to implicate David and Jeffery ... after he'd finished having his fun." Emerald wrapped her arms around herself, trying to think back.

She'd done her best to forget everything about that time, to bury it completely. It wasn't easy trying to dredge it up again. It was easier than she liked, or would've thought, however, to dredge up the way Mike Todd had looked at her each time she'd criticized him, or sent him to the office for some infraction.

It had always made her uneasy—that look that was a combination of malice and something else she couldn't quite identify. She supposed that was because, at the time, she hadn't realized that that something else was cold blooded calculation—the way a cat studied its prey for weaknesses before it pounced.

"Maybe it's got nothing to do with you at all," she said finally. "Maybe he thinks he has unfinished business with me."

Reece frowned. "I'd thought of it. I didn't want to scare you until I had a better idea of whether there was anything to my suspicions or not."

"Gee, thanks for sparing me!" Emerald retorted. "And what if he'd grabbed me while you were still trying to make up your mind?"

"Telling you wouldn't have lessened the possibility or made you any safer. It would just have made you more afraid. Besides, you could've arrived at the same conclusion, or speculation, as I did."

She might have been more likely to if she hadn't been trying very, very hard to convince herself that it was all her imagination.

"Anyway—somebody put the cops on to me. It wasn't purely by chance that they pulled me over, regardless of what they wanted me to think. They had my records when they got me to the police station—which means they'd sent for them."

Emerald frowned. "But ... your lawyer got the conviction overturned, didn't he?"

"Which doesn't change the fact that there was an arrest record ... which should still be in Georgia, but was lying on the detective's desk."

"Maureen."

"What?"

Emerald shook her head, fighting the anger that surged through her. "My neighbor. It had to have been her. She left to go on vacation

yesterday, but she could've called them before she left ... *probably* called them."

"You told her about me?" Reece demanded incredulously.

Emerald gaped at him. "I didn't have to! She was there at the time. You don't remember her?"

Reece frowned, obviously struggling with it, but finally shook his head.

"She was a teacher at the high school at the time. She coached the girl's basketball team ... She remembered you. The day after you came back that second time, she asked me if you were Reece Yeager, and, not surprisingly, she remembered the incident too."

"You think she would have called the cops on me?"

Emerald sighed. "I don't know, but it is a possibility. Like I said, she remembered ... tried to talk me into staying away from you. She's a friend. Maybe she thought she was 'doing it for my own good'."

Reece studied her a long moment, his face expressionless. "And, what did you say when she tried to talk you into dumping me?"

Emerald smiled faintly. "That you were innocent, regardless of what everyone seemed to think, you had not raped me. That you'd never done anything to me that I hadn't willingly participated in."

Chapter Seven

"In spite of everything that's happening, you still believe I'm innocent?"

Emerald stood up and moved toward him, laying her cheek against his chest and wrapping her arms around his waist. "I know you are."

After a moment, he closed his arms around her, holding her tightly. "I don't know if I'd blame you if you had some doubts. We never really got the chance to get to know each other, and I've been away a long time."

She pulled a little away and looked up at him, frowning slightly. "How could you love me and feel that you don't really know me?"

He smiled at her crookedly. "I spent years wondering if it was just a crush that got blown all out of proportion because I didn't get to be with you long enough to know if it was real, or would last. After a while I started believing that that was exactly what it was, heat of the moment ... the unattainable ... forbidden fruit and all that. Because I realized that all I really knew about you was that you were beautiful to me and I liked the way you laughed. I didn't know anything but your name and the fact that you taught history--didn't know where you came from, what you liked, what you didn't like ... what your middle name was... not even how old you were.

"But I discovered when I saw you again that the only thing that really mattered was that when I look at you, you take my breath away." He leaned down, brushing his lips lightly across hers. "If it ain't love, baby, I don't guess I know the difference."

"Emerald is my middle name," she murmured against his lips.

"Is it?" he asked, nipping at her lower lip with his own. "What's your first name?"

"Worse," she murmured.

He chuckled. "I kinda like the name Emerald myself."

"Right! That's why you always call me Em."

"I call you Em because Emerald is more of a mouthful than you are, baby ... and I'm lazy."

"I think I'm being insulted," Emerald said, smiling against his lips.

Reece picked her up and carried her to the bed, placing his knee on the edge and climbing onto the mattress with her. He nuzzled her neck.

"Are you?"

"Mmm. What?"

"Insulted?"

"I'm too wet to think about anything but sex right now. Can we skip the chit chat and fuck?"

Reece chuckled and leaned back to study her. "Lady, you have a mouth like a sailor."

She gave him a look of innocence. "OK, but can we?" Rolling toward the side of the bed, she pulled the drawer out and held up the tube of lubricant triumphantly. "I'm ready."

He propped his head on his hand, a smile playing around his lips. "You've got a hell of a lot of clothes on for somebody that's ready."

Emerald slipped off the side of the bed, then, holding his gaze, unfastened her jeans snap with deliberation, slid the zipper down very slowly and began to slide the jeans down her hips with equal care. Kicking her sandals off when the jeans puddled at her ankles, she propped a hand on the bed and tugged them over her feet. Tossing them aside, she grasped the hem of her knit shirt and began to lift it, exposing her belly by fractions. When she tossed her top aside, she reached back and unfastened her bra. Placing her palms on the bed, she allowed the bra straps to slip down to her wrists, then 'stepped' out of it as she crawled across the bed towards him.

Reece's smile had faded the moment she began to wiggle out of her jeans. His eyes narrowed predatorily as she crawled across the bed toward him. He resisted momentarily as she placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him to his back, but as she came up on her knees and placed her other hand on his shoulder, he grasped her around the waist and fell back, taking her with him and holding her slightly above him so that her breasts dangled in his face. Catching one pouting nipple in his mouth, he lowered her slowly until she was straddling his chest.

She propped her hands on the bed on either side of his head, throwing her head back and squeezing her eyes closed as heat surged through her from his mouth in tantalizing waves. When he released her breast at last, she offered him the other breast, groaning as he closed his mouth over the nipple and sliding backwards until she could feel his cock nudging her buttocks. Lifting slightly, she settled on top of the hard ridge of flesh, rotating her hips.

When he groaned, releasing her breast, she slid over him, slowly, back and forth, pushing the foreskin all the way to the root of his cock with her damp cleft and then up again. He caught her hips, held her still for a moment and then sat up, grabbing the tube of lubricant. She held out a hand for it and, when he'd squeezed a generous portion into her palm she moved back once more and grasped his cock in her hand, rubbing the lubricant over it from the root of his cock to his cock head in a slow, thorough caress.

Abruptly, he lifted her up, aligned his body with her own and pushed. Emerald gasped, felt her body resist for a moment, then slowly he pushed inside of her, burying himself deeply. A groan of satisfaction scraped past her throat. She wrapped her arms around his neck, gasping as heat flooded through her, feeling her body clench and unclench around him in pleasure. Grasping her hips, he guided her into a rhythm that pleased them both, lifting her up until he almost slipped free of her body before pushing her

down again until her clit ground against the rough hair at the root of his cock.

Within moments, Emerald felt her body climbing toward her peak, felt the glorious tension drawing every muscle in her body taut with pending release. She began to move faster, rotating her hips so that his cock nudged her G-spot with every thrust, sending out currents of static ecstasy. Abruptly, her body clenched around his cock as shock waves of blinding pleasure washed through her in a tidal wave of exquisite sensation.

As she cried out her release, he tossed her onto her back and began thrusting into her fast and hard. She reached culmination again, harder than before, as she felt the first tremors of his climax, shuddering, burying her face against his chest to stifle the cries of delight she couldn't hold inside.

They lay panting in the aftermath, swapping feather light, breathless kisses.

As their breathing slowly returned to normal, however, Emerald felt the outside world intruding once more. The harder she tried to hold it at bay, the more determined it seemed to intrude.

"Stay with me," she whispered when she felt him stir.

He subsided, rising up on one elbow to study her. "You and I both know what could come of that."

Emerald sighed. "You haven't found a job yet, have you?"

He stiffened. "What makes you say that?"

"I'm not complaining ... but you've been down to Palm Beach several times and come back. I figured you were looking for work and you wouldn't have been back so soon if you'd found a job. I'm just saying you can stay here until you get a job and get the chance to get on your feet ... I'd like for you to."

He seemed to consider it for a few minutes. "You neighbors would be bound to notice and then, before you knew it, the board would be questioning your morality and whether or not you were the kind of influence they wanted on their kids."

"Does it really matter if my reputation goes to hell if that wacko comes in here and strangles me?" Emerald pointed out, playing her trump card.

His arm tightened around her. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you." He seemed to consider the situation for several moments. "It *would* be easier to keep an eye on you if I was here," he said slowly.

A welcome sense of security settled over her for about two seconds before she began to consider the way he'd phrased that last comment. There

was just something about his wording that made it sound as if he'd been doing a little more than making sure she was safe. "You've been keeping an eye on me?" she asked, keeping her voice neutral with an effort.

He flushed. "I wasn't certain how much danger you might be in. I got ... someone to watch the house while I was away."

"Reece! Without even telling me?"

"I was trying not to alarm you unnecessarily," he said tightly.

"How long?" A curtain slid across his eyes. She knew then that he'd been watching, or had her watched, by some friend or ex-cell mate, far longer than there had been danger of any kind. She sat up and punched him on the shoulder. "You didn't trust me!"

He reddened. It was all the admission she needed and she was suddenly a good deal more than irritated.

"Damn it, Em! It wasn't that."

Her eyes narrowed and he flushed even darker.

"I was trying to take care of you ... All right! I wasn't sure I believed you hadn't been seeing anybody else before I showed up, but that was only part of it ... swear to God, Em!"

She whacked him with a pillow. "How dare you even question my word, you ass! If I'd been your girlfriend, you might have some right to question my faithfulness, but I wasn't ... and you don't!"

"Settle down!"

"NO!" she flung another pillow at him.

"You're blowing this way out of proportion, Em!"

"ME! You show up on my doorstep without ever once trying to contact me in eight years and just expect me to be waiting for you ... which I was, because I never was terribly bright where you were concerned ... and then question my veracity! If I'd screwed anybody else I would've been well within my rights and it wouldn't be any of your damn business! And I'd have told you I'd been seeing someone else!"

His lips tightened. "That was before! Now, you're mine!"

Emerald gasped in outrage. She'd run out of pillows. She looked speculatively at her lamp. She didn't like it anyway.

Reece dove between her and the bed side table, beating her to it.

"Don't you even *think* about it!" he snapped.

Emerald sat back, glaring at him. "Go!"

"Be reasonable."

“I don’t have to be reasonable either. I trusted you! Without any rhyme or reason except because I love you. But you didn’t trust me. You didn’t even take my word for ... for anything.”

He glared at her. “I don’t have any damn clothes!”

“They’re in the washer. They should be finished by now.”

“Wet!” he gasped, sounding almost as outraged as she felt.

“At least they’re clean!”

“Fine! Fuck it!” he growled, and stalked from the room.

She got up when he’d stormed out of the room and went into the bathroom to clean up. She had lubricant up to her eyebrows and cum running down her legs. It was just like a man, damn his hide—give them an inch and they took a damned mile! And then they had the nerve to question whether their woman was faithful or not when nine out of ten were out looking for their next lay the minute you turned your back on them!

She heard him slam out of the house as she returned to the bedroom to get her clothes. Stalking down the stairs, she bolted the door, turned off all of the lights he’d left on and then went back upstairs to stew over it some more.

She was sorry about it long before morning, of course. Hours of tossing and turning between snatches of sleep and bad dreams were enough by themselves to convince her that, deep down, she regretted losing her temper even if she wasn’t ready to admit it on a conscious level.

She couldn’t help but worry where he might be sleeping, however, whether he’d been able to find a room so late of if he’d ended up sleeping in the bus station or something. She was tempted to go look for him by the time it was morning, but a combination of wounded pride and the fear of being snubbed restrained her.

He hadn’t even had his motorcycle ... which was probably still down at the police impound lot.

She had no idea how to contact him and that was the worst realization of all. She couldn’t apologize if she wanted to. He’d never given her an address or phone number and she’d assumed that was because he didn’t actually have one yet. He might not. Or he might not have wanted to give her one because he was still making up his mind whether or not he wanted to have a relationship with her ... just like he was still making up his mind whether she could be trusted or not.

It occurred to her after she’d been digging around in her flower bed the following day for several hours that she had no idea, really, of what Reece had been through in prison or how it might affect his personality. Of

course, she didn't know from before how Reece had been in the trust department. Maybe he'd always been the sort not to trust until he had the chance to evaluate a person and decide whether he felt trust in them or not.

She was the opposite. For the most part she tended to like people she trusted, and dislike people she didn't, instinctively, from the moment she met them. If they proved to her that her instincts were wrong and they couldn't be trusted, she never made the mistake again—nothing they could do could ever earn it back.

She trusted Reece for the simple reason that he appeared to be, basically, open and honest. If she hadn't felt that way about him, she wouldn't have fallen in love with him to start with.

She couldn't understand how he could believe he was in love with her and still not trust her.

Unless he'd just been shooting her a line because he figured she'd be a lot more cooperative about sex if he romanced her?

It was a painfully disturbing thought.

She was so intent on stabbing the dirt with her trowel that it was several moments before she realized someone had come to stand close by to watch her. When she sensed it and glanced up she let out a gasping scream, jerked all over and pitched dirt into the air as her trowel flew from suddenly nerveless fingers.

She clutched her heart, glaring at the man. "What the hell are you doing in my yard?" she demanded furiously.

"I tried to get your attention, ma'am, but you seemed too intent on butchering the floor bed to notice," the man said coolly.

Emerald's eyes narrowed, though color filled her cheeks. "And you figured that gave you the right to trespass?"

He studied her a long moment. "I'm Detective Ansley with the Tallahassee police department, ma'am. I was just wondering if you could answer a few questions for me."

If he thought his cop status was going to intimidate her ... he was right. But it also pissed her off. She was tempted to tell him to get his ass out of her backyard. How dare he come in her yard without even asking!

She stood up, wiping her hands off, brushing the dirt—some of which was from kneeling and some from the knee jerk response of her reflexes—from her clothes. "Next time wait for an invitation from me before you invite yourself onto my property," she said coldly.

He flushed with anger, his lips tightening. "Certainly ma'am. As I said, I tried to get your attention...."

“But you didn’t. Which means you should have waited until you did to find out if it was OK with me—what did you want to ask me?”

He was giving her a look of hostility now, not that she gave a damn. She felt pretty hostile herself. “Do you know a Mr. Reece Yeager, ma’am?”

“Why?”

“Do you know him?”

“Why?”

“Could you just answer the question, ma’am?”

“Why certainly! Just as soon as you tell me why you want to know.”

“It’s part of an ongoing investigation, ma’am. I’m not at liberty to discuss details.”

She would’ve loved to slap the smirk off of his face with the back of her shovel, but unfortunately it was against the law to smack a cop--just because he was trespassing and being an asshole.

“Yes, I do.”

“How long have you known him?”

That wasn’t exactly an easy question to ask. “I met him about nine years ago.” It irritated the hell out of her to answer his questions, because she knew damned well he wouldn’t be standing in her yard harassing her if he hadn’t known damn well she knew Reece ... which meant he knew about everything. She supposed he just wanted to see if he could catch her in a lie, though she was damned if she could figure out why.

“And this was where?”

Her lips tightened. “He was a transfer student at the high school where I was teaching at the time.”

“Where was this?”

She gave him a look. “I don’t feel like waltzing, Detective....” She’d forgotten what he said his name was.

“Ansley.”

“Detective Ansley. You already know I know him or you wouldn’t be here, so why don’t you just tell me why you’re here?”

“How well did you know Mr. Yeager?”

She was tempted to tell him it was none of his damned business how well she knew Reece. She bit her tongue and tamped her temper down with an effort. “Well,” she responded shortly.

“Are you aware that Mr. Yeager is a convicted sex offender?”

“I’m aware that conviction was overturned.”

“For lack of evidence.”

“Because he wasn’t guilty!” Emerald snapped.

His eyes narrowed. “From what I could see in the reports it wasn’t lack of evidence but because you refused to testify against him. I’m curious to know why you let him walk ... to attack more helpless women.”

Emerald crossed her arms, studying him. “If you’re through asking me questions you already have all the answers for, you can leave.”

He pulled a file from beneath his arm, dragged a photo out of it and shoved it in her face. “Does this look familiar to you at all?”

It was a crime scene photo of one of the murders. Emerald knew that immediately, although the photo sent such a shock of horror through her it was several moments before her brain could even assimilate what her eyes were seeing. There was blood everywhere. She couldn’t understand why there’d be blood everywhere when they said the woman had been strangled. Her hand was shaking when she pushed the photo back at him. “I wasn’t there, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He stabbed the picture. “This woman was so brutally raped ... with God knows what ... that she would’ve bled to death if she hadn’t strangled first. In all my years on the force, I’ve never seen a crime scene that was this bad. Now, what I want to know, ma’am, is if this is how you were tied up when you were abducted. Look at it again ... closely.”

It took an effort to steel herself to look at the photo again, but Emerald did. “It’s possible,” she said finally, reluctantly.

“Is it or not!” he demanded.

Emerald handed the photo back to him, glaring at him. “The students that abducted me knocked me out with chloroform and tied me up while I was unconscious, and gagged me and blindfolded me. I didn’t *see* it! It *looks* similar. That’s the best I can tell you.”

“Can or will?”

“Did you actually listen to anything I just said?” Emerald asked tightly. “I wasn’t conscious when I was tied up. I don’t know *how* they did it.”

“You were conscious when you were untied, though, weren’t you Ms. Green?”

“I was still groggy, scared half to death and I could barely see from having that blindfold on. If I could tell you positively, I would.”

He studied her for several moments, obviously seething. “I’m curious to know how much Mr. Yeager offered you to keep you quiet.”

Emerald looked at him blankly, trying her best not to think about her most recent roll in the sheets with Mr. Yeager, although ‘about ten inches’

popped into her head. “Reece?” she said cautiously, too surprised by the suggestion that she had accepted a bribe from Reece, of all people, for anger to filter through ... yet.

“Mr. Carl Yeager—of Yeager Enterprises—his father.”

Chapter Eight

The name sounded really familiar, but Emerald was certain the detective couldn’t be talking about the multi-millionaire, Carl Yeager, the one that owned a rather substantial number of media companies, which included more than a dozen newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations ... the one who’d been killed in a plane crash a few months ago with his wife of thirty years. “I never met his father,” she said stiffly. “If you’re through now, leave.”

She knew she must be white as death. She felt faint. She was desperate for Detective Ansley to leave so that she could sit down.

She didn’t like the way the man was looking at her.

“You know ... I believe you didn’t know. Curious. Kind of makes you wonder just how well you *do* know Reece Yeager, doesn’t it?”

“Go away,” Emerald said faintly, trying to keep a note of pleading from creeping into her voice.

He nodded and left. Emerald wilted back down onto the grass where she’d been sitting before the man had arrived.

It occurred to her that the Detective must have just been trying to shock her into telling him something. Cops lied all the time to get information out of people. The paper had said Carl Yeager Jr. had inherited. She read the newspapers. She kept up with what was going on in the world - so maybe she had a tendency to skim more than anything else and she missed as much as she caught, but Reece couldn’t be one of *those* Yeagers.

Rich people sent their kids to private schools. She taught in public school.

Besides, he couldn't have kept the fact that he was rich secret from the other kids at school, even if he'd wanted to ... and why would he want to?

She couldn't remember if she'd ever heard what his full name was, though.

With an effort, she dismissed it, but the detective's parting comment kept coming back to haunt her.

She went inside after she'd finished wrecking her favorite flower bed and went upstairs with the intention of soaking her blues away. The hot water soothed her aching muscles, but it wasn't particularly soothing to her thoughts.

She told herself after a while that it didn't really matter why, or if, Reece had lied to her about himself. She'd run him off. Even if she was interested in apologizing, or trying to make up, she didn't know how to reach him.

She didn't really think he'd be coming back to give her the chance to do either after she'd thrown him out of her house in the middle of the night, on foot, in sopping wet clothes.

She didn't care.

She'd assured herself of that every few minutes throughout the remainder of the day. By evening she decided she was starting to actually believe it.

She'd just started to take a long swig of ice cold tea when the phone rang. The sudden noise in her dead quiet home sent a jolt along her nerve endings, making her jerk reflexively and slosh icy tea in her face. She jumped when the chill hit her, sloshing more out over her hand.

Turning, she glared at the phone, but it occurred to her suddenly that it just might be Reece, calling to apologize for being such a suspicious ass. Mopping her face with the tail of her shirt, she rushed to answer it, grabbing the receiver as the phone stopped ringing.

"I haven't seen Casanova around. You two didn't have a lover's spat, did you?"

It was the same wheezing whisperer from before. Despite the fact that her hair was far too long to stand on end, Emerald felt it rise up along her scalp, all the way to the crown of her head.

"Who is this?" she demanded shakily.

"Your secret admirer," the voice whispered and laughed.

The goose bumps that had raced up her scalp changed directions and ran down her spine. "Jeffery?" she asked in a squeaky voice.

The line went dead.

* * * *

Emerald was fairly certain that even if there hadn't been a killer stalking women in the city, and even if that killer hadn't been using an MO that she was frighteningly familiar with, the phone calls would have unnerved her. Under the circumstances, they terrified her.

She spent the following morning trying to arrange to get a security company out to install electronic security in her apartment. Other than locks, she had nothing, none of the high tech devices on the market that were supposed to keep intruders out, alert her to attempted break-ins ... and certainly not burglar bars on the windows. Those things gave her the creeps and moreover, she refused to turn her home into a prison she locked herself into every night.

Unfortunately, everybody who hadn't already gotten security systems for their home before the murders had immediately ordered them. The best promise she could get was that someone would stop by the end of the following week to assess her situation and plan out a work order, the actual work to be performed at some distant, unspecified time.

Thwarted of that possibility of comfort, she left the house after lunch and went to the mall to buy two new phones equipped with caller ID to replace the ones she had. She didn't know how much good it would do her to be able to tell who was calling ... or even if she would be able to tell since she'd had friends tell her that the ID could be blocked, preventing her from finding out who was calling, but she thought it might be helpful.

She discovered when she came home and plugged the phones in that it wasn't just a plug and play sort of thing. She had to order the service from the phone company. She spent most of the afternoon being transferred from one department to another trying to get a work order, and finally discovered she could get that 'installed' later in the week.

Frustrated and furious, she was tempted to hang up on the sales person, but managed to contain herself and settle on the work order ... which meant she'd committed herself to an enormous amount of money for security and still didn't have any more than she'd had before she started.

The phone was ringing when she got to the door. She'd already nicked her knuckles getting the door unlocked to get inside and catch it before it dawned on her that it was doubtful that it was anyone she actually wanted to talk to. She was fairly certain Reece wouldn't be calling ... not that she wanted to talk to him anyway. She wasn't in the mood for

telemarketers, and it was for darned sure she didn't want to talk to the whisperer.

Shivers skated along her spine just thinking of the last phone call. At the time, she'd been certain the voice belonged to Jeffery Miller. Since then she'd begun to doubt her first impression, not because she didn't think Jeffery was above trying to scare the hell out of her, or because she didn't think there was a possibility that he was involved in the murders, nor even because it didn't sound like his voice. It had certainly reminded her of his voice. The problem was it hadn't sounded like anything Jeffery would say.

From what she remembered of Jeffery, he'd leaned a little more toward dumb than bright. She had her doubts that Jeffery would have a clue of who Casanova was, or that he'd use the term to describe Reece even if he'd heard of the legendary lover.

Mike Todd might have said something like the caller had, but the voice wasn't deep enough to have been Mike's.

Of course, the person calling might have used one of those electronic gadgets that altered a person's voice, in which case it could, literally, have been anyone in the world, regardless of how likely she thought it was that it was one of the men who'd abducted and assaulted her before.

It could even have been Reece.

She didn't believe it, but she was beginning to seriously doubt her judgment where Reece was concerned.

It would almost have seemed as if thinking of him had conjured him, but the plain fact was she'd thought of little else since their fight, and certainly not since her discussion with the detective. But when the knock came at her door her first thought wasn't that Reece had come back. Her first thought was of her secret admirer and her knees went to water.

"Who is it?" she asked without approaching nearer the door than the phone table.

Whoever it was didn't answer. She wasn't certain whether it was because her voice hadn't been much more than a squeak of fright, or if they were waiting until she came closer so they could burst in and grab her. Finally, too unnerved to consider turning her back on the door and retreating, she peeked through the curtain. She couldn't see anything but one shoulder and part of a broad chest, but the man was wearing a suit. She thought at first he must be a detective, until she noticed the pale gray Mercedes sitting in her driveway.

She opened the door a crack and peered out at the man. It took her several moments to recognize him. She would never have thought an expensive suit would change his appearance that much.

“Not slumming tonight?”

“We need to talk.”

She stared at Reece for several moments, wondering why he seemed so different to her. “I don’t think so,” she said finally and tried to push the door closed.

She discovered after a moment that his foot was in it and looked up at him.

“I know I shouldn’t have ... had surveillance on you without your knowledge and consent. I really was just trying to protect you, Em, whatever you think.”

“I don’t think you want to know what I think,” Emerald said quietly. “Could you move your foot, please?”

He shook his head, grasping the edge of the door. “You told me you loved me. How can you just shut me out of your life like this?”

It took an effort to speak. The knot in her throat was painful, drawing tears to her eyes. “I loved Reece. The thing that’s breaking my heart is, I still do. But I don’t know who you are.”

“Don’t look at me like that, damn it,” he said angrily. “You don’t know what it’s like when nobody can see beyond your bank account.”

“Poor little rich boy, is that it? You’ve got more in common with Mike Todd than I ever realized before.”

His lips tightened. “You know damned well I’m nothing like that bastard.”

“Unfortunately, the problem, Mr. Yeager, is that I don’t, because all I know now is that you’re not who I thought you were.” She shook her head. “I just don’t understand why you did it, why you picked me. Was it for revenge? Because it was my fault you ended up in jail? Or was it just some kind of game? A bet? A dare?”

“What are you talking about, Em?” he demanded. “You think I used you for some kind of sick game?”

She studied him a long moment.

“You want me to beg forgiveness? Is that it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“What then?”

“I want you to go away. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“Em! Don’t do this,” he said quietly. “I know now that I should have trusted you. I’ll never doubt you again, I swear it.”

In spite of all she could do the tears she’d been trying so hard to hold at bay flooded her eyes and washed down her cheeks. “You don’t understand at all, do you? You broke my trust in you. I can’t be with you when I can’t trust you, and I’ll never be able to trust you again.”

He paled. “Em, you don’t mean that.”

She wiped the tears from her cheeks with one hand and sniffed. “It’s for the best, Reece. Find someone in your own age group and income bracket. You’ll be happier, because if you couldn’t trust the love I lavished on you, you’ll never really trust me, no matter what your investigators tell you. And I couldn’t live with that any more than I could live with someone that I doubted every word they told me.” She looked down at his foot pointedly. After a moment, he removed it, reluctantly removed his hand from the door.

“You’re wrong about one thing, though, Reece. I do understand what it’s like not knowing if someone loves you for yourself ... or if it’s something else they want from you.”

She leaned against the door for several moments after she’d closed and locked it but finally, when she didn’t hear him leave, she moved away from the door and went upstairs.

She’d hoped to avoid the confrontation. When he’d been gone for days, she’d been certain that he wouldn’t come back ... of course, up until she’d spoken to the detective she’d been hoping they could still work things out between them.

She didn’t know why Reece couldn’t seem to see that it wasn’t his family’s money that had changed everything. It was his low opinion of her. That opinion had forced her to accept that he’d never actually loved her.

She supposed, however, that as emotionally draining as it had been to have to discuss the situation with him, at least it had given her the chance to see that the whole charade wasn’t some sort of huge joke he’d cooked up with friends. When she’d found out how deep his deception went, she’d been terrified she would discover it had been something like that, some rich boy’s game. She didn’t know if she could’ve recovered if that had been the case.

She didn’t try to contain her tears once she’d flung herself down on her bed. She summoned them, allowed the pain to flow out of her. She couldn’t hold all that pain inside. When she’d cried herself to the point of exhaustion, she slept.

She wasn't certain how long she'd slept, or even what awakened her, but something roused her. She sat up, listening intently to the house. Aside from the usual creaks and groans typical of an old house, she heard nothing.

Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was nearly three AM. It had been barely dark when she'd fallen asleep ... and now she was awake and it was too early to get up. Finally, she decided to take a hot shower, then see if she could catch a movie that would put her back to sleep for a few more hours.

The shower went a long way toward soothing her. She didn't realize until she stepped out, however, that she hadn't thought to bring her nightclothes in to the bathroom with her.

Ordinarily, she wasn't in the habit of strolling around the house in the nude, even though she lived by herself, but, with a shrug, she tossed the towel over the bar to dry and went in search of a nightgown.

The sound that drew her attention was almost like the scrabbling sound of mouse feet. She paused, her nightgown in her hand and looked around nervously, peering at the baseboard around the room. When the sound came again, however, it sounded as if it was above her. She glanced up, wondering if she did have mice in the ceiling, or if a squirrel, or maybe a stray cat, had found its way into the attic to bear its young.

It was as her gaze drifted down from the ceiling that it was caught by a faint glint. Frowning, she peering intently at the dark spot just along the edge of the picture that hung above the head of her bed. It didn't look like a stain.

A mouse hole?

It seemed like a strange place for a mouse hole.

Then, it blinked.

Every nerve, muscle and tendon in her body shut down as a wave of ice cold shock washed over her. For many, many moments, her brain ceased to function altogether. When, finally, it kicked into gear again it was like a motor struggling up a steep incline, sluggish, sputtering, misfiring.

It was an eye. A human eye.

She had no idea of how long she remained frozen in shock, unable to think what to do, how to react. Belatedly, her instinct for survival kicked in. Clutching her nightgown in her hands, she backed away a step, and then another.

She didn't manage to jog herself into a run until she reached the stairs. She was halfway down them, intent on running out the door, when it dawned on her that she was far safer in the house than outside of it.

Skidding to a halt by the phone table, she grabbed the receiver up with a hand that was shaking so badly she could barely hold on to it and punched the numbers.

“911 what’s your emergency?”

“Hel...”

She didn’t manage to get the rest of the word out before someone caught her from behind, covering her mouth and nose with a cloth wet with something that had a sickly sweet odor.

* * * *

Emerald was aware of the nausea even before the fog departed from her brain, allowing her mind to begin to assimilate her sensory perceptions. She couldn’t focus on anything beyond the illness, however, the cloying, sickening sweetness that clogged her throat. Ignoring everything else, she concentrated on breathing slowly, lightly, quelling the sickness that threatened to choke her.

Finally, she mastered the sickness enough to begin assessing her surroundings. Something had been bound around her head, blinding her to everything but a faint glow of light. Her lips were sealed with tape, which she thought was wound about her head, as well, because the slightest movement threatened to tug the hair from her scalp.

With an effort she lifted her head.

“You’re awake.”

She stiffened, trying to identify the voice.

Something warm trailed along one arm, across her collar bone and then scraped a path along her other arm ... a finger.

Her wrists were tied, her arms suspended on either side of her from the binding. She understood then why her wrists and shoulders hurt.

The surface she was sitting on shifted, shook slightly. In a moment, a hot moist breath tickled her cheek. “I’d almost decided to forgive you and take you back,” her tormentor whispered in her ear. “But you just couldn’t leave it alone, you stupid, ungrateful bitch! After all I’ve done for you!”

Emerald’s heart leapt and began thundering in her chest, making it difficult to breathe. She shook her head, but the gag prevented her from trying to explain, or question, or beg.

After a moment, she felt a tug on the cloth that was wrapped around her head. It loosened, fell away. Emerald stared at the blurry image in front of her, blinking, trying to bring it into focus. Her eyes widened when her vision finally cleared.

“You weren’t expecting me, were you?”

Emerald shook her head slowly, frowning. She didn't understand. She didn't understand at all. What had she said about forgiving her?

"I always thought that doe eyed look of innocence was one of your charms, but you're really irritating the shit out of me right now, Em."

Emerald glared at her captor. "Don't call me that!" she raged against the gag.

Maureen stared back at her a moment and finally grabbed the edge of the tape, unwinding it with painful slowness. Tears sprang to Emerald's eyes as she felt her hair being pulled from her scalp by the tape. "What are you doing, Maureen?" Emerald gasped. "*Why* are you doing this?" A stray thought lit in her mind and her eyes widened. "You're trying to frame Reece, aren't you?"

Maureen slapped her so hard across the face her teeth cut her cheek and lip. Her head slammed into the headboard. For several moments, she thought she would black out.

Maureen grabbed a handful of hair. "I am so sick of you trailing after that cock like a bitch in heat! I've been patient with you, Em. You know I have. But I've had enough. You've cheated on me with that son-of-a-bitch the last time. When I get done with you, I'll be done with both of you."

Emerald tried to shake the dizziness, closing her eyes in hopes of fighting it into abeyance. She opened her eyes again abruptly as she felt something sliding around her neck. "What are you doing?"

Maureen smiled. "Something ingenious, really. I thought of it myself. I was going to just use the same tie that had been used on you that time, but then I thought, why not get creative? This little rope here's tied to that little rope there, goes around your neck just so and then over to the other rope. What happens, you see, is, if you pass out, the rope gets tighter. If you try to move, the rope gets tighter. So, sooner or later, no matter what, you strangle yourself. It was entertaining really, besides making it unnecessary for me to exert myself to do it. I really didn't have anything against them, you see. I was just trying to get a message through that thick skull of yours. I knew, even if I changed the tie a little, they'd still figure it was him. And you would know I was sending you a message. But you didn't figure it out, did you?" She grabbed a fistful of Emerald's hair again, yelling in her ear. "Behave yourself or this'll be you!"

Emerald's eyes widened. "You did ... you killed those women?"

Maureen shook her head. "God, Em. I never thought you were so god damned dense. Didn't I just tell you I did it?"

"But... but why?"

Maureen gave her a look, then popped her on each cheek. "What is it? Still groggy from the chloroform? Lis ...ten, bitch! I did it to warn you away from that dick swinging son-of-a-bitch, but did it do any good? No! Because you're too stupid to take a subtle hint."

Emerald found she had to fight another round with her nausea. "What're you doing, Maureen?"

"I'm taking care of my cheating bitch and her lover. I would've thought you'd figured that out by now."

"But ... we were never lovers!"

Maureen slapped her again. "Don't lie to me. I stood right there and watched you with him!" she said, pointing to the hole in the wall.

Emerald stared at her for several moments, trying to think of some way she might be able to reach the woman. "You and I ... we've been friends a long time, Maureen. I don't understand how you could possibly have mistaken a friendship for ... for anything else. We've never been lovers."

Maureen glared at her. "Say whatever you like. It's not going to make any difference now. I wouldn't take you back if you begged me."

She crawled off the bed. It was only then that Emerald realized that she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing. Horrified, she looked away. When she looked back again it was in time to see Maureen picking up a dildo that looked as if it might have been modeled after Goliath. "Don't you dare come near me with that thing!" she screamed when Maureen turned around and looked at her, smiling.

Maureen shrugged, slapping her palm with it. "It has to look like he did it."

Emerald let loose a scream like a police siren. It cut off abruptly when she slid down the bed and the rope tightened around her throat. For several moments, she struggled to gasp air, too frantic at first to realize she needed to push herself up the bed to loosen the rope around her neck. By the time the answer filtered through to her panicked mind, dark spots were swimming before her eyes.

Abruptly, the door swung open, crashing back against the wall so hard it bounced. "Freeze! Don't you so much as bat an eyelash!"

"Em! Somebody cut her loose, for God's sake!"

It was the last sound Emerald heard before darkness claimed her completely.

Chapter Nine

Someone was rocking her, stroking her cheek. Emerald gasped, clawing her way loose from the smothering folds of cloth around her face. The gasp sent pain lancing through her abused throat and for several moments panic threatened to overwhelm her as she struggled to breathe and swallow through a throat that felt as if it had swollen closed.

“Shh, baby. It’s all right. It’s me, Reece.”

She shuddered, but relaxed at the sound of his voice. “Get her?”

“Yeah. They got her. She’s gone. We need to get you to a hospital ... get you checked out. The paramedics are on the way, so just hold tight, baby.”

“It was her,” she managed to croak past her damaged throat.

“I know. The detective figured it out ... almost too late, but he figured it out. We can talk about it later. You don’t need to be trying to talk. Your throat’s in bad shape.”

Emerald pulled away enough to look around. She saw they were still in her bedroom. Someone—Reece she supposed—had wrapped her in a sheet. She was grateful for that. There were still cops moving around the room, collecting evidence, photographing the scene. “Why you here?” she said in a croaking whisper.

He stiffened. “Don’t be pissed with me, Em.”

She shook her head, but it made it swim. She dropped her forehead to his chest, closing her eyes. “Not.”

His arms tightened. “I couldn’t give up. I was totally pissed, but after I got to trying to see it from your point of view, I understood why you were so mad at me.” He let out a deep sigh. “I promised I wouldn’t do anything stupid to screw things up for us, but I really screwed up this time, didn’t I?”

Emerald was in no mood to spare him. She nodded.

“If I promised never to do it again, do you think you could give me another chance?”

“Can’t.”

“I made a mistake. You said you loved me. Can’t you at least try?”

With an effort, Emerald swallowed, gathering moisture into her dry mouth to try to speak. “You ... can’t ... promise,” she managed to say, trying to clarify.

“What if I promised to love, honor and cherish forever? In front of God and everybody?”

Startled, Emerald glanced up at him questioningly.

“Marry me?”

She frowned at him, torn between a surge of hopefulness and irritation that he’d picked the one time when she was least able to discuss the matter to ask her such an important question.

He looked alarmed. “Don’t say no. Just think about it, OK?”

She gave him a look. “Yes,” she managed to croak.

“Yes, you’ll think about it?”

“Marry you.”

He grinned. “You said yes?”

She nodded, smiled faintly. “Condition.”

He looked at her warily. “What?”

“Nuptial. Pre..Nup.”

He flushed. “I won’t ask you to sign one. I swear I hadn’t even considered it.”

“Want one.”

“You want a Pre-nup?” he asked incredulously.

“For you ... Don’t trust me. Want you to have.”

He hugged her tightly. “I don’t need it. I’m sorry. I don’t know how many ways I can say it, Em.”

“I want you to have it,” she said stubbornly.

The bustle of the arriving paramedics distracted them. Before they took her away, she squeezed his hand. “Promise?”

He looked distressed, but he nodded.

* * * *

Emerald woke to find Reece holding her hand. He was studying her fingers, tracing them. He leaned down and kissed her palm and she curled her fingers to caress his face.

He looked up at her, smiled a little crookedly. “You’ve been out of it. How’re you feeling?”

“Better,” she said, but her voice still came out as a croak and little more than a whisper.

“Do you remember what we were talking about last night?” he asked hesitantly.

She studied his face. “Yes.”

He seemed to relax. “You meant it?”

“All of it.”

He frowned. “I don’t feel comfortable about this, Em. I’m afraid it’ll ruin things for us.”

She gave him a look, but gripped his hand. “I don’t want you to have any doubts, Reece. That would be worse for us than making the agreement. I can’t say I think it’s romantic ... but I’d rather have it between us than have doubts between us.”

He scrubbed his face with his hands. “You’re not really going to forgive me, are you?”

“Some things take time. In time, I think I will. In time, maybe, you’ll learn to trust me and believe in me. I love you enough to try. If you love me as much as I love you, we’ll figure out a way to make it work. But I think it would be a mistake to even attempt to make a marriage work as long as you had doubts about me. I’m hoping a pre-nup will remove the doubts and give us a chance.”

He dropped the subject, but he looked miserable and uneasy.

“I’ve been lying here trying to figure out what happened the other night, wondering if it was some kind of nightmare brought on by the stuff they gave me to sleep. Or, rather, wondering if parts of it were. That was Maureen, though, wasn’t it?”

Reece sat forward. “It was. And, as close a call as it was, it was still a damned good thing she was so focused on you that she didn’t manage to get the phone hung up after you called 911. I don’t know if we’d have made it in time otherwise.”

Emerald shuddered. “How did you manage to arrive with the police?”

“I was with the detective at the time the call came in. I was uneasy about you so I figured, since you’d gotten so pissed off about me having someone watch you I’d just mention to the cops that I was afraid you’d be the next target.

“Turned out the detective had already deduced that. He told me that, once he’d become convinced it wasn’t me—which took him a while, in spite of my alibi—he decided it had to be somebody that was there at the time. He knew it couldn’t be a copycat—the MO was too close to be no more than a coincidence, but, except for the people directly involved in the previous crime, there was no way anybody could know the particulars.

“He checked out Mike, Jeffery and David—had them picked up and questioned, but the police couldn’t get anything out of them and were pretty convinced they didn’t know anything about the murders down here. There wasn’t a lot of forensic evidence the police here had to go by, but they had picked up one partial print on the last one and it didn’t match me ... or any of them.

“Since he met a dead end there, he started back tracking. At first, he was focusing on me ... on the theory that, if it wasn’t me, then somebody wanted to frame me and get me out of the way. That led him to the possibility that you were the reason they wanted me out of the way, so he started digging, looking at anybody that might be obsessing over you.

“When Maureen’s name popped up, he dismissed it at first. But he got to examining the crime scenes again and he realized there were a few little details that pointed to the possibility that the perp was a woman ... Things they’d missed before, or misinterpreted because they’d been certain it had to be a man.

“The problem was, he found out she’d left to go on vacation before the second murder occurred. He decided he’d have to drop her as a possibility, but, just to be on the safe side, he told them to check the partial against her prints. It looked like a possible match, so he put in a call to the police up near her cabin to pick her up. When they got to her cabin and searched it, they found out that she’d never arrived.

“By the time the detective got that information back, it was almost too late to do you any good ... but, as I said, the phone hadn’t been hung up. Ordinarily, the operator might have thought it was a prank, or a false alarm, but since there’d already been two murders, she had it traced and called it in.”

Emerald frowned. “It’s still hard to believe. I never even had a clue Maureen was a ... liked me that way.”

Reece frowned. “I’m not sure what Maureen is ... besides psychotic. I don’t know if she knows. The only thing that there’s no doubt of is that she was obsessed with you and convinced that you belonged to her. I think,

in her mind, she considered that the two of you were living together, as a couple ... even though the apartments were separate.”

“She told me she was doing it to teach me a lesson for cheating on her ... and to get even with you.” Emerald shuddered in revulsion. “I thought she was just nosy. She was always watching me, asking me about my day. And any time I even considered dating, she always managed to convince me I didn’t actually want to go out ... which wasn’t too hard because I was usually too busy to really consider it anyway.”

Reece frowned. “I thought you were waiting for me?”

Emerald rolled her eyes. “Don’t be an ass, Reece. We weren’t even seeing each other *before* all that happened. You wouldn’t speak to me after you were arrested, wouldn’t let me testify. I had no reason at all to expect that you’d ever be out ... if you’d served the full sentence And, even if I’d considered the possibility that you might get out, you didn’t give me any reason to think you’d be interested in looking me up when you did. I didn’t date because I was in love with you. If I’d met anybody that could’ve changed the way I felt about you, I wouldn’t have waited for somebody I never expected to come.”

“I was trying to protect you,” he said irritably. “Stupid as it sounds, I figured you’d be better off if I could keep you out of it ... and I couldn’t do that if I’d contacted you. Somebody would’ve gotten wind of it. I knew I was innocent. It never occurred to me ... until the trial was over, that there was any possibility of anything happening except that I’d get off. Then, after things quieted down, I figured I could look you up and we could do it right ... date, get to know each other.”

Emerald studied him a long moment and finally tugged on his hand. “Come here.”

He looked surprised, but leaned forward.

She smiled. “You’re going to have to get closer if you want a kiss.”

He got up abruptly and leaned over her, kissing her deeply, hungrily. When he broke the kiss, he propped his forehead against hers, nuzzling her nose with his own. “What do you say we fly out to Reno as soon as you get out and make it legal?”

Emerald put her arms around his neck. “You in a hurry?”

He grinned. “It took me eight years to get up the nerve, Em. Don’t you think that’s a long enough wait?”

The End