



## TREASURE HUNTERS

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## ALSO BY CAITLYN WILLOWS

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# TREASURE HUNTERS

BY

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TREASURE HUNTERS  
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# CHAPTER 1

Long fingers curled around the water goblet mesmerized Rika Kiley. She pressed her lips together to keep her tongue from tracing a circle around them. That was it. If he didn't make a move tonight, she would. They had known each other a month, first as business acquaintances then as dating material. It was time. It was past time.

Candlelight from the globe at the center of the table and the two set high on the wall caught the gold in Ryan Fletcher's dark brown hair. Rika visually traced each strand along its not-too-long path then gazed at the sharp facial angles now softened by shadow. His smoke-gray gaze clicked up to hers, sparkling with life and what she hoped was desire.

They were expressive, those eyes of his. She'd seen them in business, in play, and as they watched her. No one need doubt what the man was thinking. His demeanor might be poised, professional, but one look could send an errant employee scurrying away to right a wrong.

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*That's* what helped make Fletcher's a quality hotel resort. No screaming, no ranting, just orders given quietly with a smile and that look.

Rika would never forget the dinner party the first week of her assignment. One woman complained her roast turkey was cold. Not a complaint, really—more of a casual statement. Ryan's gaze zeroed in on the waiter, then on the cook in the kitchen alcove beyond. Before he could finish saying, "Please fix Mrs. Nelson's dish," the plate was replaced with a steaming one. Ryan smiled and thanked the men, but the smile never penetrated his eyes.

She'd listened outside the kitchen once the party departed, waiting for an explosion sure to come. It didn't. In fact, the only caution given from Ryan was to be watchful and to try to not let it happen again. It didn't matter if the food was hot when it left the kitchen. If the customer said it was cold, it was cold. The customer was always right. She'd seen those same qualities in his brothers.

That was how Rika started the first in her series of newspaper articles about Fletcher's. Now she was here with Ryan, having moved beyond business to the personal, hanging on every word, every movement. And to think she almost missed it.

Rika had pitched a fit when her editor had told her about the assignment. True, as a columnist for travel and social section of *The Sentinel*, it was her responsibility to cover a story on Fletcher's. But not during the holiday season when the demands from her family were the greatest. She'd been hoping for a little vacation time in order to deal with it.

All the pleading in the world wouldn't budge Art. So, for the week leading up to Thanksgiving and the week following, Rika became an extension of Ryan while Fletcher's prepared for their holiday season. She'd even wound up spending Thanksgiving at Fletcher's rather than with her family. They were kindred spirits that day—both choosing

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work over family. It turned out to be the best Thanksgiving Rika had ever had, if not the least stressful. At the end, when the job was over, when she was back in the lonely comfort of her very snug, one-bedroom apartment, one thing was certain—she missed his company.

Apparently the feeling was mutual. Just when she was debating whether or not to call him with some excuse about needing more information, he called her. Tack on two more weeks of dating and it was enough for her to know—this was definitely a man she wanted to share a bed with.

Tonight was the night. Yes. *Oh, yes!* She'd make sure of that, even if she had to tie him down to have him. *Now there was an image to fire a woman's lust.*

\* \* \*

Ryan watched the light glint off Rika's emerald eyes. Her looks could still manage to catch him off guard, even after a month. Not her beauty, although she was definitely an attractive woman, but the whole sense of her—self-possessed, confident. The first glimpse of her as she had slipped her long legs out of her Geo Metro caught his interest. Her stride up to the building boasted of professionalism. But the second her hand grasped his in a welcoming handshake, he was caught. Just the thought of being around her spawned an instant erection, one he'd carried constantly for the last month.

And to think he'd almost missed the chance of meeting her at all. If Matt hadn't chickened out at the last minute, Ryan never would have known she existed.

Ryan's rule of never allowing his business and personal lives to intersect had been hard to keep. Each day he had tossed back the covers, knowing he'd spend it with her. Each night, he'd beat off twice in the shower wishing it was her long fingers wrapped around his stiff cock. He kept any body contact to a minimum—the barest of touches to her back when he led her through a door, a brush against her when he



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leaned forward to show her something—when all he wanted to do was rake his fingers through her long, copper-colored curls and kiss her hard and deep. To meld their bodies as one.

He'd waited one full day after their business association ended. Okay, he waited six hours. The kiss was well worth waiting for. Having crossed that threshold, Ryan forced himself to hold back. Rika wasn't a one-night stand. She was a long-term relationship. He wanted to be sure—wanted *her* to be sure before they shared a bed—no matter how much it killed him.

Ryan had just run out of time. His body was ready to explode from wanting her. That he could deal with—it made the eventual union supreme. But his enemy, time, was forcing the issue. In two weeks, just after the New Year, he'd be on his way to Maui to help his family establish a Fletcher's there. The trip would last a good six months. He had two weeks to make Rika his. Two weeks to build a relationship to withstand the distance test. Two weeks to bond in such a way, she might even consider coming to visit him there.

Tonight was the night. The stage was set. A Christmas bouquet of flowers delivered to her office. Romantic dinner in a quiet, dim corner of her favorite Italian restaurant. A bottle of her favorite wine chilling in the refrigerator back at her apartment. Five condoms miraculously stuffed in his wallet—yes, he was *that* horny. There was no doubt how this night was going to end. Not the least.

Ryan braced his forearms on the red-checked tablecloth and leaned closer. "That was a great article on the San Diego Museum of Art."

Her eyes sparkled with her smile, like emeralds in the moonlight. "You read it?"

"Of course. After the series you did on Fletcher's, I'm a fan. From now on, if there's a Rika Kiley byline, I'm reading it."

She curled her fingers over his. "Wow...my first fan."

Ryan laughed and squeezed her hand. "I doubt that. But I would

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swear you've missed your calling. You should be doing PR work, not working as a reporter."

The smile froze. She cocked her head to one side. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Ah," — he tapped the air with his index finger — "but you find the idea intriguing."

"Well...somewhat. Challenges, new adventures are always intriguing. But PR? I don't have any experience. I wouldn't know who to approach."

"You're a natural. As for who to approach...Fletcher's could hire you."

Rika eased back. The lust he'd seen earlier dimmed.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.* Ryan wanted to kick himself. He knew what she was thinking. It was plastered all over her face. She thought he was trying to schmooze her into working for them. If he didn't think fast, this evening was a wash.

"Anyone would hire you. Or you could start your own company. Or start small, working on the side."

The words came out one top of each other. He sounded like a blithering idiot, but he just couldn't help it. Ryan couldn't stand the thought that he'd just screwed up royally. He was doing some serious backtracking.

Rika started laughing and pressed her fingers against his lips. "Enough."

His eyebrows inched closer with his worried frown. Ryan kissed her fingers and drew her hand into his. "Are we about to have our first fight?" He turned her hand over and kissed the underside of her wrist.

Rika's intake of breath shouted to his aching cock.

*Where the hell is that check?*

"I...I've just spent the last month with you, two weeks of which were with you at work. You are the most direct man I've ever met. If

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you wanted me to work for Fletcher's, you'd have come right out and asked, not spent two more weeks going for the romantic approach."

He dropped another kiss to her wrist, and then draped it around his neck as she slid close to him in the booth.

"I've never been particularly fond of heavy necking in public." Her free hand drifted between his suit jacket and shirt. Ryan longed to yank it right to his crotch. "But I think I have more sympathy for them now."

"Do you?" He dusted his hand up her inner thigh. Thank goodness she wore a short black velvet dress.

Ryan also blessed the dim light and dared to venture further. Rika parted her thighs, giving him full access to the heat at the top. She dug her short nails into his back as he reached his goal. The crotch of her pantyhose was already soaked.

"God, you feel like a furnace," he whispered on a ragged breath.

"I..I..."

Even in the candlelight, he could see her cheeks flush. "I want you, too." He brushed his thumb against her.

She squeezed her thighs, capturing his hand in their steely hold. "If you do that again, we really might make a spectacle of ourselves."

"And here I am wondering if anyone will really notice if I pull you astride my lap."

"Oh, they'll notice all right. I'm not a quiet lover."

Ryan jerked around, lifting his hand as he did so. "Check...please."

\* \* \*

Rika tried not to laugh. It was impossible. Just knowing he really did crave her as much as she did him, made her so happy she could bust. It would be a small miracle if they made it back to her place before giving in. Five miles felt like five hundred.

His smile to the waiter belied his impatience to leave. He tucked payment into the leather holder, no doubt tipping generously as he always did.

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“Ready?”

He slipped from the booth, tucking his jacket closed as he stood. But not before Rika got a good glimpse of what he was trying to hide. Her pulse thudded in her ears.

“I’ve been ready for a while.” She used what she hoped was a sexy sounding voice and brushed up against him as she stood.

Ryan snaked his arm around her waist and cupped her ass. “Then I promise we’ll make up for lost time. I don’t do one-night stands, Rika.”

She forced herself to swallow. “Neither do I. I’ve wanted you from the start, but I appreciate the—”

“Build up?” He cocked an eyebrow.

Rika laughed. “Oh, yeah. I hope I was worth—”

“The agony?”

“Stop that.” She smacked her palm into his rock hard chest as she giggled. “Let’s get out of here before I give in to the urge to sprawl myself wide open on the table.”

He feigned a groan then guided her from the restaurant.

When they stepped beneath the outside canopy, a cold breeze blasted into them, tightening Rika’s already aching nipples. Ryan whipped off his jacket and tossed it around her shoulders. Rain spit against them. It looked like a very nice night to be snuggled under the covers with the man of her dreams.

He tucked her into the cove of his arms while they waited for the valet to bring Ryan’s Grand Cherokee around. He cringed at the sound of tires squealing against wet pavement. His arms tensed.

It was symptomatic of living where there was very little rain. Oils built up on the streets, diminishing traction. Add to that a driver with little to no experience with inclement weather and you had problems. The accident rate exploded during rainstorms.

“I haven’t heard the crunch of metal or any thuds into concrete, so you’re probably all right.”

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Ryan shook his head. "I can only hope."

"Who's watching your pride and joy while you're in Hawaii?"

"Dad's thinking about buying one. I'm going to let him test it out. He'll treat it like it was his own. Matt and Kevin..." He shrugged.

"I hear you." She gave a light laugh. "But I'd trust my brother before I'd trust my parents. Those two are like maniacs when they drive. It's enough to give you a heart attack. My older sister isn't much better. But Andy is Mr. Safety."

"Much like his sister, Miss Responsibility. And that's meant as a compliment, not a dig."

"Taken as such." She tilted a nod his way. "I thank you very much. I pride myself on being responsible." Heaven knows, someone had to be. Becky took after their parents too much—flighty, scatter-brained, disorganized. Her husband wasn't much better. Rika could never understand how people could live that way—for today and screw tomorrow.

Ryan lifted her chin on the pads of his fingers. "What happened to the hot chick who's going to ravish me later?"

Rika laughed. "Sorry. I let family garbage drag me down. I promise you, she's still here...and still damned hot."

Her lips parted for his. The sound of a vehicle coming around the corner pulled them apart. The valet pulled the dark green Cherokee to a smooth stop before them.

Ryan whipped open the door, ushering Rika into the warmth inside. She watched him slip the young man a tip before he dashed to the driver's side. He'd barely closed the door when the sky opened up.

"We're going to get drenched from the car to my apartment."

Ryan flashed her a naughty grin. "I wasn't planning to stay in my clothes long anyway." After a wink, he shifted into drive and pulled onto the street.

Rika appreciated his attention to the road. She had to admit she

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hadn't found him lacking in anything so far. Hopefully, sex was going to be the icing on the cake. She eased into the soft seat, soaking in the comfort and the treat of space. Her little Metro felt like a cracker box compared to this. But it was cheap and got her where she was going.

Ryan avoided the crowded freeway and cruised down side streets to get to her apartment complex. Like just about every other apartment dweller in San Diego, she was crowded into a prohibitively expensive closet. Ryan's wasn't much better from what she understood. But the two-story building in which she lived had a lovely garden courtyard, a small perk few others had. Ryan reached the place in record time. He pulled in behind her little car, trying to tug up close under the portion of carport allotted to her. Looked like they were still going to have to battle the rain.

As he twisted off the key, Rika touched his arm. "I know you like to be the gentleman, but it's pouring out there. I can get my own door. The sooner we get inside—"

"The sooner you can have your way with me."

That devilish grin of his cut straight to her heart. This one was definitely a keeper. She grabbed his face in both hands and slipped her lips over his. One arm tugged her close while his tongue twined with hers.

He broke off on a deep groan. "Thank God for that cold rain. I need something to slow me down."

Rika butted her forehead to his. "I doubt that. I suspect you are as meticulous in your love-making as you are with everything else."

"Boy, are you in for a shock." He laughed. "You'll be lucky if I don't rip your hose to shreds and do you up against the door once we cross that threshold."

Heat pooled to her clit at that thought. No one had ever been that hungry for her before. She wanted to beg him to do it—take her hard and fast. Coherent thought, much less speech, wasn't possible.

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“Ready?” he asked.

Rika was conscious of nodding as she wrapped her fingers around the door handle. She shoved her shoulder into it. A blast of cold wind and rain took her breath away. Slamming the door shut, she raced for the steps leading to the second floor. Ryan was right behind her, holding his jacket over them as they made a run for it. She seated the key in a single thrust, twisted open the knob, and they were inside...and dripping wet.

“I’ll get us some towels.” She tossed her purse to the nearby chair and headed for the bathroom. “I want those clothes off by the time I get back, Mr. Fletcher.”

“Only if you come out of there naked, Miss Kiley,” he shouted back.

“You can count on that.”

\* \* \*

Ryan squeezed his dick into submission. At the rate he was going, he’d be coming the second he was inside her. As tempting as quick release was, he really wanted to have more to say for himself in this area than that. He wanted to give her a ride she’d grow horny just thinking about. Considering how on the edge he was, Ryan thought it prudent to leave something on between him and nirvana. He wanted to make her come first, to feel her release beneath his hand, to watch the rapture on her face, before giving in to the pounding thrusts his body craved.

He tucked his jacket over one of the stools at the island between the kitchen and living area, then peeled off his shirt and put it over the other stool. Rika had as much elbow room in her place as he did in his. Looked like she’d nested a little better than he had, though. Her furniture consisted of what his mother would call “early single girl.” In fact, it looked like it had come right out of the sixties. Rika had indicated she’d bought it secondhand. Ryan didn’t doubt that for a

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minute. At least it was clean and sturdy, even if he questioned the choice of green plaid.

The bathroom was off her bedroom and that was it. Just like his, it took less than a minute to look through the whole place. Barefooted and down to trousers, Ryan retrieved the bottle of chardonnay and two glasses from her kitchen. As he popped the cork and poured, he noticed the message light flashing on her answering machine on the counter.

"You've got a phone message waiting," he called out.

"Caller ID say from who?" she shouted back.

He pressed the button. *K.D. Kiley*. "Looks like your folks."

"It'll keep. Probably Mom. She wants to go shopping tomorrow...again." She walked from the bedroom draped in a towel that just covered her butt. She dusted its mate through her long red curls.

Ryan's jaw dropped. He knew she had long legs—hell, she was five-seven—but this was his first full glimpse of them. They were smooth, shapely, and sprinkled with a kiss of freckles just like the bridge of her nose. And all he wanted was to get between them and fuck her until they collapsed, dehydrated and exhausted.

He took a slow sip of wine. "God, you're beautiful."

Rika passed him a towel and reached for her glass. "I was thinking the same thing of you."

\* \* \*

She couldn't take her eyes off his chest. Touching the hard angles was nothing compared to seeing the real thing. He had a smattering of hair sprinkled between his pecs. It grew denser as it reached his navel, then disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers. What looked like a foot-long erection pulsed behind his zipper.

Rika snagged her wine and wandered around to his side of the counter. "You're still wearing your trousers." She sipped.

"You're wearing a towel."



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“I’m shy.”

“So am I.”

“You are not,” she said with a laugh.

“Nope, but I figured there was a better chance of me hanging on more than five seconds if I kept my pants on.”

Rika closed the short gap between them. “But...how can you possibly resist my charms?” Then she did what she’d been longing to do—she palmed his erection.

His nostrils flared with his sharp intake of breath. She reveled in the power while she quivered with the need to have him buried deep inside her cunt. She gently massaged the rock hard ridge. His eyes closed on another, more shaky breath.

“I want to see you.” She dotted kisses around one of his taut nipples. “I want to feel you all hard and big, pounding inside me.”

“If you keep doing that, you won’t be able to look at this counter again in the same light. As it is, I’m beginning to wonder if I brought enough condoms with me.”

“If not, I bought a box for the occasion.” Rika eased his zipper down beneath her inquisitive hand. A low groan rumbled from his throat. “Will that be enough for tonight?” She snaked her nose down his torso.

“Geez, woman!” Ryan caught a handful of hair and gently pulled her up.

Rika tugged her towel away and pressed herself against him. “I’m burning up for you, Ryan. Please don’t make me wait any longer. Please...give me what I need, what only you can give.”

Now Rika knew what an animal in heat felt like. She wanted him to take her right here on the floor. To fuck her until she couldn’t walk, then haul her off to bed and make her his over and over again until any man who’d ever existed was permanently wiped from her memory. She needed Ryan like she needed air to breathe. Somehow, in this last

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month, he'd become part of her existence. They only needed this union to finally blend their souls. It sounded corny, it sounded crazy, but that was how she felt.

She caressed his long, hard dick once more. "Would a gentleman make a lady beg for it?"

He squeezed her ass in his big hands. "Would a lady make a gentleman come in his pants?" Without warning, he seized her by the waist and hoisted her to the counter.

"Open your legs, sweetheart. Let me see your kitty."

He didn't give her much choice. Long fingers kneaded her thighs, coaxing them further and further apart. Rika had to admit, she loved his dominance. Leaning back on her elbows, she gave him full access.

Ryan draped her calves over his shoulders. "My poor sweetheart, look how swollen you are. I know how badly you need to come." He kissed his way up her thighs. "God, I love the scent of you. Fresh...sweet..." His tongue flicked across her clit.

"Oooh!"

"I know, sweetheart. I know how good it feels."

Rika swore she could come just hearing him talk. "I want you."

"I want you, too, honey. But I also want you to remember our first time." He circled her clit once more.

She closed her eyes as she cried out, helpless to fight what she so desperately needed. There wasn't a place he didn't touch with that nimble tongue of his. Each fold was mapped to perfection before he swooped to the peak and twirled it to the pinnacle of release. Rika writhed beneath him, unashamed let him know how very much she enjoyed the attention. She longed for his fingers inside her, but they cupped her buttocks. She wished for his cock, but it was still tucked away.

"Oh, Ryan, please!"

He answered with a guttural sound as he sucked her clit between his

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lips, flicking his tongue around and around.

Rika's hips lifted with the force of her orgasm. He hung on until the pleasure subsided, then dropped more kisses to her thighs and stomach in her after-throes. She'd never felt more satisfied in her life.

"You'd better not fall asleep on me." He hauled her upright and into his arms.

She laughed lightly and dropped her arms around his neck. "I feel like a cat in front of a warm fire."

\* \* \*

Damned if she didn't look extra sexy now. Ryan scooped her in his arms. He wanted to make her come a second time, but he just couldn't wait. Listening to those sweet sounds she'd made, he'd had a hell of a time holding back as it was.

She traced her tongue around his ear as he carried her into the bedroom. When he placed her on the bed, she nibbled her way down his neck, then to his chest. Ryan fumbled for his wallet and the condoms inside. Then her teeth grazed his nipple. He sucked in a gasp as he fought to stay on his feet. No woman had ever...

He sucked in another sharp breath as she twirled the nipple between her teeth and flicked the tip beneath her tongue. Long fingers spread fire down to the waistband of his trousers. In seconds the zipper was down. Rika released a muffled groan as his cock fell into her hands. She raked her mouth down to it.

"Man alive, you're gorgeous," she whispered.

His pants and boxers were at his ankles. Ryan kicked them aside. He was torn between tossing her back to the mattress, and seeing how far she'd go. One loop of her tongue around the shiny, purple head took any decision away. It felt like a thousand feathers danced around his dick. He raked his fingers through her long, red curls and indulged in gentle thrusts as she licked and sucked, licked and sucked. If her pussy was as hot as her mouth... He groaned as she cupped his balls.

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“You’re gonna make me come, honey,” he gasped out.

Rika pulled back on a hard suck that nearly pulled the cum from him. “Isn’t that the point?” Mischief danced in her green eyes.

“I want to fuck you. I *need* to fuck you.”

She crawled back on the bed, that naughty little smile taunting him. “Then give it to me.” Those nimble fingers of hers drifted to her nipples. One hand teased the tight little beads while the other traveled to her clit.

“I need you,” she whispered.

God, she was hot! Ryan snatched his trousers from the floor, yanked the wallet from the pocket. Condom retrieved, he tossed everything aside and ripped open the packet. She danced her toes up his thigh. Seating the condom, Ryan grabbed her feet, spread her thighs wide, and crawled in between.

He nudged his dick against her swollen clit. Rika arched against him and he seated himself in a hard thrust. Her tight walls contracted around him, caressing him. Ryan fought the rush and shoved his hand between them. Deep inside her heat, he watched the pleasure build on her face as he pulled her toward climax once more. As the moment exploded, he gave in to the long, deep, vigorous thrusts he loved.

Rika wrapped her legs around him, digging her heels into his buttocks, riding him as much as he rode her. Fire coursed to his pelvis, then his balls, then...

Loosing a long groan, he cupped her ass tightly as he came hard. Rika clutched him to her, opening herself to all he had to give.

They collapsed to the kisses and caresses of after-love while their breathing slowly subsided to normal.

Ryan brushed his thumb over her silky cheek. “Suppose you can wrangle a week’s vacation out of that editor of yours? There are a couple of beaches in Hawaii with our names on them.”

Her eyes brightened. “What about *your* work?”

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He shrugged a shoulder. “Man can’t work day and night, especially if he has a beautiful woman waiting for him.” He danced his other hand up her ribs. “Besides, I was thinking a weekend back here at least once month might be in order. I hate the idea of being away from you for six months.”

Rika laced her fingers around his neck. “I’d like that very much. Who knows? Maybe I can manage a long weekend every month, too. I’ve got a little tucked away...and there’s always plastic.”

Ryan wanted to cheer. They were on the same page. Not that he liked the idea of her going into debt for him. In fact, he’d see she didn’t. But—damn—she wanted to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her. This was it. She was the one. He knew it!

“Why don’t you grab our wine and we can plan.” She dropped kisses along his jaw.

Ryan captured her lips in a deep kiss, then pulled away. “Be right back.” He kissed her all the way down her body.

After tossing the spent condom in the trash can beside her dresser, Ryan walked on to the kitchen. The telephone blasted out a ring, startling him.

“Want me to get that?” he asked.

“No, let it go. It’s probably just Mom about going shopping tomorrow. Mom can truly shop ’til she drops.”

He grabbed the bottle of wine and their glasses, listening as the answering machine picked up. There was a choked sound, then a man’s voice.

“Damn it, Rika. Where the hell are you? It’s Andy. Mom and Dad...” He smothered what sounded like a sob. “Becky...Dan... There was a car wreck. They’re dead, Rika. They’re all dead.”

Ryan stared in dumbstruck silence for what seemed like hours, searching for the words to tell the woman he was falling in love with news no one should have to hear.

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“What’s taking so long?” she called out. “Are you talking to my mom?”

He wanted to cry. Setting the wine aside, he returned to the bedroom. Rika sat up the second she saw him. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Ryan sat beside her, pulling her hand into his, forcing himself to meet her gaze. “Honey, that was Andy...”

\* \* \*

Rika sat on the edge of her parents’ bed and fingered the diamond solitaire necklace at her throat—a Christmas gift from Ryan. More guilt. She hadn’t gotten him a thing. It was all she could do to make sure the kids had what they needed for Christmas. He’d brushed it off by saying she’d had much more important things to worry about, like five children who were suddenly under her guardianship. If only he knew how bad things really were.

She blinked back tears. That was something she was determined to hide from him. Knowing Ryan as she now did, he’d try to fix it all. That was hardly fair to him.

He’d been a godsend to her these last two weeks—helping her with funeral arrangements, dealing with the parade of people and sympathetic phone calls, sitting by her side in court while she got guardianship of her sister, youngest brother, nephew, and two nieces. He’d even had their Christmas dinner catered by Fletcher’s. Everywhere she went, everything she had to do, all she needed was to turn and his shoulder was there.

Ryan loved her. He didn’t have to say it, Rika just knew. She loved him, too. That’s why it made this so much harder to do. She had no choice.

“Ryan’s here.”

Rika glanced up at her twenty-one-year-old brother. People didn’t believe she and Andy were related. His hair was golden brown, his eyes

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a brown that merely hinted at green depths. The only other sibling who'd had red hair was Becky, and Becky was gone. She hadn't even passed that trait on to her three children. Rika was the odd one now. All the rest looked like Andy.

She had to protect him, too. He deserved the same opportunities Rika and Becky had had in life. He didn't need to know Rika had spent every dime, and then some, on hospital bills and the funerals. The fools hadn't even had medical insurance.

"Thanks."

"You're going to do something stupid, aren't you?"

She wanted to laugh. God knew, she wanted to laugh. The truth hurt too much. "Yes, I probably am."

"Then maybe you need to do it at his place. I can watch things here."

Rika shook her head. She'd made her decision, painful though it was. It was best to get it over with. She forced herself to stand, then prayed her legs would hold her. "I'll talk to him on the patio."

Andy muttered something under his breath. Rika strongly suspected he was calling her an idiot and lacing a few curse words in there as well. If he only knew how much this was breaking her heart.

Blinking back tears, she walked into a living room sprawled with bodies. Ryan sat in her father's recliner, flanked by her young nieces. Kristi and Amy adored him. What child wouldn't? He talked to them on their level, paid attention to what they had to say. She'd never in a million years forget how they'd cuddled under his arms after the funeral, telling him their fears, crying until they'd fallen asleep.

Yep, she was stupid all right. But how fair was it to ask him to take on this burden?

He smiled when she entered the room. That smile faltered when he saw the look on her face. He knew. Rika buried her face in her hands and started to cry. In an instant, his arms were around her. He kissed

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the top of her head and drew her out the back door.

"You're scaring the hell out of me, honey. Please don't say what I think you're going to say."

That made her cry all the more. "I have to, Ryan. Relationships take time and work—"

"But I—"

"Please don't say it. Don't make this harder than it is." She burrowed deeper into his arms, weeping against his chest. "I've got five children to take care of. How do I possibly find time for..."

"I'm there for you, Rika. I can help. We can do this."

She glanced up at the pain in his eyes and damned the light from the kitchen window. "You'll be in Hawaii for six months. I'll be here. I can't just pick up and go. This can't work."

"And I say it can. Damn it, I don't want this to end. I need you. I want you. I l—"

She clamped her fingers over his lips. "Please...don't. It's not fair to you to ask you to take a back seat. It's not fair to you to ask you to put up with all of this."

He kissed her fingers and pulled her hand into his. "Even if I want to?"

"It won't work. Even the best of established relationships would have a hell of a time. You'll be gone for six months. It's best to end it now."

"Just like that."

She forced herself to nod. "It kills me to say it, but...yes."

"This isn't over, Rika. It can work. It will work."

If he kept this up, she'd cave. Why couldn't he understand it was better to get this over rather than drag the heartache out?

"Give me a chance. Give us a chance." He kissed the curve of her neck at that spot he knew weakened her resolve. Desire welled up with her sigh. "Matt or Kevin can take over the job in Hawaii."



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Rika forced her senses back in order. “You leave tomorrow. How is that fair to them to have them uproot their lives and families at the last minute?” Reluctantly, she stepped from the warmth of his arms. “You have responsibilities just like I do, and people who’ve depended on you a lot longer than I have. Please...just go.”

She reached to unclasp the necklace. His hands stopped her.

“Don’t. There’s enough pain in my heart right now without you doing that.”

Tears drifted down her face. Ryan kissed her lips, then brushed by her and left. Rika waited until she heard his Jeep start up, then sank to the patio chair and cried what was left of her heart out.

She didn’t know how long she sat there in the cool night air—long after Andy and their next younger sister, Robyn, had put the little ones to bed. She just didn’t have the will to move. Her heart had walked out the door with Ryan. Yes, it was her doing, but that made it all the worse—not only had she broken her own heart, but that of a wonderful man. She heard the back door open and half prayed he stood there. It was Robyn instead.

A clear match to Andy, the seventeen-year-old held out the cordless. “Ryan’s on the phone.”

Rika’s shaking fingers wrapped around it. Robyn ducked back inside.

“You don’t give up easily, do you?”

“Not when there’s every reason not to. We’re good together.”

He was so right about that. “With everything the way it is, I just don’t see how we can survive the time and distance...for one thing. For the other—”

“Let me prove to you we can weather this. Every relationship has its tests. Ours just came a little sooner than we might have liked.”

“How can you prove—”

“Find a private room. Go in it and lock the door.”

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He was going to wear down what little resistance she had left by talking. She should hang up now and end it. It seemed too cruel an act. Ryan deserved better than that.

"All right." Back inside, she debated on whether to use the bathroom or her parents' room. With only one bathroom for all of them, the bedroom was the better option for a few minutes of privacy. Ignoring Andy and Robyn, she walked inside then shut and locked the door behind her.

"Are you there?" he asked.

"Yes." Her voice came out on a ragged sigh.

"Is the door locked?"

"Yes."

"No chance of interruptions?"

"The children are asleep. Andy and Robyn are still up."

"Good... Touch your breasts for me, honey."

Rika gasped. "I...I—"

"Close your eyes and touch them. Pretend your hands are mine. Pretend my lips are around your nipples."

She sank to her knees. "My bra—"

"Unhook it. You know how you love my hands on your tits."

"I do," she breathlessly replied. One hand shook as she released the hook. Once free, she closed her eyes and cupped her breast.

"Tell me how it feels, sweetheart."

"Soft, hot. It...it wants your mouth."

"And it's there, wrapped around your light brown nipple." He sucked in a breath. "God, I love how it gets hard under my tongue. I love how you arch into my mouth, begging for more with those sweet sounds you make."

Rika swallowed her shyness. "And your dick feels so hard against my...against my..."

"Say it, sweetheart. Say how much your pussy wants my cock."

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“Is it in your hand? Are you stroking it slowly?”

“Just like you would, honey. Touch your clit. Play with it. Tell me how sweet and swollen it is.”

Rika shoved her hand into her jeans. Her hips lifted to meet her. “I’m so wet.”

“Who makes you wet?”

She sucked in a breath as she slowly massaged her clit. “You, Ryan. You make me wet and horny. I...I want you fucking me all the time. Are you hard for me?”

“Always. I’m going to come fast, honey. That’s what you do for me. But I want to wait for you. I want to hear you come. I want us to come together.”

“I’m close. I’m so close.”

“Do it, sweetheart. Give your kitty what it wants.”

Her fingers swirled faster. “I’m going to come...now.” The moment exploded on her. Rika bit back the urge to cry out. Hearing him come on the other end of the line heightened her release. The feeling subsided by small degrees.

“I love you, Rika,” he said through pants of breath. “I love you and I’m not going to let you go. Give us time, honey. Please.”

“I love you, Ryan, so much. But—”

“No buts, sweetheart. Time. Please.”

She found herself nodding, then realized he couldn’t see. “Time...okay. But you’re going to have one hell of a long distance phone bill.”

“You’re worth it. Think I’ll see about getting us headsets.”

She laughed lightly. Maybe they could get beyond this. Ryan being gone might work to her benefit. She’d be able to get things under control without him seeing her implode. “I should come over and give you a proper send off. Think you’re up to it?”

“I’m crushed you’d ask that.”

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“Yeah...I’ll bet. I’m on my way.”

Rika punched the off key and stared at the phone. A lot could happen in six months. She was panicked, that’s all. There was no reason to drag Ryan down with her. She could handle this just fine. He’d never need to know.

## CHAPTER 2

*Six months later*

Rika sorted coins on the bare floor of the bedroom she now shared with Robyn. A tendril of hair drifted before her eyes, taunting her. Time was up and so was this façade she'd been trying to hold up for the last six months. How in the hell was she possibly going to explain to Ryan that she'd been lying to him all this time? That things weren't all right? In six hours, they were going to come face to face for the first time in four months. He was sure to see the lie in her eyes the second he saw her. So much for her end in what was supposed to be an equal and honest relationship.

At least she'd bought herself some time. He'd gotten back late last night and had wanted to come right over. By some grace she surely didn't deserve, Rika had managed to hold him off until tonight. They were all meeting at the cabanas in front of the Fletcher Resort.

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Hopefully, she'd be able to ease him into the situation a little better, explain why she hadn't been truthful. He'd be pissed, but...

But nothing. He'd be pissed. She could hear the argument now. They were supposed to be a couple. They were supposed to be supporting each other. How could he support her if she wasn't honest? Somehow she had to make him realize she hadn't intended for it to go this far. She truly hadn't.

At first, Rika had thought she had things under control. But one thing after the other piled up until it was a snarled mess. He shouldn't have to bail her out. This wasn't his problem. Hell, it wasn't even hers. It was her irresponsible parents and sister.

She shoved her hair behind her ear and continued counting.

"Do we have enough yet?"

Rika's gaze clicked up into a pair of expectant brown eyes. She tried her best to maintain her patience, but it wasn't easy. This was the third time she'd been interrupted.

"Amy, I'm still counting, and I'll never find out if the three of you don't quit bothering me," she told the five-year-old.

"Maybe Robyn and Andy will come back with lots of money from the can place," she said with all the optimism youth allows.

Rika gave her a half-hearted smile. "Maybe so. Now please, go play and let me count. And tell the others to stay out."

Happy to oblige, Amy skipped away, her doll tucked under her arm.

Rika shook her head and rolled up some quarters. It never should have come to this—the seven of them having to struggle this way. Reduced to recycling cans and bottles, and scraping together coins just to spend a weekend at the beach. True, Ryan paid for the cabanas. But she couldn't go there without offering something—food seemed like a good idea. He'd insisted otherwise since part of the weekend was a welcome home for him and a party to celebrate the new branch of Fletcher's. She bargained him down to breakfast, then prayed she have

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enough money for breakfast, sun-screen, swimsuits for growing kids...the list grew with each breath.

Rika was damn angry at the cruel twist of fate that put them in this situation.

Responsible adults, they'd called themselves. She'd gotten a wry chuckle out of that phrase since Christmas. Their wills were a joke. Each couple left all they owned to their children. What they owned was nothing. They hadn't even had the foresight to keep life insurance, not even on the mortgage on the house. And she was still trying to pay off their hospital bills. Her sister and brother-in-law didn't own a house, so Rika was able to sell what she didn't need of their furniture and at least get the security deposit back on the rental. That helped her keep up the two mortgages on this place.

Her brother-in-law had no relatives. The elderly aunt who'd raised him had passed on the previous year. Dan and Becky had quickly blown what little inheritance the old woman left. They'd all lived for the moment, not for the future, and to hell with the consequences.

That left Rika to deal with it all. Bills, five kids...a big responsibility for anyone. At times, like now, it was almost too much to handle, even with Andy's occasional help.

Holding together a family and holding down a job occupied all her time. Life was all work...no play except for those naughty phone calls from Ryan. He'd kept her sane these last six months. He'd even thrown a little Fletcher PR work her way. He'd never know how much that extra cash meant. Well...he'd know soon enough. In Ryan, she knew she'd find an equal partner to help her with all this. She just couldn't bring herself to drag him down in the mud with her. Tonight would tell. He'd know all. Hell, considering the shrew she'd become, he'd likely beat feet and haul ass after this weekend.

Shamefully, a part of her longed to take Ryan and run from it all and never come back. But she knew she could never do that. She'd

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never run from responsibility before, and she couldn't, she wouldn't now. Besides, who would take care of the little ones? They needed some family security.

*Who could love them more than shrill, bitchy Rika?* she asked herself.

She parked her elbow on her knee and covered her eyes. She was so tired all the time, so worried about everything, it was no wonder she'd grown into the biggest bitch the world had ever seen. What she wouldn't give for more than two hours sleep a night. Poor Ryan. Much as she wanted to make love to him tonight, Rika didn't think she had the energy. It was spent trying to keep their heads above water, just like every other day.

A heavy sigh took her back to the coins. Andy had offered many times to quit school and help out at home. But he had only one year of college left. Rika wouldn't hear of it. He deserved the same education she'd gotten. So did Robyn. With high school graduation looming next year, Robyn had the promise of a full scholarship right at her fingertips...if she kept her grades up. If she didn't?

Well, Rika would figure something out. She sure didn't want to see Robyn walk Becky's path—pregnant at eighteen and not seeming to have a care in the world. Becky was definitely her parents' child. And even if Becky did give birth to three beautiful kids, Rika never had much respect for her sister's lackadaisical approach to life. Robyn had great potential and Rika was determined to see the young woman lived up to it.

Rika blinked back tears. She'd fight to her last breath to see the kids were brought up responsibly. It was up to her to make the right decisions to prepare them for the world and all the wonders...and horrors it presented. They all deserved a chance and were going to have it. The children were her responsibility. The law said so. If it meant hardship for her, so be it. And even if they were crammed into a three-



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bedroom house, at least they were together.

“They’re back.” Amy zoomed into the room and danced around.

“Amy, no!”

Too late. Amy’s doll clipped the stacks of coins, scattering them across the floor.

Amy froze for a second or two while tears puddled in her big, brown eyes, then she darted from the room.

Rika stared at the mess before her, as her own tears clouded her vision. This time she let them fall.

She heard footsteps and looked up to see Andy and Robyn standing in the doorway. With their golden brown heads cocked toward each other and their brown eyes, the two reminded Rika more of inquisitive puppies than humans. The thought made her want to laugh, but her chuckle came out in a sob.

They slid to the floor beside her.

“I can’t believe you’re still counting out change.” Andy wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “Why isn’t Donny in here helping you? This is partly for his birthday. Personally, I think we should beat his ass instead of take him to the beach. Dad wouldn’t have put up with his shit and we all know it.”

Rika wiped away her tears with the heel of her hand. “Andy, please...your language has gotten atrocious.”

“Please, hell.” He shoved himself to his feet and marched to the door. “Donny, get your lazy ass in here and help. Kristi, Evan, get in here, too. You’re old enough to count. Amy, you sit on the bed and stay out of the way.”

Still sniffing and clutching her doll, Amy poked her head in the doorway. “Do you still love me, Aunt Rika?”

Rika forced a smile and opened her arms. “Of course I do.”

Amy scurried to her, skirting the coins. As they cuddled, the older blond duplicates of Amy sat down to help. Donny meandered in behind

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them, then slumped to the floor. He bent his head to his task, never once acknowledging his older brother's gruff order to him.

They worked in silence, counting and rolling the coins in paper wrappers. A half hour later, they had one-hundred-fifty dollars neatly packaged.

"And we've got fifty bucks from the cans and bottles," Robyn told them.

"Is it enough?" Eight-year-old Kristi clasped her hands under her chin while she waited for an answer.

Rika nodded, slowly at first, then more surely. "More than enough." If she shopped carefully, using double coupons and rebates, they might even have enough for two weeks of groceries in addition to the stuff needed for the weekend.

She stood and stretched her back. "I'm going to the bank and get paper for these coins. You guys start packing. And don't forget sunscreen. We'll leave as soon as I get back."

The younger ones cheered. Donny merely shuffled out of the room to park himself in front of the television once more.

Rika watched Andy clench his fist, and put a hand on his shoulder. "It'll be all right. He's at that age. Losing Mom, Dad, and Becky was hard on him."

He snorted. "Yeah, and it was a piece of cake for the rest of us."

When she sighed, he patted her hand. "Sorry. I'll back off."

"Thank you." She forced a weak smile. "I'll be back as fast as I can."

Rika piled the rolls of coins into a paper sack then shoved the bag into her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder. The weight caught her off guard, and she was forced to cradle the purse in her arms in order to carry it.

At the sight of Donny sprawled on the floor in front of the television, Rika bit back the urge to give him a hard kick in the seat.

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The boy never budged, never acknowledged he was in the way as she stepped over him. It was as if he hadn't seen her.

Andy was probably right. Donny was due for a talking-to of the physical type. But Rika wasn't about to do it. At age twelve, he was as big as she was and almost as strong. If Andy wanted Donny's ass smacked, he was going to have to do it himself.

She slid onto the torn upholstery of her battered Toyota van. She sure missed her little Geo, but it was hardly a practical vehicle with a crew of kids to haul around. Much as she despised it, the van served its purpose. With a bony-weary sigh, she glanced at the house. The lawn was trimmed, but still dying in spots. The house was in desperate need of painting. But the inside was clean and orderly, despite being overcrowded.

"Well, it's no mansion, but it's also no hovel." She could almost hear her father say, "Fredrika, you work with what you've got."

"Yeah, right. Tell that to the social worker when she inspects again, Dad."

That dredged up more guilt. Rika marched back to the house, taking the rear entrance where there'd be less chance she was noticed. She snagged the garbage bag just inside the door and hauled it to the van. If Andy or Robyn said one word about her taking the mound of sewing, they'd find a needle in their hands.

She tossed the bag in the back of the van and headed for the bank.

\* \* \*

Ryan couldn't wait another second. He'd been without Rika in his arms for four months. So what if the kids were around? He knew sex was out of the question until tonight. All he wanted was to hold her close, to kiss her just once, to see those beautiful green eyes light up when she was him for the first time. He just wanted to be with her. How could she fault him for that? Wild and crazy sex could come later tonight. He got a hard-on just thinking about it.

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Laughing at himself, Ryan adjusted his erection behind his zipper as he turned onto her street. He sure had to get that in control before he left the vehicle. But he'd had it since he walked into his apartment the night before. Rika's scent had surrounded him. She'd been watching the place while he was gone. Everything was fresh and spotless, like he'd left it only that morning. She'd even made sure he had a few essentials for the morning—coffee and homemade cinnamon rolls. There was even a note with hearts, Xs, and Os next to a long-stemmed red rose in a vase. The only thing missing was her.

Ryan had craved her beside him. Phone sex wasn't going to do it for him. But Rika couldn't be persuaded to join him. In fact, she laughingly told him he had to wait. He had to admit he felt a little kicked to the curb. Surely Andy could have watched the kids while Rika spent the night. He and Robyn had done so when Ryan was able to take a very brief break during Valentine's Day. But he didn't make an issue of it. He just told Rika all the things he longed to do with her when he saw her again. Her laughter buoyed his spirits and inflamed his *need*.

After beating off in the shower, he'd crawled into his lonely bed praying her scent would be on the sheets. It wasn't. They were just as fresh as the rest of the place. It didn't help him sleep. He'd bounded out of bed and spent the night unpacking. He'd even made a trip down to the laundry room. Once his clothes were washed and dried, he had started packing for the weekend at the beach. Anticipation rose again. With two cabanas set aside for them, there'd be plenty of time for privacy. Then, like the lovesick fool he clearly was, Ryan watched the clock, counting the minutes until he could see her.

At one point, Ryan flirted with the idea of just going over. He'd tap on her bedroom window, open it, and be in her arms a second later. It worked great in his imagination. If he hadn't been afraid she'd hand him his balls on a platter for scaring her, he might have done it.

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He finally fell asleep reviewing some of the PR copy she'd recently done for Fletcher's. Matt had emailed him her most recent efforts. As always, it was amazing. She caught the tone and image Fletcher's needed. Ryan wished she'd agreed to work full-time for them. But she was locked into being a reporter and nothing would persuade her.

Sleep refreshed him, but he woke up hornier than ever. Now, here he was, more than determined to see her. Even if meant just holding her hand or seeing her smile, he'd take it. He just couldn't bear to be away from her another second.

Andy and Robyn lifted waves his way as Ryan pulled into the driveway. Looked like he wasn't the only one ready for a weekend at the beach. A small parade carried things to Andy's old Dodge Colt station wagon. The little red car had definitely seen better days, but it ran and Ryan knew that was all that mattered to Andy.

As he cut the engine on his Cherokee, Ryan noticed the car wasn't the only thing looking battered. Large, light brown patches splashed over the lawn. At first he thought someone had dumped sand on it, then he realized it was dying. The sage green color of the house had gone chalky. In some spots, it was completely worn. Well, he was here now and would definitely pitch in.

He'd barely gotten the door open when the three youngest—Rika's nephew and two nieces rushed him. Amy threw herself into his arms. Kristi did likewise to his waist. Ten-year-old Evan was right behind with a smile as big as he was.

"Aunt Rika said you'll be at the beach. Suppose we can play catch like before?"

Ryan set Amy on her feet and dusted his fingers through the boy's dark blond hair. "You bet. We're going to have a great time." The first of what he hoped would be many. Ryan was ready to get back to normal, to be a part of everything that involved the woman he loved. Hell, he was ready to marry her...right now if she'd have him.

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His conscience warned him to take things slower. They'd been apart for four months. Even with nightly phone calls and constant emails, there would be a period of adjustment now that he was back.

"Where's your aunt? Inside?" It didn't look good for him. Rika's Metro wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Kristi finally released her hug as she turned big, brown eyes up at him. "She went to the bank to get dollars for all our coins. We got a hundred-and-fifty dollars. Aunt Rika says now we can really go to the beach. She had to count twice because Amy knocked down all the coins and made Aunt Rika cry."

Amy tugged on his pant leg. "I didn't mean, too. It was a accident. My baby doll did it. I don't like when Aunt Rika cries. I would never mean to make her cry."

Dozens of questions swarmed through Ryan's head. The kids made it sound like Rika cried all the time. A glance toward Andy and Robyn confirmed that fact when the two looked away. All Ryan could manage to say in response was, "What?"

"What are you? An idiot?"

Ryan shifted a cold gaze to Rika's youngest brother. Donny had a mouth on him for sure. He'd recognized that during his Valentine's trip. Looked like it was getting worse. He'd never been more tempted to pop someone in his life.

Donny shoved a box into the back of the wagon. "She counted out all the change she'd collected. Andy and Robyn took all the recycling in. How else could we afford to go? She keeps saying it'll be a great birthday for me. I'm not stupid. I been around. I know why she really scraped the money together." He flashed Ryan a dirty look, then shuffled back into the house.

What the hell? He jerked his attention back to Andy and Robyn. "What's going on?"

Andy twisted on the hose to squirt off the lawn chairs Robyn

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opened up. “Puberty,” he said.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“It’s best you hear that from Rika.”

He stomped toward them. “I’m going to hear it from the two of you, and I’m going to hear it now.”

Andy pulled up on a sigh. “Okay. But, remember...you asked for it.”

Robyn nudged him. “Shut up. He was going to find out how bad things were sooner or later. Rika’s a stupid idiot for keeping it quiet this long.”

They were scaring him. If someone didn’t say something soon...

“Okay, here’s the deal.” Andy crossed his arms over his chest and started talking.

As the full extent of their problems unfolded, Ryan’s morale plummeted and confusion reigned. Money was tight—very tight. Why in the hell did Rika insist on paying for the food this weekend? Pride? Why hadn’t she said anything?

Just as quickly as he thought that, Andy told him Rika didn’t want to burden him while he was away. She didn’t feel it was his problem to worry with. That made him feel doubly bad. Here he was, calling her every night at midnight for raunchy phone sex—well, not phone sex all the time, but still—when he’d be doing her a favor by calling earlier and letting her get some sleep. And the PR job for Fletcher’s.... No wonder she didn’t quit the job at the paper—she needed the money from both jobs.

Ryan had to face it. As boyfriends go, he pretty much sucked. He should have been more sensitive. Shit! He’d even had her watching his apartment when she had all this other responsibility on her shoulders. There was no reason his mom or one of his sisters-in-law couldn’t have watched the place. But no. He wanted Rika because he loved the idea of her being in his apartment, near his things while he was gone.

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“And how is she physically?” he somehow managed to ask. “Besides frazzled and exhausted.”

“She sucks down Mylanta like it’s water,” Andy replied.

“I’d be surprised if she slept four hours a night,” Robyn added. “And she’s...changed.”

Andy whipped around on her. “Come off it, Robyn. Changed, hell. You just have your nose out of joint because she gave you curfew and—”

She jammed her fists onto her hips. “She’s not the boss of me.”

“The court says she is. And you’re gonna damn well listen.” He stabbed his finger in her face.

“Or what? You’re gonna ground me. Spank me like Daddy would?”

Andy’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, don’t tempt me.”

“Go to hell.”

Ryan jerked up his palms. “Enough!” Good God! He could understand why Rika was on the edge. “How ’bout calling a truce here? Just finish getting packed. I’m going to find Rika. The sooner we get to the beach, the sooner we can all start to relax.” And the sooner he could take care of her, like he should have been doing all along.

“It’s going to take more than a weekend at the beach to fix the problems in this family.” Robyn yanked up the lawn chair and started for the station wagon, dripping water as she went.

Andy snapped the other one closed. “I hate to say it, but she’s right. You might find yourself heading for the hills after this weekend. Any sane man would.”

“Can’t ever say I claimed to be sane.” He did an about-face and headed for his Jeep.

\* \* \*

The teller line at the bank had to be at least fifty people long when Ryan walked in. Friday in San Diego, and everyone wanted money for the weekend. The line for the ATM wrapped around the building.



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Inside was no better—only two teller windows were open. At least it worked to his advantage.

He saw Rika right away and politely pushed his way to her. She was hard to miss with her russet hair falling in waves past her shoulders. His body surged to life. He was ashamed of himself. Knowing all she'd been through and he still wanted to jump her bones, right here, right now. What the hell kind of man was he? Still, he longed to bury his face in those silken waves. Inhale the essence of her.

Ryan shook the thought aside even as he dropped his gaze to her gently rounded bottom. Her khaki shorts allowed his eyes easy access to her long, slender legs—tanned and smooth. Her feet, even in sandals, were beautiful.

Picking through the line of people, his gaze drifted upward to arms left bare by the white tank top she wore. She clutched her purse protectively against her chest. Only he knew the prized possession it truly was right now. It held just about all they had left. And to think she was going to spend it to be with him. Damn, he wasn't sure he deserved her. She was obviously too good for him.

Ryan forced the choking emotion away and let his eyes feast on her some more. He was almost to her. How could he keep from crushing her in a hug? Her long, slender neck begged for his lips upon it. The diamond on the necklace he'd given her for Christmas rested against the hollow of her throat, right where he wanted his tongue. Her delicately curved chin turned his way, full lips just barely parted. Her slightly pointed nose was next, sprinkled with just the right amount of freckles. Then came her striking emerald eyes. Eyes flecked with gold near the pupils. Eyes that made him want to dive into their depths. Eyes that stared, wide, right back at him.

“Ryan!”

She was in his arms a second later, that humongous purse squashed between them...along with the most painful erection he could ever

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recall having.

“I’ve missed you so much.” She gave him a light laugh. “I can tell you’ve missed me.”

God help him. He wanted to kiss her long and hard right here. It was all he could do to keep his hands around her waist when he longed to cup her ass.

“I stopped by the house, honey. Why didn’t you say something? Anything? I’m supposed to be your hero. You didn’t let me...hero.”

\* \* \*

Rika giggled despite her urge to break into tears. She couldn’t believe he was here, that she was in his arms. She should have known better than to think he’d stay away until tonight.

Pulling back, she let her eyes drink in their fill of him. Those eyes of his wrapped around her heart like a soft fog, or rather, a mysterious cloud. He wore gray Dockers with a light blue pullover that gave her a peek of chest. She longed to dot kisses there, to inhale the scent that was his alone—a combination of testosterone-laden male and that spicy aftershave he wore. The months in Hawaii had darkened his tan to a nice bronze. A naughty thought wiggled to the forefront of how white his ass would be in comparison. Or had he dared to go buff?

“I knew I should’ve said something, but—”

“Everyone stay where you are!” a man shouted.

All heads jerked toward the entrance. There was a collective gasp at the sight of the armed masked men. Rika clutched her purse closer. They waved those guns around like they were batting at flies. She forced herself to notice details. That’s what the police would need. The men were short and stocky, either white or Hispanic, with black hair. Their masks—big, red handkerchiefs—covered only the lower part of their faces. White running shoes—one set Nike, the other Reebok—stood out against their black jeans and T-shirts. Both pieces of clothing hugged their bodies. These weren’t youngsters who felt they had to

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swim in their clothes. These were adults and either experienced or desperate...or both.

"Stay away from the alarms. Nobody move," one shouted.

His partner rushed forward, pillow case open to take the money. Yellow and pink daisies covered it. The hem around the top was frayed on one side.

Rika prayed the men would leave without violence, but from the way they brandished the weapons, it didn't look good. While the one collected money from the tellers, the other hovered no more than five feet from the customers. He passed his gaze over each person in line, then settled on her. Right on her necklace. She felt Ryan move closer to her, and blessed his presence. Still, it wasn't enough to deter the robber.

He motioned to her bag with his pistol. "You're holding that purse awful tight. Let's have a look."

"She doesn't have anything you want. Leave her alone." Ryan's voice was calm, reasoning, and fell on deaf ears.

The man took a step toward her. "Give it here."

"No," she said firmly.

"I said give it here." He lunged forward. "And I'll take that bling-bling you're wearing, too."

"Like hell you will!" Rika swung the bag as hard as she could. The pistol flew from his hand and skidded across the floor. She lashed out again and caught him on the chin, angling his haphazard mask. The thief staggered back.

Ryan plowed his fist into his face, toppling the guy to the floor. His partner dropped the pillow case and sped away, his money forgotten. Scrambling to his feet, the battered would-be robber followed in his partner's wake.

Rika darted for the door. Ryan caught her elbow and yanked her back.

"Have you lost your mind? You can't chase after them."

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Rika jerked free. “Don’t be silly. I’m pretty stupid, but not that stupid. I have to call in my story in to the paper. This could be my chance to get out of the society pages.” She clutched his arm. “Ryan, I need that promotion. I couldn’t afford to keep my cell phone. I need to find a pay phone.”

He fished his cell from his pants pocket. “Here, honey.”

On tiptoe, she gave him a quick kiss then darted for a private corner of the lobby. Hands shaking, she dialed her editor and never once took her gaze off Ryan.

## CHAPTER 3

Now that the adrenaline surge had dropped, Rika was exhausted. At least Art was happy. In fact, the editor was over the moon. By his definition, she'd been in the right place at the right time. There was no way they could scoop the evening TV news, but by morning, all of San Diego would be reading a first-hand account of the foiled bank robbery.

Rika stayed close to Ryan, more than grateful for his silent support. News cameras buzzed around even while she, Ryan, and the bank manager talked with the police. They zeroed in on everyone else, trying to capture the moment for posterity's sake—for at least that famed fifteen minutes everyone was supposed to crave. Someone would snag copies of the surveillance camera and that would be plastered all over the television. Rika preferred a quiet, "No comment," when they tried to corner her. Ryan's presence added a more forceful deterrent to their questions.

With police questioning over, Ryan hustled her to a nearby Denny's

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for a bite to eat. She actually found herself shaking as she followed him in her van, but kept that information to herself. She'd been foolish enough attacking an armed man. It was only money and a necklace. Even if it was all she had, they weren't worth more than her life. She cursed herself a thousand times over.

As they waited to be seated, Ryan called Andy and let him know what had happened so they wouldn't worry if they should hear it from someone else. Rika was more than happy to let him take charge. It felt wonderful to have someone to depend on, to lean on, rather than have to be the strong force. He sat across from her, holding her hand, stroking his fingers over her knuckles while they waited for their food. Rika felt like she was holding onto a lifeline.

"I can't believe I was so stupid." She massaged the growing ache in her temple.

"I can't say smacking a bank robber with your purse ranks up there with the smartest things you've ever done." Ryan took a long drink from his ice tea.

Her eyebrows rose. "And whose fist hit his jaw?"

He laughed. "Didn't claim I was any smarter. Guess that makes us the perfect couple."

"You think?"

"I know." His smile faded. "Why didn't you tell me what was going on?"

They pulled back as the waitress placed their food on the table—a chicken Caesar salad for each of them. In unison, they thanked her and picked up their forks.

"Well?" he asked.

He did deserve an answer. She knew this would come soon enough. It was just she'd expected it to be on her terms...not have her control yanked away. She'd clearly underestimated the men in her life. Looking back, Rika should have realized Ryan wouldn't stay away

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until the evening. Those nightly phone calls while he was gone should have told her that. She wondered if she hadn't subconsciously sabotaged herself. In any event, it did save her from having to tell him everything. Andy would have been more thorough anyway, leaving nothing unmentioned.

"What could you have done?" she finally answered. "You had enough on your plate without worrying about things here. If you'd known, you'd have been frustrated and upset—"

"And a little more considerate of you. You could've been sleeping instead of indulging me every night."

"Maybe I was indulging myself." She shoved a forkful of salad into her mouth. She treasured the long distance connection with him, no matter how naughty their pursuit of pleasure was. "I wasn't sleeping anyway, so why not spent the time with you? You're worth it. Besides...."

He arched one eyebrow and looked up at her from under it. Somehow Rika suspected he knew what she was going to say.

"It's my responsibility, not yours."

"I see." He finished chewing, took a drink of tea, all the while nailing that gaze on her. Now Rika knew how the waiter felt at Fletcher's.

"Are we not a couple?" he asked.

"Well...yes..."

"Do couples not share in the good and bad?"

Rika lifted her chin. "Not in any relationship I've ever had. First sign of trouble, they normally cut bait and run."

But she'd known Ryan was different from the start. No other man came close to him. So why was she doing this? To force him to say what she already knew, or to give him an easy out.

\* \* \*

Blinking, Ryan pulled back. Then her previous boyfriends were

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fools and he was one lucky man. Although, right now he felt like a stupid one. What had he been concerned with the last four months? Sex. Maintaining that delicate bond between them until he could come back and they could pick up where they'd left off. No wonder she hadn't said anything. He certainly hadn't behaved any differently than anyone in her past.

Oh, yeah, he'd sent gifts and flowers, and done his best to nurture the relationship from his perspective. He'd pretty much been an idiot. He'd asked how she was doing, listen to her talk about work and the kids in general, and left it at that. It didn't matter how much he'd been there for her, he hadn't really *been there* for her. He'd been occupied with showing her his love with his dick. Yep, he'd been a first-class jackass. He was lucky she hadn't told him to get lost ages ago. The fact she hid so much in an effort to maintain their relationship said everything. Ryan felt humbled and completely unworthy. Groveling seemed to be in order, but he doubted she'd respect him much after that.

"I'm not like that, Rika. Granted I haven't done much to prove that. In fact, from where I sit, I've only added to your burden."

"Then perhaps you need to sit over here for a while."

Damn it, how could she give him a hard-on with just a few words? Ryan tried to yank himself back on track. It was no use—the erection remained. He shoved his fork onto his plate and leaned as close as the table allowed.

"Damn it, Rika, I feel awful about all of this. I feel like I failed you."

She leaned in, too. "Why? How could you know what I didn't tell you? You're supposed to neglect your business and your obligations for a woman—"

"I love?" When she tried to pull away, he caught her wrist and made her stay. "I could have figured something out. I *should* have paid



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more attention to you rather than..." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "Rather than my damned dick. Even now, knowing all you've been through, all I can think about is the log in my pants, and how much I want to get you alone and fuck you until we're too exhausted to move."

Her breath hitched. A pink flush hid her freckles. Turning her hand over, she clasped his fingers. "At this point, it wouldn't take much of that to exhaust me."

"I'm ready for a serious, no-holds-barred, share and share alike relationship. Hell, I'm more than ready and have been since the day I set eyes on you. What about you?"

"Be careful what you wish for, Ryan."

"Just answer the question."

Rika's gaze caressed his face as she slowly nodded. "It would be nice. Yes. A challenge, but nice. I've very independent, you know."

"Really? I never would've guessed."

She laughed at his sarcasm and nudged his foot under the table. They then leaned back and focused on their salads once more.

"So...where do we start?" she asked.

"Why don't you go back to my apartment where there are no distractions and—here's a concept—take a nice, uninterrupted nap while I get everyone ready and down to the beach?"

"Sounds nice, except..."

"Except what?"

Her lips curved in a devilishly naughty smile. "You aren't the only one with a hard-on."

Ryan swore she actually made *him* blush. "Then eat up and we'll take care of both our problems."

"Good. Then I'll nap while you wrestle kids. I'll grab some groceries and meet you out there." She danced her toes up his leg. "Sure you're hungry? I have a little surprise I've been saving for you."

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Ryan scrunched down to give her better access. “If I thought you’d eaten anything since yesterday, I’d be tempted. But you’re going to need your strength to keep up, so...” He pointed at her food.

“Hmph. Not even tempted.” She feigned hurt. The gleam in her eyes said differently as she continued to toy with his leg.

“Tease all you want, sweet stuff. Just remember, what goes around—”

“*Comes* around?”

Ryan tossed back a laugh that drew heads their way. Casting a guilty gaze around, Rika lowered her foot.

“Give me your cell phone.” She wiggled her fingers his way. “I’ll call Andy and let him know we’ll be a little while—”

“Coming?”

Rika laughed. “Okay, I deserved that one.”

He pulled out the cell and placed it in her open hand. “And, just for the record, it won’t take me long at all.”

“There’s a ringing endorsement every woman wants to hear.” She punched in the number for the house.

Ryan grabbed it on the first ring. “I’d better tell him. Can’t risk looking bad in the translation now, can I?”

“Heaven forbid.” Smiling, Rika speared a piece of lettuce.

\* \* \*

Rika tried to do justice to her meal. The fact was, she just didn’t eat that much anymore. Add that to the need she had for Ryan and the tempting offer of a nap, and what little appetite she did have left.

She listened to Ryan’s conversation with Andy with half-attention. All she could think about was being in his arms after all this time. All the masturbation in the world couldn’t compare to the orgasm he could give her during a long, hard tumble in bed.

Rika remembered her raunchier moments when she used to call it a good fuck. Being with Ryan more than surpassed that marker. With

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him, it truly was making love...maybe even better than that.

He ended the call and stuffed the phone back in his pocket. Something didn't seem right. The mischief on his face was now clouded by knitted eyebrows.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he quickly replied, then smiled. "Andy said they are all ready to go, so I told them to go on and we'd meet them there later. Is that all right?"

"Sure." The kids were chomping at the bit to go. She knew how hard it was to corral that kind of energy. She'd learned that the hard way.

"Good. I just need to make sure registration knows to give the room keys to him. Be right back. I've got the number in the car."

Rika watched him stand. "And here I thought you'd memorized them all."

"Sorry you had to find out—I'm not perfect."

But he was pretty close to it as far as she was concerned. She studied his ass as he walked away, recalling the flex of muscle there as he'd thrust into her. Her stomach clenched. She crossed her legs to quell the throbbing between them. Eating was useless. She couldn't taste a thing.

Ryan returned as the waitress was removing her plate. Judging from his frown, Rika braced herself for a lecture on not eating, especially when he stared at the departing food. He glanced at Rika, then at his own salad which was only half gone.

"You know what? I don't think I'm all that hungry either. Let's go." He snatched the bill off the table, then gave her a hand up. "At least not for food," he said softly against her ear.

Rika caught the heat in his eyes, the hint of a smile on his lips. "Meet you there?"

"I'm right behind you."

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And he meant it, too. He was in his vehicle before Rika could pull out of the parking lot. How she kept from speeding was a mystery. She kept glancing in the rear view mirror, blood racing with every mile they put behind them.

Rika had to laugh. It was very much like their first time together. That happy memory sparked a more painful one—it was also the night she'd lost her parents and sister.

She blinked away a rush of tears. It was in the past, where it needed to stay.

In fifteen minutes, they were parked in front of his apartment building. The building itself didn't have the personality of the one she'd lived in, but his apartment had become her little sanctuary over the last couple of months. He'd be surprised to know how many times she had come here for a little peace and quiet—too many to count, but not enough for her to feel guilty over leaving the kids to Robyn's or Andy's care, and certainly no more than an hour or two at a time. She'd stretch out on his cushy sofa and drift to sleep dreaming he was there. Despite his absence, the place still carried his scent, and Rika could pretend he was no farther than the next room, rather than a half an ocean away.

Now, here he was in the flesh! And soon to be in her flesh. That thought had her grinning.

"Is that big smile for me?" He draped an arm around her shoulder.

"You bet." Arm tight around his waist, she tucked closer and matched him step for step up the stairs.

At the door, he released her long enough to unlock it, then squeezed her rear as he shoved it open. Rika caught his shirt in her fist and dragged him across the threshold with her. He kicked the door shut behind them.

"Now...show me how much you missed me." She cupped her hands against his hard cock. Ryan's eyes glazed over, and she laughed.

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“Don’t try to fight it. You know you like it.”

She released the fly button and shoved her hands inside. The zipper fell to her invasion. A low groan closed his eyes. His hands against her wrists kept her still. Rika stuck her tongue in the open V of his shirt. A shudder coursed through him.

“You feel so hot,” she whispered as she moved up his throat. “Like steel just pulled from the forge.” She stroked one finger down the length of his penis to the base. It throbbed, begging for more attention. She wiggled her hand inside his shorts and clasped it.

“Oh, Rika, you don’t...”

A drop of pre-cum kissed her flesh.

“Do you want me to lick it?” She shoved pants and shorts down.

Ryan hauled her upright, nailing her against his body. “I am about two seconds away from coming,” he said through hard intakes of breath. “I want to be inside you. I need to feel my cock inside you.”

Rika fumbled with the buttons on her shorts. Once open, she shoved them down with her panties then turned in his arms. “Do it. Show me how you can’t stand to wait.” She leaned toward the side of the couch, lifting her butt to him.

“God, honey, I need to get a—”

“No, you don’t.” She wiggled her ass in invitation. “I pay dearly for health insurance and decided to use it. We are now on the pill.”

With a low growl, he grabbed her hips. He probed for her opening, brushing long strokes against her clit with his erection. Rika lifted higher, letting the fire sweep over her. She rocked with every stroke, wanting to come so badly she thought she’d cry.

“Inside, Ryan, please!” She grabbed his hand and pushed it to her crotch.

Hot fingers danced around her swollen point. She felt the head of his dick pierce her and moaned. Ryan froze. His gasps reached her ears. He was desperately fighting for control while hers was completely

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gone. Inch by agonizingly slow inch, he seated himself deep inside. Rika felt herself contract around the log. Pleasure rippled through her, building fast.

“Now!” she gasped out. “I’m coming...now!”

Fingers tight on her clit, he thrust her hard and deep. Her body opened in the wonder of climax, suspending her there until she heard his responding cry. Hot spurts of jism filled her. He thrust again with even more release, then again. And still he was hard. His fingers worked her again. Rika jerked, still sensitive from her first orgasm, but Ryan wouldn’t let up. Pinned in place over the couch, he was in command.

Long, full thrusts pumped into her. She pressed her face into the cushions, helpless to the unrelenting pleasure his hands and cock built. Another orgasm clutched her into spasms. Fingers curled deep into the couch, all Rika could do was jerk with the release. She was barely conscience of the guttural cry she loosed. Exhausted, she collapsed into the pillowy softness and still muttered a disappointed, “No,” when Ryan pulled free.

He dotted kisses up her spine, then rolled her into his arms. Cradled there, he carried her into the bedroom, crawling on top of her as he placed her on his bed. Together they pulled the bedspread and sheets down. Rika wrapped arms and legs around him, sealing them together as one. His hand found its way between them once more. Rika twitched against his thumb, setting the pace for them. It was only when her deep vaginal contractions signaled climax that Ryan took over. Hard, pounding thrusts brought them to the peak. Orgasm splintered her.

“Oh...God...yes!”

Ryan arched back with his own release. She gloried in the pleasure-pain that consumed him. She wanted to touch him everywhere at once, to kiss him over and over again. As the moment subsided, she drew him into her arms, closed her eyes, and sighed. It just didn’t get any

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better than this.

\* \* \*

Ryan waited until he was certain Rika was sound asleep. It didn't take long for her to drift off. The biggest problem was pulling himself from her side. He could have cuddled with her here forever. Unfortunately, life intruded. More appropriately, television reporters intruded.

He slipped from bed and dressed in the living room. He had to get back to her house. With any luck, the reporters would be gone by now and Andy could have left with the others. Ryan had told him he'd be there as soon as possible. His main priority was keeping this from Rika. She had enough to deal with. She sure didn't have to be worrying about reporters camped out at her house. Andy agreed and had the good sense to not ask what Ryan was going to do to distract her.

Grabbing the bag he'd packed earlier for the weekend trip, he eased the apartment door closed. A glance at his watch worried him. It had been an hour and a half. Punching in the number for the Kiley house, he trotted down the stairs to his vehicle. Andy picked up on the second ring.

"Are they still there?" Ryan asked.

"No. Robyn told them Rika normally works during the day. When they asked where, our own little town crier told them and they took off."

Kristi was a very informative child. "I guarantee they won't be there long once they find out she has the day off." Art Steffanson had more experience dealing with that sort of thing than Andy did. The editor wouldn't put up with any shit. Once they found their prey not there, they'd either give up or be back at the house. Ryan was betting on the house.

"Is everyone ready to go?"

"We're ready, but with all the stuff in the wagon, I can't take

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everyone,” Andy replied.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Sounds good. I could use a little help. Those reporters really freaked out the others. Robyn’s a basket case. She won’t stop crying. Kristi and Evan are doing karate chops all over the place pretending to be you and Rika. One of them smacked Amy by mistake and she’s got this bruise on the side of her face. And—”

“I’m on my way.”

Andy definitely had his hands full. And to think Rika dealt with this every day. No wonder she was exhausted. He hoped she had better control over the kids than Andy did. The young man was clearly out of his league and outnumbered. The kids knew exactly how far they could push him. Most probably, they’d also figured out how close to the edge they could put Rika, too. Ryan had the advantage...for the moment. He had that brief space of time to assert who was boss, or rather, one of the bosses. If that made him the bad guy, so be it. Anything to help Rika. They could be bad guys together, just like real parents.

He drove through traffic thinking about that. Marriage was definitely in the future. Ryan had realized that some time ago. But as much as he wanted them to get on with their life together, he couldn’t just plop back in Rika’s life with a ring in his pocket and a proposal on his lips. It wasn’t only about him and her any more. It was about all of them.

He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t scared. This was a ready-made family. His parenting skills were limited to playing uncle to his nephews. He couldn’t screw this up. If he ever hoped to have a future with Rika, he had to prove to her how he fit perfectly in her life, in their lives. Failure wasn’t an option.

At least Andy had them all somewhat corralled when he got to the house. As before, Amy and Kristi swarmed him.

Evan grabbed a Frisbee and dashed for Ryan’s Cherokee. “I’m



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riding with you. I call front.” He dashed off with the two little girls close behind, protesting their brother’s seating selection all the way.

“No fighting or you’ll stay out of the water the rest of the day,” Ryan called out. It seemed like a good threat. He’d heard his brother use it on his boys more than once. It must work because the kids shut up and got in the vehicle without further nonsense.

“Obviously, they’re going with you.”

Ryan glanced up at Andy. “Looks that way. Ready?”

Donny shuffled out of the house with his perpetual glower. He passed by without a word. Kid looked like he hated the world.

“I don’t know how Rika does it,” Andy muttered. He looked like he couldn’t take another second. “Come on, Robyn,” he shouted over his shoulder.

She appeared a few seconds later, eyes searching beyond the two men. Her eyes were red and her nose puffy from all the tears she’d shed. “Where’s Rika?”

Ryan draped an arm around her shoulder. “Taking what I hope is a good, long nap at my place.”

She jerked away. “She’s hurt and you’re not telling me.”

He held up his hands. “What would be the sense in lying?”

Eyelashes spiked with tears blinked at him around wide eyes. Ryan tried the arm over the shoulder bit again. This time she didn’t move.

“She’s really okay?”

“Just taking a nap she desperately needed. She’ll meet us at the beach later. Now, come on...we’re wasting prime beach time.”

Although Robyn was placated for the moment, he knew she wouldn’t be satisfied until she saw her sister. Hopefully, by that time, he would have things back at a more manageable level. He couldn’t let Rika down. She had to see she could truly depend on him, include him in everything. Ryan silently prayed for help.

\* \* \*

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Rika couldn't believe she'd slept for six hours. After a quick call to Ryan to let him know she hadn't died, she hurried to buy groceries and join them. Judging from the commotion in the background, things were fairly normal with the Kiley crowd. Ryan didn't even sound frazzled yet. She gave him points for that, double points when she learned he'd already had pizza delivered for dinner. If he had the little ones washed and ready for bed by the time she arrived, he definitely would have earned his hero points for the day and then some.

The sun had already set by the time she turned into the parking area paralleling the cabanas at Fletcher's—actually two-bedroom mobile homes. It wasn't hard to pick out the two assigned to their crowd—Ryan's Cherokee and Andy's Colt were parked right in front of them. If any doubt remained, Robyn sat on the steps of one cabana. She snapped to her feet as Rika pulled to a stop. Fists balled at her sides, she stomped her way towards the van. Looked like yet another problem. Rika didn't have the energy to deal with it.

Putting on a smile she didn't feel, she opened the door. "Hi, what's—"

"You could've been killed, and then what would we have done?" Robyn snapped. "There's no one else, Rika. Ms. Stanhope would never let Andy take care of us. She has a fit over you being our guardian. You know she's just waiting for any excuse to take us away from you. How could you be so selfish?"

The door to the noisiest cabana opened. Light from inside silhouetted Ryan. "Selfish?" She might not be able to see his face, but the tone of his voice left no doubt he was pissed.

"It's okay. She's just scared." Rika pulled her sister into a tight embrace. "It wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done. I'm sorry I frightened you. I was just trying to protect our money. I'll be more careful next time."

Robyn clutched at her. "That reporter said—"

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“What reporter?” She flashed a look Ryan’s way.

He trotted down the two short steps. He wore an old T-shirt proclaiming he’d hiked Death Valley over a pair of blue swim trunks. “Just a couple poking around the house for a story. Andy took care of them, then I hustled everyone here.”

After one last squeeze, she set Robyn away from her. “I’m sure they’ve already found another story to latch onto. Don’t let it bother you. Groceries are in the van.”

“I’ll get the boys.”

“It’s not that much. Just grab a bag. Ryan and I can bring in the rest.”

Robyn shrugged, snagged a paper bag, and walked inside.

Rika was in Ryan’s arms a second later, nestling her lips into his as their tongues mated. She sealed the kiss, but didn’t bother to move.

“Manage okay?”

Ryan chuckled and cupped her butt. “I don’t know who had the worse deal driving over—me with three boisterous little children or Andy with two sullen teenagers. One look at the beach and Amy let out a squeal that pierced my eardrums. That’s when I realized I was the lucky one.”

She laughed. “She loves the beach.”

“Really? I never would’ve guessed. I got them into suits as fast as I could. They’re fed, had a bath, and are ready for bed...or not. Actually, Amy fell dead asleep on the floor. I already tucked her in.”

“She can sleep just about anywhere.”

“You...uh...might notice a bruise on the side of her face. She got in the way of a karate chop.”

Rika cringed. Hopefully, it would be gone before the next visit from the social worker. “The other two still wound up?”

“Oh, yeah.” He gave her another kiss, then grabbed the remaining bags from the car, handing her the third one.

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Judging from the decibel level inside, they were in for a long night.

"I thought we'd have boys in one trailer, girls in another."

"And where does that leave us?" she asked.

Ryan shrugged. "We'll figure something out."

"Yes, I've seen how inventive you can be." She gave him a wink and headed for the cabana.

He reached it before her, swinging the door wide.

Evan leaped to his feet. "Aunt Rika, you were brave." His eyes lit with hero worship.

Kristi pushed forward. "She got that bad guy just like a Power Ranger."

"Or a Ninja Turtle." Evan jumped back and sliced the air with his fist.

"At least." Ryan winked at Rika.

Her stomach did somersaults. "Come on, kids. Let's get settled in for the night. We've got a big day planned tomorrow."

When she stepped inside, Donny shoved his way out. Rika teetered on the metal steps. Juggling bags, Ryan snapped his arm around her waist to keep her from falling.

"What's the rush?" He shot the boy a glare she'd only seen from her father.

"I'm just tired and wanted to go to bed," Donny snarled back.

"You almost pushed Rika off the steps."

"Big deal. It's just two lousy steps."

Ryan caught his arm before he could storm away. When Donny jerked free, Rika could see war in Ryan's eyes. The only sign Donny gave that he knew he'd screwed up was the bob of his fledgling Adam's apple. Rika envied Ryan's ability to crack the kid's hard exterior.

"There's no need to get defensive," Ryan told him. "Just be careful."

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Donny rattled down the steps without another word. His whole disposition was summed up by a resounding slam of the door at the next cabana.

Andy released the breath he'd been holding. "Puberty. Sheesh!"

Ryan passed off one of the bags to him. "Yes, I'm sure you were never, ever like that. I know I was the perfect angel."

He snickered. "Point made."

Rika followed them to the small kitchen while Robyn hustled Kristi off to bed. "Guess it's no different for boys than it is for girls. I remember I had a hard time expressing my feelings. Shoot, half the time I didn't realize what my feelings were. He's at that difficult age where all your emotions get churned up inside."

"I guess I never thought of it like that." Andy shoved the milk into the refrigerator. "But it's no excuse," he quickly added. "You know, I've got this if the two of you want to take a walk on the beach."

Rika felt her cheeks heat.

Ryan looped his arm through hers. "Now there's a thought."

She had just enough time to grab the last slice of pizza before he led her outside.

The cool night air was heavy with the scent of the ocean. One sniff could always revive her flagging spirits. They wandered barefoot down to the edge of the surf while Rika ate. The dim light of the half moon outlined the breakers in a soft, lacy glow. The sand was still warm from the day's heat in stark contrast to the cold water. They paused while a dissipating wave lapped at their feet. Food finished, she tucked her fingers through his. They quietly strolled down the beach while the water kissed their toes.

"So...was I better at letting you be the hero today?"

Ryan puffed up his chest and thumped it. "Yes. Tog ready build fire. Kill meat."

Giggling, she gave him a playful shove. "If Tog is trying to decide

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between tossing Nana over his shoulder, or dragging her off by the hair, Nana would prefer the shoulder. Nana not like hair pulled.”

“Good. Tog not like hand trapped in snake-long hair.”

“Snake?” Her attempt at an indignant response was swallowed by her laughter.

Ryan grunted and thumped his chest again. “Tog mate now.”

Before she could stop him—as if she wanted to—Ryan had her over his shoulder. Helpless with laughter, she held on as he ran to a dryer patch of sand. In a feigned gasp for breath, he set her down. “Nana heavy like baby mastodon.”

Rika howled with laughter and dug her fingers into his ribs. “That’s not very hero-like to say. And to think I was ready to give you a special reward.”

Ryan laughed as he tried unsuccessfully to dodge her tickling. “Nana Tog’s reward. Mate now.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Looping her fingers into the waistband of his swim trunks, Rika jerked them down. His full erection bounced against her belly. Even through her tank top, it felt like hot flame on this cool summer night.

“Is this Tog’s log for the fire or is Tog just glad to see Nana?” She pressed her hand against the base, then nudged it further to cup his heavy testicles. They were as hard as the rest of him. A soft moan coupled with Ryan’s shiver.

“Lie down and let me love you,” she whispered.

He did so without hesitation. Stroking his cock with one hand, she massaged his balls with the other and knelt to the sand with him. Smiling, she traced the underside of his penis to the slit at the point. A bead of pre-cum greeted her. She stroked her fist down to the base then up again, pulling at the glans.

Nestling between his thighs, she stroked again, dotting kisses along the length, down to his sack. There she circled each one with her

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tongue, outlining them, following the line that divided them, sucking one then the other into her mouth.

Unintelligible sounds drifted from Ryan. Fists clutched the grains of sand beneath him. He lifted his hips, spreading his thighs wider for her. She figured now he really knew how she felt when he loved her.

She flicked her tongue up the under-ridge, earning a deeper groan. His testicles tightened in her hand, his cock pulsed. She sucked the pre-cum away, just taking the slit in her lips. Ryan thrust up, his body begging for more. Still she taunted, circling the head slowly with her tongue until he was completely helpless with need. Just as slowly, she sucked his length in deep.

Ryan groaned. His lips rose of their own volition. She twirled her tongue at the base and sucked again. Long fingers caught her head, holding her in place while he pivoted into her greedy mouth. Gently kneading, she coaxed his balls to release with one hand, while the other stroked where her mouth couldn't reach. He clenched, breath held. She suctioned harder, demanding his orgasm. The moonlight cast shadows around the cords clenched in his neck. He gritted his teeth in a poor effort to mute his pleasure. It still rumbled around them as he jerked spasmodically and came.

Rika stayed with him until his cock was flaccid, licking up any residue that might have escaped her. Ryan purred like a well-contented tomat.

"Holy cow, I don't think I can move."

"You won't have to." Her voice was husky with her own needs. Standing astride his waist, she stripped her shorts and panties off, then crawled up his body until she'd reached his lips. Spreading her labia, she offered herself.

Groaning, he dove into her like a starving man. He clutched her hips, holding her in place while he worked his tongue over, under, around, then deep inside. It felt like he was everywhere at once,

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torching her with tiny, feathered flames until she exploded in a wash of fire. Sated, Rika fell beside him on the sand and into his arms. The sounds of voices jerked them apart.

Muttering a curse, Ryan scrambled for their clothes. They dressed quickly and resumed their walk just as two other couples strolled into view.

Ryan hugged her against him and kissed her. “Now that’s what I call inventive. Think we can risk a shower together?”

She sighed as she snuggled against him. “Everyone should be asleep and we can be quiet when we need to. Think we can both fit on the couch? I’d love nothing more than to sleep in your arms tonight.”

“It’ll be tight, but we’ll give it a shot.”

They returned to the cabana in silence, content in each other’s company with the gentle waves serenading them. A shower was going to feel good—the warm spray, Ryan’s soapy hands gliding over her body.

He opened the cabana door quietly. A single nightlight burned in the kitchen. Rika smiled. Robyn was asleep on the couch.

Ryan smiled and drew Rika back outside. “Let’s save that joint shower for another time. I’ll meet you under the covers in five minutes.”

A tinsil-tickling kiss sealed the bargain. Rika eased back inside. She smiled down at her sister, silently thanking her consideration. Rika brushed a kiss to her forehead, and then hurried on to the bathroom.



## CHAPTER 4

Rika peered out the small kitchen window as she washed up the breakfast dishes. She and Ryan had wakened with the dawn. Truthfully, she was the one who got him “up.” Who could blame a woman? There was his nice morning erection just begging for attention. He sure didn’t complain. Oh, he might have moaned and groaned a bit. Rika smiled. It felt good to feel naughty.

After a nice cuddle, they’d fixed breakfast together. The smell of eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes brought everyone stumbling to the table, even the three young gentlemen in the cabana next door. Andy and Donny wolfed their meal down, anxious to hit the waves. Evan dawdled with his siblings, as usual. The first hint of beach, though, sped things along. The minute Ryan put on his swim trunks to start setting up for the party, Evan wasn’t far behind.

Rika let her gaze caress the curves and planes along Ryan’s torso. No matter how much sex they’d had in the last twenty-four hours, it

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didn't take much for her to want him again. She could feel the taste of his skin on her tongue as she traced the contours of his bronzed skin. Clearing her throat, she snapped her mind into place.

Ryan's brother, Matt, and his family had arrived minutes ago. While his wife, Lissa, raced after their two little boys, Matt and Ryan struggled to put up a large canvas awning. Rika had liked Matt and their other brother, Kevin, from the minute she'd met them. Although her initial business—the news article for Fletcher's—had been with Ryan, once she'd started doing a little side promotion for Fletcher's, she'd gotten better acquainted with the other two.

There certainly wasn't any doubt they were brothers—one look gave that away. But it was more than just on the surface, their personalities and business sense were similar, too. Being around the other two always made her feel more connected to Ryan. She supposed it was the sense of family that made it so, more than all the other qualities.

Matt's two boys boasted of energy. And his auburn-haired Lissa always had a smile. This was the first time she'd seen that smile completely unfettered.

Of the three brothers, Kevin was the most reserved, as was his wife. Yet to have children, they were content to wait. They both worked long hours—he at Fletcher's, Muriel as an accountant. Rika watched the couple pick their way across the sand. Muriel wore a straw hat as big as she was. With her fair skin, Rika could certainly sympathize. She was sure a day at the beach wasn't on Muriel's list of top ten things to do, but you'd never know it by the smile on her face. A younger woman, who closely resembled Muriel, tagged along behind them. Her long, dark hair wafted behind her.

Seeing the awning nearly up, Muriel let out a whoop then dashed for the shade, dragging a clattering lawn chair behind her. Kevin rolled his eyes and continued to struggle with their ice chest. The other

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woman hurried to catch her. As Muriel snapped her chair dead center of the shade, the other woman snapped a blanket into place and tossed her tote bag on top. With a twist, she secured her wavy dark hair to the top of her head with a barrette then froze, her gaze fixed on Ryan's trailer. Actually, on Andy.

Up until that point Rika had never thought of her brother as a man, but now, seeing him through the eyes of another woman, she could appreciate that fact. Andy was sculpted to perfection—his pecs well-defined, his stomach washboard lean. He smiled a greeting to the girl then walked on by, surfboard in hand and Donny close behind. The girl's gaze followed him. Behind her back, Kevin dropped the ice chest and dramatically clutched his hands to his heart. The other three adults struggled to keep their smirks in check. Rika didn't have that problem. Her laugh pulled their attention her way.

"How much more fooling around can you do in there?" Ryan shouted.

"Can't do any fooling around with you outside," she shot back.

That brought the color to his cheeks. Matt slugged him in the shoulder. Rika laughed.

"Get your suit on. The dishes can wait," Ryan said.

Rika hooked the strap of her swimsuit and lifted it for him to see. He wiggled his eyebrows, then stretched on tiptoe for a better peek. Rika waved him back and turned to Amy and Kristi.

"Just about ready?"

Robyn smeared sunscreen over Amy's shoulder as the five-year-old wiggled in front of her. "Finally...go on. I'll be right behind you." The two dashed out the door. Robyn wiped her hands on her beach towel. "And Ryan's right, the dishes can wait."

"Dishes are done." Rika snagged a couple of towels off the stack near the door, grabbed the sunscreen, and followed the kids.

Ryan's smile greeted her. The look he passed over her yellow

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swimsuit told her he liked it. She was half-tempted to sneak a peek at his crotch to see if he *really* liked it. Her suit might not be the latest style, but it was her favorite. It was tied strategically in two places to keep from exposing her breasts before the plunging V-neck ended at her midriff. The leg openings were cut high, yet covered enough of her body to keep from being immodest. She tossed towels and sunscreen to the nearest chair, then pulled her hair back in a scrunchie.

Ryan didn't hesitate to take advantage of her distraction. "I like this. You look *very* nice in it." He brushed the backs of his fingers over her middle and smiled.

She longed to pull open those strings that held the suit together and press his marauding hand to her flesh.

Matt nudged him aside. "Give the girl some room to breathe. I'm sure you've been on her all night."

Rika felt like her cheeks would bust with the smile she gave Ryan. "Don't blame him completely. He's hard to resist."

Kevin stuck his finger down his throat and pretended to gag. "The hard part I don't doubt, but resisting? Please."

Ryan turned a smirk toward his brothers. "Rika, I believe you have the dubious pleasure of knowing everyone here...except Chesney."

The young woman finally tore her gaze from Andy's backside. "I'm Muriel's sister—Chesney Dresden," she said with a smile. "You are obviously the Rika I've heard so much about lately." She glanced back at Andy. "I like your brother. He single?"

"Oh, yeah. Go get him," Rika replied with a laugh.

Chesney smiled. "I think I will." She slipped on sunglasses and wandered toward the ocean.

"Now there's a tiger on the prowl." Muriel slathered sunscreen over her legs.

"Must run in the family." Kevin gave her a wink as he set the ice chest under the awning. "Speaking of tigers... I saw you two in action

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on the evening news. Mom is freaking out. Can't say I blame her. I don't know whether to take you to a psychiatrist, or offer to manage you in the boxing ring."

Rika dodged the Frisbee Evan sailed her way. Ryan caught it with one hand and hurled it back.

"It was stupid and impetuous, and I hope your parents will forgive me for putting their son in danger," she said.

Matt snatched the returning Frisbee in mid-air before Ryan could grab it. "I think Mom and Dad will probably say Ryan is a big boy and has a mind of his own. But I'd love to know what the hell you were thinking."

"Apparently, I wasn't thinking." All of a sudden, she felt like crying. How could she explain to any of them what it felt like to be at the end of your rope, emotionally and financially? Rika honestly didn't know what embarrassed her more—her dire straights or her fool-hardy actions.

"Can we go swimming now?" eight-year-old Kristi asked.

She forced a smile from the pit of her doldrums. "Absolutely!"

Ryan grabbed the Frisbee from his brother and tossed it Evan's way. "Last one there is a rotten egg."

Shrieking with delight, the girls zoomed off with Ryan and Evan close behind. The boy's shorter legs pounded the sand in an effort to beat his idol. Ryan slowed, giving the boy a clear edge. Then he grabbed Lissa around the waist and hauled her into the water with him. The woman let out a howl that brought her two boys running. They hit the water with a splash. Lissa clamped her arms around Ryan's waist and dragged him down while the five kids tackled him.

"Now that looks like too much fun." Matt nudged Kevin and the two trotted off.

"Men...they never grow up." Muriel wiped her hands on her towel. "So... Why did you slug the bank robber?"

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Rika's joy faded. "It was all the money I had."

Muriel hauled a book from her tote bag. "Been there, done that. Don't want to do it again. If I'd been in your shoes, I probably would've done the same thing. There's no shame in admitting it, although I know you feel there is. The biggest problem would be one of those three demanding to know why you didn't say something about your problems." She jerked her head toward the Fletcher brothers.

"I certainly couldn't ask—"

Muriel lifted her hand. "I know that. And it says volumes of wonderful things about you that you didn't. But we're dealing with three white knights and you didn't let any of them save the damsel in distress. The guilt must be killing Ryan." She gave Rika a wicked grin. "Take my advice—use it to your advantage."

Rika laughed. "You are evil."

She nodded gleefully. "Girl's got to have an edge. Anna and Mitch are going to love you."

Rika hoped so. She couldn't bear it if Ryan's parents didn't like her. "What time will they be here?"

"Probably just in time to eat. Then they'll leave before we start to clean up." She smiled. "Anna calls it their God-given right to mooch. Feels they've earned it. Imagine that."

"Imagine."

Leaving Muriel to her patch of shade, Rika wandered down to the water where Ryan still battled little kids. Matt and Lissa had drifted into deeper water, leaving their two to Kevin. Everyone looked like they were having the best time ever. She laughed out loud when the kids managed to topple Ryan yet again.

"You think rolling around in this cold water with these three munchkins is funny, huh?" he called to her. "Why don't you join us?"

"No, thanks. Maybe later in the afternoon."

"I don't think that's fair. Do you, kids?"

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Their answer was a unanimous, “No.”

“Let’s get her.” He stalked toward her, dripping water and dangling children from his arms.

Rika caught the glint of mischief in his eyes and edged away.

“Where do you think you’re going? Chicken?” He dropped the kids and lunged for her.

Rika squealed as he scooped her in his arms and walked back into the water.

“Please don’t get me wet. Please don’t.” She clutched him around the neck and pulled herself away from the water.

“Dunk her, Ryan,” the children urged.

“No, no. Please don’t.”

Evan sent a splash of water in their direction. Rika gasped for air when the droplets rained upon them.

“Oh, please, anything but this,” she screeched.

Ryan’s eyes widened with his grin. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

His gaze caressed her face. “My mind is running rampant with all kinds of possibilities.”

She laughed. “I’ll just bet.”

“Since the tide just went out, let’s see what kind of sand castle we can build before it comes back in.”

Again, he struck a chord in the children’s hearts. They raced to the cabana for buckets and shovels while Ryan set Rika safely on dry land.

“What’s all the excitement about?” Robyn called out.

Rika glanced up at her sister and felt her jaw drop. The bikini Robyn wore barely covered her, plus it was flesh colored, giving the illusion of nudity. Male passers-by did a double take.

“Have you lost your mind? You look naked.”

Robyn snapped a towel open on the sand. “I think it looks sexy.”

Rika opened her mouth for a comeback. Ryan’s hand on her waist

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stopped her.

“Sometimes, Robyn,” he said, “a man finds it sexier to imagine what he can’t see, than to have what’s there on display.”

She pursed her lips, slammed on her sunglasses, and flopped face down onto her towel. They had been, in no uncertain terms, dismissed.

Rika took a step toward her.

Ryan held her back. “The more you say, the more stubborn she’ll get,” he said softly. “She’ll learn...Come on. We’ve got a castle to build.”

Minor construction would have been a better term for the sand sculpture. It was a project that involved everyone, with the exception of Robyn. Even Muriel dared the sun to help, slathering on fresh sunscreen every fifteen minutes. They used anything they could find—plastic buckets and shovels, spoons, knives, forks, bowls, and spatulas.

They’d barely started when the elder Fletchers arrived—much earlier than anticipated. After quick introductions were traded, they jumped right in just like it was an old family tradition. For all Rika knew, it could have been. They were all too well in tune with each other for this to be new.

She liked Mitch and Anna Fletcher on sight. The couple looked like they belonged together. Mitch’s hair was a distinguished salt-and-pepper gray while Anna’s was still a deep, rich brown. Their eyes mirrored those of their sons, and every once in a while, Rika noticed a gesture or two she’d seen in their offspring.

The sand castle certainly helped curtail Rika’s nervousness over meeting them. Working in silent companionship, it was the perfect ice-breaker. What resulted was a monumental work of art extending twenty feet down the beach and five feet in width.

At the center was a turreted castle complete with moat and bridge. Surrounding it was a small fiefdom of hills and houses. At each end, dragons lay vanquished by the sword of a heroic knight. The effort



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drew a stream of curious people and fans who kept their distance while the work was completed. When the last grain was smoothed into place, cheers and applause followed, and the workers waited for the incoming tide to reclaim the sand.

“Yep.” Mitch rocked back on his heels to admire their handiwork. “It’s our best ever.”

“Now we wait for the tide. Come on.” Anna hauled him to his feet. “I could use a dip in the ocean.”

Rika and Ryan bided their time by taking the children into the water, too. Andy and Donny returned to the waves, this time with Chesney riding tandem on Andy’s board. Only Robyn remained onshore, flirting with the young men who crowded around her. Rika wondered if she did it more to grate on her nerves than for anything else.

Ryan grabbed her around the waist, pulling her around. “If you let her know it bothers you, she’ll keep doing it.”

She leaned into him. “I just don’t understand why she’s acting this way all of a sudden. We’re so close.”

“Was today the first time you disagreed with something she wanted to do?”

“Yes, I think so.” But there was that issue of curfew last week. Robyn was more than pissed and hadn’t talked to her civilly for two days afterward.

“Then that’s probably the problem,” Ryan said.

“But I’m supposed to watch out for her.”

“I know that. But for seventeen years you were her sister. Now you’re her guardian. What teenager accepts authority?”

Rika’s gaze flicked back to the beach. Anna sat at the water’s edge with Amy and Kristi catching the waves. The girls were waiting to bury Ryan in the sand. Mitch watched with Matt and Kevin from the lawn chairs. Several other people from Fletcher’s had shown up and the

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party looked like it was in full swing. Even from this distance Rika could smell burgers cooking.

"I get so tired sometimes, Ryan. I don't know what's right or wrong. I feel I'm torn in so many directions. Sometimes I'm even resentful. Then I feel guilty for feeling that way."

He laced his fingers through hers and brought her hand to his lips. "Don't feel guilty. You just need a little help, a little back up. That's what I'm here for." He slid his arm around her waist and drew her close.

"And here I thought it was to give me endless pleasure."

"That, too." He kissed the curve of her neck.

Rika closed her eyes on a sigh. "But things are so complicated. The house is so small. Three bedrooms, six people, and Andy sleeps on the couch when he's there. Robyn and I share a room. There's no place to be alone. I have to be careful because I don't want to lose the kids."

"You're worrying too much. Things will work out fine. I'm not going to do a thing that will cause you to lose those kids." He lowered his lips to hers and slipped his tongue between them.

Rika wiggled her fingers into his hair as she twined her tongue around his.

"Hey, watch out!"

Before they could pull apart, a wave smashed them underwater. They bounced up, spurting water, and laughing.

"You okay?" Andy paddled toward them.

"Fine," Rika called back. "The kids want victims to bury in the sand. Ryan volunteered. How 'bout you?"

"Be right there."

By the time the tide had remolded the sand castle into an unrecognizable lump, Ryan and Andy were covered to their necks in sand. Rika gave Ryan the luxury of her lap for a pillow then combed her fingers through his thick, brown hair while she studied his face.

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From time to time she pampered him with lemonade he drank through a straw. Being together had never felt more right. If only she could freeze this moment of bliss. How much longer before the real world and all its problems intruded?

\* \* \*

It just didn't get any better than this. Ryan couldn't recall when he'd felt more comfortable and at ease. His head in Rika's lap, his family and friends all around, everyone having a great time. Well, everyone but Robyn, who suddenly seemed like she had a point to prove. A very bad point.

He did his best to shrug off the irritation. It wasn't easy to do, but Rika's gentle caress against his forehead had a hypnotic effect on him. He closed his eyes to enjoy it, glad for the sand that hid his painful erection.

"Wow!" Kevin rattled the newspaper in his hands.

Ryan opened one eye. He'd almost fallen asleep and didn't appreciate the jolt. "What is it?"

"Listen to this deal." He leaned forward, elbows on knees as he read. "The Wind Racer Corporation says they've designed a new sailboat that can out-race any other. To prove it, they're sponsoring a race. Ten boats, nine of which are donated from competitors. Two-man teams. No one will know which is the prototype, until after the race. Applicants must have a passport, all current shots, and be able to take a physical fitness test. And, of course, they must be able to demonstrate skill at sailing. The winning team gets one million dollars."

Ryan gave a low whistle. "That's a lot of money for a race."

"It's some race. They're jumping on the reality show craze. Cameras will film intermittently. They leave from Miami, stop at specified ports in the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal to Hawaii, then home to San Diego. They start screening people next week. You should go for it. You kick ass on the water."

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“A trip like that would take at least a month...maybe longer.” He didn’t want to be away from Rika again. All the money in the world wasn’t worth that. And, of course, there was his job. “But I’d love to get a look at that prototype.”

Kevin twisted around to Muriel. “Hey, Vampira, how ’bout—”

“No,” she quickly responded.

“Give me one could reason—”

“You get seasick.”

Ryan laughed with the others. “She’s got you there.”

Feigning embarrassment, he returned to his newspaper. “There’s also an article here about the bank robbery. Want me to read it to you?”

“No, thanks.” Rika didn’t need that thrown in her face again. Frankly, neither did Ryan.

She combed her fingers through his hair. “It’s getting late and the kids need to eat.”

“Be right there.” Ryan burst from his sand cocoon. “Have a towel waiting for me. I’m going to wash off and be right back.”

He trotted to the water praying no one would see the erection bouncing before him. The shock of cool water helped jolt his system back to almost normal. He dove into an approaching wave for extra measure, bobbed to the surface then body-surfed the next wave to shore. The brush of air against his wet body finished him off. *Now* he could face the others. Just in case, he ran to the cabanas.

Rika held out a towel, carefully leaning away to avoid any drops that might fall on her.

He blotted his skin dry. “You want to feel cold, I could carry you back to the water.”

“Don’t you dare, Ryan Fletcher.” Her green eyes sparkled.

Tempting as it was to grab her and press his wet body to hers, Ryan knew doing so would put him back in the same predicament he’d just left. Instead, he gave her a wink and grabbed a plate.

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“So, Amy, what will it be? Hot dog or hamburger?” He smiled down at the five-year-old.

“Hot dog and I like ’em burned.”

“My kind of girl.” He plucked the most charred one he could find off the grill. “Where’s Robyn?” And why wasn’t she at least offering to help with the little ones.

Amy knelt on the bench of the picnic table, trying to get a better look at what he was doing. “She went for a walk with some boys. Ketchup and mustard. No pickles. I hate pickles.”

Ryan gave a quick scan of the beach. Robyn was nowhere in sight.

Andy swore and leaped to his feet. “Did you see which way she went?”

Amy pointed up the beach, and Andy stormed off in that direction.

Ryan saw the worry in Rika’s eyes. For now there was little to do but occupy her mind until Andy returned with their sister. “Come on. It’ll be fine. Let’s eat.”

\* \* \*

Rika let him take charge of feeding them, watching as he plopped a burger on her plate and shoved it her way. Concern for Robyn knotted her stomach. What was wrong with her all of a sudden? How could one disagreement over a bikini cause this much trouble? Each bite Rika took of her hamburger lay in her stomach like a lead weight. She shoved herself away from the table. “I’ll be right back.”

She hurried into the cabana. She swore her stride shook the whole trailer as if tattling on her. Rika didn’t have to search for what she was looking for—the bottle of Mylanta was never far from reach. She unscrewed the top with a single twist then took a gulp of the chalky liquid.

“How much of that stuff do you drink?” Ryan asked.

Rika spun around. The damn sneak. He’d have to know, of course, and from his glower, she doubted she’d able to put him off with a joke.

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“A bottle every two days,” she quietly replied. “Sometimes two.”

Ryan winced. “I’ll see if I can help Andy find Robyn.”

Rika stared after his departing figure wondering what she had done in life to be blessed with this man. He cared about her and the kids...really seemed to care. He had from the start. Being away had to have frustrated him. Although he wasn’t happy about it, Rika was glad she’d kept their true circumstances to herself. She’d never want to cause him worry. But now that he was here, she cautioned herself to not give into the urge to dump it all on his shoulders. Ryan deserved a hell of a lot better than that.

\* \* \*

Ryan’s footsteps gouged holes in the sand. A bottle of Mylanta every two days? Sometimes two? Ridiculous. Rika was under too much stress, stress that could be lessened if the kids would work with her instead of against her. Donny’s surliness, Robyn’s rebellion, and Andy’s pressure to make her be a firmer disciplinarian all took their toll. Well, he was here now and things were going to change. He would *not* have Rika in the hospital because of ulcers.

He found Andy and Robyn arguing on the perimeter of a large party. When they saw him, both turned their argument his way. Ryan refused to listen. In one heave, he tossed Robyn over his shoulder.

“Rika wants you to come back and that’s were you’re going.”

“You can’t treat me like this!” She tore off a scream and kicked him in the chest.

“Kick me again and I won’t hesitate to spank you,” he said, and stomped away.

Andy trotted alongside, a smirk of triumph plastered on his lips.

Ryan didn’t release Robyn until they were inside the cabana. Then he unceremoniously dumped her on the couch.

She snapped to her feet and jammed her fists on hips where a spaghetti strap was the only thing between her and nudity. “I’ve never

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been so humiliated in my whole life! How dare you come after me like I was five years old!" She jerked a finger at Ryan. "Toting me down here like...like...like a sack of bird seed!"

"It wouldn't have been necessary if you'd left with me."

"Stop it!" Rika pressed a fist against her stomach.

The action stabbed Ryan through the heart—her guts were in knots.

She pulled in a deep breath and faced her sister. "I was worried about you. You didn't tell anyone where you were going."

"You're not my mother. I don't have to report to you."

Rika jerked from the words as if slapped. "No, I'm not your mother. But I am responsible for you."

"Not for much longer." She was hinting about her eighteenth birthday just months away, a joyous event that now held a threat behind it.

Andy muscled his way between them. "Ground her for a couple of weeks. I'll bet that'll change her attitude."

Robyn shoved her face within inches of his. "Who do you think—"

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Rika beat her fists against the air. Tears flooded her beautiful eyes. "I've had enough of this. I'm taking a shower."

Ryan waited until he heard the bathroom door close. "Don't you two see how this is tearing her up? First, Donny. Now you two."

Robyn pushed past him and prissed to her room.

"I'm trying to help Rika," Andy said.

"You're pressuring her instead of taking a more active role yourself."

His eyes widened. "I...I didn't realize. Excuse me. Chesney's waiting next door for me." Andy stumbled outside.

A few minutes later, Ryan followed. He found Andy and Chesney in quiet conversation, fingers interlocked while Andy unburdened his guilt. Ryan was careful not to disturb them. While they talked, he stood

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under a warm shower to wash the beach away.

\* \* \*

Kristi and Amy were all tucked in bed, sound asleep, and still Rika faced a closed bedroom door. Knowing how angry Robyn was, she didn't dare risk another confrontation by walking into the bedroom. She'd sleep on the couch if she had to. Let her hair dry in a tangled mess. Anything to avoid more upset. Her stomach burned. She'd have to do without her Mylanta, too. In her cotton nightshirt, Rika settled onto the couch with her feet tucked under her and combed her fingers through her damp hair.

Ryan had sure seen the bad side, the normal side, of them now. *If he was smart, he'd head for the hills.* Just the thought broke her heart. How could she bear up under dealing with all this and losing him, too? She felt like crying.

She heard the door open and looked up to find Andy and Chesney standing there.

"We thought maybe you and Ryan would like some time to yourselves," Andy told her. "I know you worry about the kids needing you, so Chesney and I will stay here. He's outside waiting." He pulled her to her feet and shoved her out the door. "Go."

Rika stepped down into cool sand and shivered—all she had on was her knee-length nightshirt. She was about to return for something warmer when Ryan called to her.

"I've got a blanket and me waiting for you. Come over and we'll both keep you warm."

Rika could hear the smile in his voice. "After what happened, I'm surprised you're still speaking to me."

"I'd like to think I have some moral fiber. I'm a hero, remember?"

"How could I possibly forget?" she said with a soft laugh.

He patted the chair webbing. "Come sit."

How could she resist him? She nestled her bottom between his open



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legs, leaning back against the hard wall of his chest as he tossed the blanket over her.

“How’s that?” He closed his arms around her.

“You’re really something. Is it a sex thing that keeps you here?”

Ryan’s low chuckle rumbled in his chest. “I’m in trouble no matter which way I answer that one.” His tone became serious once more. “I didn’t like what happened tonight, but I’m not going to run off because of it. I meant it, Rika. I’m part of this. I’m going to do whatever I can to help you...before that bottle of Mylanta turns into something worse.”

She tilted her head back and kissed him. A deep kiss filled with all the emotions she couldn’t find words to express.

He cradled her as if she were the greatest treasure in the world; at least he made her feel that way. An erection quickly grew against her hip. Rika rubbed against him. He answered with a soft moan and slid his hand under her nightshirt. Over her thigh. Across her stomach. And up to wrap around her breast where his thumb brushed her hardened nipple. Smothering a groan, she took another kiss.

God, did he know what he was doing to her? Electric shocks of pleasure shot through her with every caress. She longed to rip away the material separating them and press her burning flesh to his. And those lips—firm, persistent, demanding, yet gently marauding her senses.

She tried to roll around to face him, to sit astride the erection pulsing with urgent intensity against her. But Ryan held her in place each time she tried to move.

Rika sealed another kiss. “But I want—”

“This?” His hand slid downward, deep into her panties.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she parted her thighs. Long fingers parted her labia, tracing the slick path over and over, all the while avoiding where she most needed his touch. She protested the neglect with a grunt, trying to force his fingers where she wanted. With each attempt, Ryan moved further away, kneading her inner thighs, the U around her

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pussy, everywhere except her clit. Pressure built, swelling her until Rika swore she just might come anyway. One hand played between her breasts, tweaking and twirling her rock hard nipples and adding to her agony.

“Please,” she whispered.

He nipped at her neck, pinched her nipple, and circled her clit.

Rika arched up on a sharp gasp. She pressed her lips tight, fighting the urge to cry out while she twitched wantonly in his arms. Fists nailed the blanket around them. Climax was so close. Just as she saw the peak, he jerked his hand away.

“What...”

Grabbing her hips, Ryan turned her around. Frantic for contact, Rika fished his cock from his shorts, shoved the crotch of her panties aside and seated herself hard. Fast thrusts rasped her cotton panties over her clit. She came in a flash, riding him madly while he joined her.

Heads butted together, they gasped for breath. It was too late to worry if any of the family in the other cabanas had seen them. If so, Rika was certain they’d be teased about it tomorrow.

A shrill scream from up the beach jerked them apart.

Robyn burst through the darkness clutching the tattered remnants of her bikini to her. She’d snuck out. Behind her, three young men closed in. One leaped forward and tackled her to the sand.

Before Rika could move, Ryan shoved his cock in his shorts, swung his leg over her, and sped to Robyn’s aid. Rika was vaguely aware of Andy zooming past her. She grabbed the blanket and followed.

Robyn’s attackers were oblivious to the assistance coming her way. Two of them pinned her down for the third one to use. He clamped a hand securely over her mouth to keep her from crying out. With a leering grin displaying his crooked teeth, he yanked his swim trunks down. His hard-on popped free. A hard knee to her thighs parted them. Grabbing his dick in his hand, he aimed.

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“You son-of-a...” Ryan hauled Robyn’s attacker up by a fistful of shirt and hurled him into the ocean. The other two fell over themselves trying to get away.

Rika snapped the blanket around her sister. Robyn clung to her, sobbing while Ryan and Andy pulled the young man from the water.

Rika rocked her as if she were no bigger than Amy. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Footsteps beat a path their way—Matt and Kevin. They didn’t bother to ask what happened. It was obvious from the aftermath. Their wives stood at the cabanas with Anna and Mitch.

“I’ll call the police,” she heard Matt say.

Robyn’s grip tightened. “No, police. Please. Just let it go. I’m okay. It’s my fault.”

“No, it isn’t.”

She shook her head. “Please, Rika. No cops.”

Rika sighed. Ryan grudgingly accepted the decision, while Andy dealt with it less than gracefully. After shoving the would-be rapist in the direction his friends had fled, Andy marched back inside, a string of muttered expletives spewing from him.

Ryan knelt beside them. “He’ll be cooled off by morning. Let’s get you inside and under a warm shower.”

“I want to go home. Rika, take me home tonight.”

“But the kids are all asleep—”

“Oh, please. I want to go home.”

Rika knew how upset she was, but waking up the kids and packing up now? It wasn’t a simple thing to do. They’d be crabby and difficult. More arguments would break out. Still, seeing the tortured look in her baby sister’s big brown eyes was tearing her apart. She’d have to take her home.

\* \* \*

Ryan could see the decision in her eyes as her expression changed

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from disbelief to anger and then to guilt. *Damn it, she needs a break, too*, he thought. Robyn *had* been through a horrible ordeal, but packing up now wasn't going to do anyone any good. Rika didn't need that hassle, and it would be a hassle even with help. It was an argument he knew he'd lose.

"You two go home. Andy and I will be there tomorrow with the others. No sense spoiling their fun. You go take a shower, Robyn. I'll help Rika pack your things."

Clutching the blanket around her, the girl hurried away.

Rika slipped her arms around him. "Thank you. I know how hard that was for you to agree to."

*Sweetheart, you have no idea*, he thought. Ryan rubbed her back and ignored his brothers' stares that called him crazy not to call the police and report the incident. He didn't need them to tell him. He already knew.

## CHAPTER 5

Rika darted a sidelong glance Robyn's way. She'd been quiet during the hour-long drive home, with only an occasional snuffle to accompany her vigilant stare out the window. There were several times Rika opened her mouth to offer comfort. But each time she rehearsed what she was about to say, it sounded more like a recrimination than solace, so she kept quiet. Later she'd be able to help Robyn through this...with Ryan's help.

That thought made her smile. What a guy...a hell of a guy. Her mind drifted to the mind-numbing kiss he'd burned into her mouth prior to her departure. A kiss he'd given in full view of everyone. A kiss that broadcast how he really felt to those too stupid not to have understood by now. A kiss that spawned butterflies in her stomach. Just thinking about it made them flutter still. The sensation of going over a hill too fast washed over her. Rika gasped.

Robyn's head jerked around. "What's wrong?"

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“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Robyn accepted the answer and turned back to look out the window. A few minutes later, they pulled into their driveway.

A figure darted in front of the headlights. Rika slammed on the brakes. Even as the masked man pulled the revolver from under his jacket, the full impact of what he intended didn't hit Rika until he leveled the weapon their way.

“Get down!”

She jerked the van into reverse and squealed down the driveway. Robyn dove down. The seat belt wouldn't let her go far. The windshield shattered. Glass stung Rika's skin.

He ran behind the van, firing another shot. Rika ducked behind the wheel and swerved. The rear window exploded. Robyn screamed.

Rika yanked the van in the opposite direction, plowing into the neighbor's white picket fence. Boards flew into the air. Lights flicked on in the houses as she careened down the street.

She watched, terror-stricken, as a white Mustang closed the distance between them. The man aimed once more. She skidded through an intersection. The van teetered on two wheels, then righted itself.

A siren blasted through the night. Rika saw flashing red-and-blue lights close the gap on her pursuer. The Mustang zoomed down a side street, the squad car close behind. A second car signaled Rika to pull over.

Robyn snapped open her seat belt then threw her arms around Rika. Glass was everywhere. Sobs reached her—Robyn's. Rika couldn't think straight, much less comfort her. She was vaguely aware of the doors to the police car slamming, of the patter of footsteps as the officers raced her way.

“Ma'am, are you all right?”

She should roll down the window. Then she realized the glass was gone. There was nothing left to roll down.

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“That...that man tried to kill us.” She couldn’t quite believe it herself.

“Come with us. You’ll need to file a report at the station. We’ll have a tow truck get your van.” He held the door open for her.

Rika nodded, but couldn’t move.

“Ma’am...Ma’am...You need to let go of the wheel and come with us.” He gently pried her hands away. Cupping her elbow in a sturdy grip, he helped her exit.

Her legs threatened to give way. She leaned into the van. One shaking hand reached up to brush the hair from her neck. Glass tinkled to the street. She glanced down. Small cuts were splashed along her arms.

“Radio for the paramedics,” one officer told the other.

“No.” Rika forced the words out. Paramedics cost money, didn’t they? She couldn’t remember for sure, but refused to take that chance.

“Can we call someone for you?”

Rika nodded, but it was Robyn who answered. “Ryan Fletcher. Fletcher Beach Resort. Cabana 28.”

\* \* \*

“Miss Kiley, do you have any idea why someone would want to kill you?”

Rika sipped her fourth cup of coffee and shook her head.

Detective Molina placed his stubby fingers over her arm to comfort her. He was shorter than Rika, but as stocky as a line backer. Gray was sprinkled through dark brown hair that matched his eyes. She’d seen compassion there as well as determination. Heaven help the criminal who crossed his path.

The detective had wasted no time seeing to the victims now in his care. Before their butts hit the chairs, he ordered a first aid kit be brought, as well as water for them. He’d even helped a policewoman clean up their wounds. Thank God those were only superficial.

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"I know this is difficult for you. But since we were unable to catch that Mustang, we need as much information from you as possible."

"I wish I could tell you more, but that's all there is." She was usually very observant, noting even the minutest details. The fight to keep them alive took all she had...and then some. She didn't know how she'd managed to drive to the police station. Maybe she was stupid for doing so, but the van was still drivable and she refused to pay for a tow truck, no matter how rattled she was.

Long fingers closed over her shoulder. She looked up—Ryan.

He wrapped his arms around her before she could stand. "I'd like a little more detail about what happened."

Molina pulled another chair over while Rika retold the story.

"And you couldn't catch this guy?" Ryan rubbed calming circles on her shoulder with his thumb.

The detective scrunched his Styrofoam cup in one hand and tossed it to the trash. "No, he got away. There is one possibility, though."

"What's that?"

"Well, Miss Kiley did get a good look at that bank robber. Maybe it was him or his partner."

All this just for a lousy one-hundred-fifty dollars in change. Rika felt more stupid than ever.

"It would probably be a good idea if you didn't go back to your house tonight, Miss Kiley. We'll have a patrol car drive by there from time to time," Molina told her.

"Miss Kiley and her family will be staying with me for a while," Ryan said.

Rika didn't argue the point. "If my sister is done with her interview, can we go now?"

"She's waiting in the hallway." Molina stood with them. "We'll keep in touch. Let us know if anything else happens."

Robyn wrapped an arm around both of them when Rika and Ryan



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joined her. Her eyes were red and her nose puffy from tears, but for now she was composed.

"I'm so sorry. This is my fault." A new crop of tears puddled. "If I'd stayed at the cabana—"

"Then he'd only have tried another time when all of you were there." Ryan steered them toward the exit. "Come on. When I told everyone what was going on, Mom insisted I take you to their house so you two can get some rest. Andy's going to meet us there in the morning. I'd take you to my apartment, but it'll be much too crowded with the kids."

"I've had four cups of coffee. I couldn't rest now if you paid me." Rika rubbed a chill from her arms. Would she ever stop quivering? Right now she couldn't tell if it was from the caffeine or shock. "Besides, I'd feel better if the kids were with me. Can we get them first?"

"Sure. And that'll put Andy's mind at ease. We'll get your van tomorrow."

"Good. I couldn't drive anymore if you put a gun..." She bit off the rest of the cliché. It was too close to the truth.

Ryan hugged her. "Let's get your things from it and go. The sooner we get you safe and settled for the night, the happier I'll be."

Rika silently echoed that sentiment.

\* \* \*

Ryan's brothers flanked a shaking Andy. Rika was more than grateful for their support. Andy looked like a nervous wreck. She wasn't much better herself. The second they walked in the door, he smothered his sisters in tight hugs. He looked close to tears. Chesney stood off to the side with Muriel, wringing her hands.

"Everything's packed," Muriel said. "All we have to do is carry the kids to the cars. Mom and Dad are at the house waiting for you. What in the world happened?"

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For what felt like the millionth time that night, Rika gave an account of their ordeal. She ended with, “But they did manage to get the license number. The only problem is the car was stolen.”

Matt stretched to his feet. “You’ll be safe at our parents’ house ’til this blows over.”

Rika twisted her hands. Living with Ryan—crowded as it’d be—was one thing, but it seemed a big intrusion on someone she’d just met. “Won’t they mind?”

Chesney laughed. “Anna and Mitch mind? No way. The more the merrier, they always say. They put up with me and Muriel all those years. From what I’ve seen, you guys aren’t much different.”

*Muriel and Chesney lived with the Fletchers?* she wondered silently.

Before Rika could indulge her curiosity, Kevin stood. “That’s a story for another time. It’s getting late. Let’s get the kids settled. With any luck, you might actually get some sleep tonight.”

It was going to take a lot of luck as far as Rika was concerned. She was too keyed up.

The children barely moved when they were toted to the cars. Donny, however, grumbled and complained the entire time. Rika tried her best to ignore him. There’d been enough excitement for one night. She didn’t need to add an argument to the list.

But Ryan’s patience snapped. Before Donny could plop in the passenger seat of Andy’s car, Ryan grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him around.

He shoved a finger in the boy’s face. “Your sisters have been through a lot tonight. Have a little consideration for someone besides yourself.” He pushed him into his seat and slammed the door.

Donny stared after him in dumbstruck silence.

Rika watched him through sad eyes until she felt Ryan’s hand slip around her waist.

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“It’ll be fine. Just give it time.”

“I feel so helpless. I don’t know how to reach him.”

“He’s at an awkward age...puberty sucks. His parents are gone. He’s troubled and angry. Since he doesn’t seem to want to talk to you or Andy about it, maybe he’ll eventually feel he can come to me. But, until then, I won’t put up with his crap.”

Rika cupped a palm to his cheek. “Are you real, Ryan Fletcher? Or are you a dream?”

He laughed. “Some people would call me a nightmare.” He kissed her palm, then started the vehicle.

In less than a half hour, the small convoy was winding its way up the driveway to the Fletcher home.

Rika knew the place well. The Fletcher family home could be seen for miles. Situated on a hilltop overlooking San Diego, the house looked as if it belonged more to Cape Cod than Southern California. The first floor of two-story, white-frame house was surrounded by windows instead of walls.

Rika had always been captivated by its simplistic design. The many windows gave her the impression of a bright and cheerful home.

They parked in front of a garage Ryan explained was more of a storeroom. Even the red Audi belonging to Ryan’s parents was parked outside, right beside a large recreational vehicle.

The scent of flowers wafted to her as she stepped out. Dogs barked from within a house awash with lights. The door swung open before Rika could take another step. Anna and Mitch rushed out. Anna had the vehicle door open and Amy in her arms before Rika could stop her.

Ryan gave her an audible *tsk*. “You can cuddle them later, Mom.”

“And you can bet I will. Upstairs...everyone. I’ve tucked the four-legged kids away so there’ll be no distractions.” Hidden meaning—so kids and pets didn’t meet up. They’d be wide-awake then and it’d be a while before they’d be back to sleep.

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Amy cradled in her arms, Anna pushed ahead, directing them to their rooms.

She pointed out the bathroom, the master bedroom, the stairs leading to the attic room, then helped settle the children before herding everyone else back downstairs.

It was a dream. It had to be. To open their home to a group of people, strangers even if it was Ryan's girlfriend, in the dead of night had to be... Rika didn't know what. It seemed everything about Ryan and his family was heaven-sent. How in the world could she ever give back to him and them half of what had been offered to her?

"Sit, everyone. Please." Anna motioned to the table. "You don't know how thankful I am you are all right. What in the world happened? You two have more cuts and scratches... I should get the first aid kit."

Ryan caught her arm and drew her into a chair. "Just sit, Mom." When she complied, he gave a brief rundown of the event.

Rika was more than grateful she was spared from narrating.

"You've had quite a night," Mitch said. "Ryan, drag out that bottle of wine from the fridge. I think these ladies could use something to calm their nerves." He patted Robyn's hand. "Now I don't advocate minors drinking, but after tonight, I think just one little glass won't hurt you."

Ryan passed a glass Robyn's way. The second glass went to Rika. "After all the coffee you had, you need something to bring you back to earth."

Rika accepted the stemware with quivering fingers. She could feel Anna's gaze appraising her. Questioning? Accusing? Condemning her for being stupid enough to put her family in danger in the first place? Rika didn't what to know. It was all too nice—too good to be true. She didn't want to ruin it.

"We won't be a burden to you, Anna," she said without meeting her gaze. "I don't expect you to take care of us. You don't even have to

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feed us. I have food. I'll take our clothes down to the laundromat...even the sheets and towels we use. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's been a hell of a night. I need to do something to take my mind off all of this. Now's a good time for me to catch up on my sewing."

"Rika—"

She jerked up her hand, stopping Robyn in mid-protest. "Yes, I brought a bag of sewing with me. Please make sure the groceries get put in the refrigerator." She shoved her glass of wine away. "Someone else can have this."

Ryan placed a hand on her shoulder before she could stand.

Mitch shoved Rika's glass back to her. "You've got circles growing under your eyes as we speak. You drink this. You need it after what you've been through. Then you get some sleep. Same for you, little lady," he told Robyn. "Andy, you bring in those groceries before they spoil. No sense letting good money go to waste. Now I'm going to say this once and I expect everyone to understand it. You and your family are welcome to stay in this house as long as necessary. We will gladly share all we have with you."

"I don't want to cause—"

"You won't."

"Thank you, Mitch."

"You're more than welcome."

She thanked him again and left without touching her drink. The shock of the attack, the emotions pouring through her were too much. If she sat there much longer, she'd be bawling. Anna and Mitch barely knew them and already a blanket of love had been tossed around her family. Rika was half tempted to fall into Anna's arms and cry like she was her mother. That's what it felt like—parents taking charge, relieving her worries. *Responsible* parents.

Rika's stomach burned from the combination of coffee and the night's anxiety. In the privacy of the bathroom, she drained the bottle

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of antacid. It failed to alleviate her discomfort. Seemed that happened too many times lately. She'd have to work through it. Sleep would elude her tonight. She had too many worries and too much coffee. So she parked herself in one of the bench chairs in the family room where she could put her time to good use replacing lost buttons and repairing rips. There was a sizable stack of clothing to work on. She'd shoved it all in the plastic garbage bag where she could ignore it. She'd avoided the odious task like the plague. Nothing was worse than sewing. Even a trip to the dentist ranked higher. But now it gave her the outlet she needed.

Rika settled into one of the big chairs with a deep sigh. Wooden floors gleamed as if reflecting the warmth of the family. One side of the staircase hugged the far wall, while the other side widened in an arc at the bottom of the steps to become part of the spacious living room. Pieces of early American furniture—a couch and two chairs—upholstered in a floral print of gold were placed in a semi-circle before the fireplace. Another arrangement of golden brown, the one in which she sat, was set at a right angle to the first one. A wall unit with television, DVD, and stereo faced it. All of this rested on a circular rug of variegated browns and golds.

A quilting rack with work in progress stood in the corner of the room. At least someone enjoyed sewing. Tall windows would give a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean and San Diego in the daylight hours—she looked forward to seeing it. A dining table of walnut with matching china hutch and sideboard were set near the kitchen door. A multi-colored braided rug protected the floor from chair scrapes. It felt like...home. More so than her own family home had ever felt. She could be content here, very happy. Even this big chair wrapped its arms around her.

Snuggling deeper into it, she spied Ryan propped in the doorway watching her. A glass of wine dangled from his long fingers. He was

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quiet for so long, it made her nervous. Yet she refused to open the conversation. Instead, she pulled one of Donny's shirts off the stack and started on a ripped seam.

"You gonna sit there all night?" he finally asked.

"I'm too...I need...I can't sleep. I need to do something mindless." Then the tears started. "I almost got us killed tonight. All for a hundred-and-fifty dollars." It had to be that; what other explanation was there?

He didn't argue, didn't rush to pull her in his arms. Rika was grateful for both. He tossed back the rest of his drink and returned to the kitchen. Minutes later he returned with another glass, placing it on the white oak end table beside her.

"You should at least drink this. It'd be a crime to toss good wine down the sink." He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the couch.

"I'll see you in the morning," he said, then closed his eyes. "You're not the only one burdened with guilt, Rika."

She paused, needle in mid-air. "You aren't the one who attacked the bank robber."

"No. I'm the one who didn't put my foot down and insist Robyn call the police when she was attacked on the beach. I'm the one who let you go home when all my instincts told me to keep you with me. I was away for six months, when I should've been helping you here."

"We've been through—"

He snapped upright. Anger darkened his gray eyes. "And I didn't come through tonight. You don't want to sleep, fine. You want to play martyr, fine. I'll play with you. You want to sew? Sew. Wake me when you're done and we'll go to bed. But don't *ever* shut me out again like you just did a few minutes ago."

He lay back down and tucked his arms over his chest. Seconds later, he bolted up again. "Can you even begin to imagine how I felt? It's bad enough for me to think I let you down, but to think you thought that, too?"

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Good God! Did he have any idea how very much she loved him at that moment?

"I never thought that, Ryan. Not for a second. How could I when I'm so busy blaming myself?"

Those damned tears started again. She blinked her vision clear and returned to her sewing. Ryan returned to his former position on the couch and stayed there. Rika watched him from the corner of her eye. She'd been so locked up in her own guilt, she hadn't considered his. And she should have known he'd feel bad. Hadn't Muriel warned her earlier about the Fletcher brothers "knighthood?" There had to be a way to fix his wounded ego.

"If you really wanted to be my hero, you'd help with this freakin' sewing."

He popped one eye open. "You're joking, right?"

"I see...you want to be a hero on your own terms." She fought a smile as she wove the needle through the seam. "I understand now. A *manly* hero, flexing your big muscles and posturing with chest out. Not a girly-girl hero with a tiny needle too small for your big man hands. Please forgive my unintentional insult." She curved an eyebrow his way.

Arms still crossed, he gave her that are-you-just-about-done look. Not quite.

"Oh, dear." Feigning a gasp, she pressed fingers to lips. "Could it be? I must confess I am quite shocked. I thought your parents gave you all the tools necessary to survive. It never occurred to me. Please, please forgive me. I didn't realize you didn't know how to sew."

"Okay, okay, you've unmanned me enough." He swung his legs to the floor and scooted closer. "Just give me a damn needle and thread."

Rika set her small, plastic sewing box between them. "Something tells me someone else hates sewing, too."

"With a passion. That's what girlfriends are supposed to be for." He



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grabbed a shirt missing three buttons.

“Not this girlfriend. I’m just a love machine.”

His laugh brought his parents from the kitchen. Robyn and Andy followed, but the second they saw sewing involved, her siblings darted upstairs.

Anna sat in the chair opposite from Rika. “Looks like fun. An all-night project, but still fun.”

Mitch grabbed her arm as she reached for the plastic bag. “No, you don’t. The only all-nighters for you and me are in a Vegas casino.” He steered her upstairs to bed.

Before they ducked out of site, Rika saw him cup her butt.

“At least someone will be having a good time tonight,” Ryan grumbled. “Some love machine you are.”

“As with all machines, this one must be turned on before it can work.”

Ryan tossed the shirt aside. “Is that all?” Fingers drifted up her thigh. “Now...where is that damn switch? Here?” He poked his finger in her ear.

Rika battled laughter. “Nope. You’re freezing.”

“Here?” He danced his hand down the curve of her neck.

“You’re cold.” And she shivered.

“You sure?” He followed with kisses.

She sighed. “Well...”

“What about here?” He wiggled his hand under her shirt, brushing her nipple through her bra.

“Warmer,” she said on a choked breath, wishing his mouth were there.

“Ah...I remember.” His voice was husky. Sliding his lips over hers, he slid his hand to her crotch.

Rika melted under the dual caresses. “Now you’re burning,” she whispered against his lips.

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Ryan tugged her to her feet, then swooped her into his arms. “Grab your wine. If you’re not going to drink it, I have other uses for it.”

She did as he asked, doing her best to hold it without sloshing as he carried her up the stairs. On the second floor, he continued to the attic.

“You’re taking me to the attic?”

“Yep.”

Rika frowned. “Love machines don’t work in attics.”

“Oh...I think everything will plug in nicely in this one.” He flicked a switch, flooding the stairwell with soft light.

A door was open at the top, dimly shadowed in the dark. Ryan swung her to her feet at the entrance, then turned off the light behind them. Moonlight filtered through a big bay window. Just outside, a huge pepper tree swayed in the breeze. Its branches and leaves were silhouetted on floor and creamy living room suite that faced it.

Ryan turned on the lights. They glowed unobtrusively from recessed panels in the corners and sides of the huge room. Three ceiling fans slowly stirred the air. Everything was open, spacious, except for a bathroom set next to the kitchenette in front of her. Polished hardwood floors reflected the golden décor of the small kitchen. A hexagon-shaped table of gold Formica waited for company.

Ivory carpet covered the floor in the living area. In awe, Rika walked over to the plush sofa, sipping at her wine as she went. Her feet sank into pure heaven. She brushed her hand over butter-soft leather then wandered to a king-size bed on the farthest side of the room. A dark walnut headboard bookshelf stuffed with books was only a reach away. Matching nightstands flanked the bed, along with matching dresser and chest of drawers. Royal blue carpet, deep and thick, under the bedroom furniture was the perfect complement to the velvet patchwork bedspread in colors of rich burgundy, violet, royal blue, and emerald green. She brushed her hand over the surface.

“Beautiful.” She remembered the quilting stand downstairs and

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presumed she was looking at Anna's work. "Your mom make this?"

"Sure did."

Hugging her midriff, Rika glanced around. Private. Peaceful. What more could she ask of a fairy tale castle?

"It's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful."

Ryan's face beamed with pride. Hands splayed on hips, he surveyed the room. "Thanks. Matt and I renovated most of it ourselves when he and Lissa got married ten years ago. They lived here for a couple of years. Dad had a contractor do the bathroom and kitchen...and the larger windows. It was sure a change from the dusty storage attic it used to be."

"I love it. It's big enough to be its own house, definitely bigger than my old apartment. Although it's hard to tell without walls. I really like that tree outside the bedroom window."

Ryan glanced that way and shook his head. "That tree is trouble. It broke my leg, arm, and collarbone, and nearly got me spanked."

Rika laughed. "You fell out of it."

"Yep. Dad told me to stay out of it, but I wouldn't. Finally, he told me if he caught me in the tree, he'd spank me. I didn't listen. I didn't think he'd catch me. I certainly didn't think I'd fall. I'll tell you...I wanted those casts on forever because I knew I'd get it when they came off. Matt and Kevin didn't make it any easier for me. They kept taunting me with how bad Dad was going to beat me. In the end, he didn't. Said broken bones was lesson enough. But then he started lecturing. Now *that* was painful."

"How old were you?" she asked, laughing with him.

"Ten. What really pissed me off is that Matt climbed the tree hundreds of times. He never got a scratch on him. Never even got caught. I considered telling on him once or twice, but he was two years older than me and a lot bigger at that time."

Rika smiled. "And what about Kevin? Did he dare?"

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“Nooo.” He shook his head. “I was his example. Tree’s been kid-free ever since. So...you have a bad tree in your life?”

“With me, it was my bike. I wasn’t supposed to ride out of the neighborhood. I went with some friends to coast down a big hill. I lost control of the bike and swerved in front of a car. It stopped. I fell.”

“What’d you break?”

“Nothing. Dad paddled me good,” she said, taking another sip of wine. “Then I heard him crying later with Mom. He told her it broke his heart to spank me. That hurt me more than anything else—that I’d made him cry. I tried my best to never do anything wrong after that again.”

\* \* \*

And Ryan guessed from her devotion to duty now, she’d never given her parents another moment of grief. Too bad they didn’t have the same consideration. By her own admission, they’d been horribly irresponsible, despite their love for their kids.

“Are you really going to drink all that?” He pointed to the wine. “Because I did have plans for it.”

Rika gave him a naughty smile as she crawled onto the bed. “Really? What kind of plans? Does it involve us being naked?”

“Most definitely.”

“Well, then...” She set the glass on the headboard then pulled her shirt over her head.

Ryan’s cock pulsed to life with the release of her breasts. Tight nipples begged to be sucked. He stripped his shirt off quickly, loathe to take his gaze from her. She taunted him unmercifully, peeling down her shorts and panties then laying back with thighs open. She tugged the bedcovers down, rubbing one hand on the cool sheets as the other played with her clit.

He rubbed his erection beneath his pants. “Is that how you did it when I called you, honey? Is that how you made yourself come while I

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hand-fucked myself?"

"Yes," she whispered. "And this, too." She kneaded one breast then the other, plumping them to ripeness. Her nipples grew harder, longer. Rika twirled the tips between her fingers. The hand between her legs moved faster. "Do you want to see me come?"

"God, yes!" He yanked pants and shorts off, then grabbed his dick so tight it nearly undid him. Kneeling between her legs, he stroked his erection and watched her fingers flash around her hard little clit.

She clutched the pillow in a white knuckled grip, oblivious to the world beyond her core of pleasure. Ryan dusted his hand over his belly. The other moved in time with hers, pumping his cock until his hand was a blur. He wanted to shove his dick between her breasts and fuck her there. He wanted to spurt his cum on her and watch her spread it around, getting him all hard to fuck her again. He wanted to feel her tight cunt squeeze him...

His balls tightened. Heat rushed him. Rika cried out, lifting her butt off the bed as she came.

He slammed into her. Sharp nails dug into his shoulders. Long legs wrapped around his waist. Shoving his hand between them, he forced her clit back to attention. She jerked against him, first trying to avoid the touch to her too-sensitive area, then riding him hard. Bodies slapped together with the force of his thrusts. He felt himself coming and fought the release. Then she came again, jamming her heels deep into his butt cheeks. The cum streamed out of him, searing his dick with its heat. Pulling in deep breaths, he eased from her body.

"Where are you going?" she asked with a voice of the well-loved.

"Nowhere," he replied with a smile. He reached for the glass of wine and sat astride her.

He kissed her long, deep, and hard until her fingers flexed against the cords of muscle in his back like a purring cat. Dipping a finger in the wine, he drew it to her lips. She twirled her tongue around the digit

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to lick it dry. His dick lengthened, hard and ready against her stomach. He rubbed it on her, leaving a small trail of pre-cum in its wake.

Another drop of wine found the well of her throat. He sucked it dry then poured a small trickle in the valley between her breasts. Tongue lashes lapped it up. Her nipples puckered for attention. Ryan didn't refuse. As his mouth closed over one, she arched into him on a gasp of breath. He traded one for the other, one for the other, again and again until her soft moans filled his senses.

Pulling back, he offered her a drink. She leaned on elbows accepting the offer as he pressed the glass to her lips. When she settled back, he finished the contents. Smiling, he nuzzled between her legs and sucked her clit into his mouth. His tongue was cool from the liquid.

Rika cried out. Fingers dug into his hair, holding him in place. Her thighs helped anchor him there. Her orgasm wasn't as quick this time. Ryan savored the moment, her scent, the honey-musk taste mixed with his own, and the build-up. He felt the electricity of her climax course through her and held on until she cascaded over the top and lay whimpering in completion beneath him.

He seated his aching cock deep into her fire, pounding her with an intensity that shocked him. He was mindless from his own pleasure, vaguely aware of her urging him on. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pressure and white sparkles flashed behind his lids. Digging his hands into her ass, he lifted her higher. One hard thrust seated him deep. The entrance to her womb sucked at the tip of his cock.

*We've truly mated.* The primal thought yanked the orgasm out of him in a searing blaze. Hot jets spurted from him over and over again. When it finally ended, he was truly drained.

It was minutes before he could move, time he used to caress the sides of her breasts, to dot soft kisses on her lips, and to share words of love. Before he could give in to the urge to fall asleep on top of her, Ryan relieved her of his weight. Wrapped in his arms, they fell asleep.

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\* \* \*

The smell of coffee drifted into Rika's dreams and nudged her awake. She gave a long, cat-like stretch before she opened her eyes. The fan above her in the open-beamed ceiling whirled a chilly breeze. Rika pulled the bedspread to her neck. She was alone, but the bed was still warm from Ryan's body. He hadn't been gone long. At least long enough to make them coffee. Judging from the closed bathroom door, she guessed he was there.

Birds twittered among the branches of the pepper tree. *What a wonderful way to greet the morning. Birdsong and fresh coffee waiting.*

She stretched again. It was still early, but the kids would be up soon...and hungry. Nothing was worse than grumpy kids. Her crew was the worst when they needed feeding.

Rika pulled herself from bed and dug her toes into the plush carpet. It cushioned her walk to the kitchenette where coffee continued to call her name. As she poured a cup, she heard the shower running. She also saw her duffel bag by the door.

Smiling at his thoughtfulness, she snagged her toothbrush and ducked into the bathroom with him.

"Sorry, but I have to pee," she called out.

"No problem." He waited until she flushed before poking his head around the shower curtain. "Join me?"

Rika spit out a mouthful of toothpaste then swished. "How could I possibly refuse such a tempting offer given at such an appropriate time?"

"Now my feelings are hurt."

"I doubt it," she said with a laugh and stepped beneath the warm spray.

Soapy hands drifted over her, catching every curve while Rika tried to shampoo her hair. Once done, she leaned into him, content to let him explore. He traveled the circuit from head to toe, then parted her labia

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and caressed her to sweet orgasm. Sated, Rika turned around and wrapped his cock in her hands. Kneading his balls, she stroked him until his orgasm spurted against her belly.

"Now that was better than any coffee." He nipped kisses across her lips.

Rika playfully shoved him back and rinsed. "Speak for yourself." Squeezing the water from her hair, she grabbed a towel as she stepped out.

They lingered over their coffee after they'd dressed while Rika combed the tangles from her hair.

"I wonder when it's going to be safe to go home."

"I say after they catch this guy."

With the pathetic description she'd given the police, that could take forever. "I don't want to impose on your parents too long."

Ryan freshened their cups, then stirred the hot from his. "They really don't mind. Honest. They love kids. Why do you think they've got so many pets? If you don't believe me, ask Muriel."

"Yes, I got the impression last night she and Chesney had stayed here." Rika pulled her hair back in a scrunchie. "Okay, that's it. It's just too heavy. I can't deal with it any more."

His eyes widened. "You're going to cut your hair?"

"That almost sounded like a shriek."

Ryan laughed. "Sorry. It's beautiful. But...it is your hair and you do have to take care of it."

She crossed her hands over her heart and batted her eyes. "Thank goodness your love is still mine."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...smart ass."

"So..." She lifted her mug. "Muriel and Chesney stayed here."

"Yeah, their situation wasn't so different than yours. Their father was never around. Her mother developed skin cancer..."

Rika squeezed her eyes shut. "No wonder she's so careful in the



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sun.”

“And she wishes Chesney would be too, but...” He shrugged. “Muriel and Kevin were high school sweethearts. Social Services was going to put the girls in foster care—”

“Damn, interfering...” Just the thought of Claudia Stanhope and her threats freaked Rika out. There was no pleasing the woman. Why hadn’t they gotten one of the nice social workers? No, they get the Wicked Witch of the West. She wished a house would fall on the woman. “Sorry. Never mind. Go on.”

“So Mom and Dad arranged for guardianship and they lived here. Hardest part was keeping her and Kevin apart. But he went to college, then she followed the next year.”

“And it all worked out.” She found herself nodding. “Well, if we’re going to be here too much longer, I’m going to have to bring some more things from the house. In broad daylight with a cadre of Fletchers to back me up, that shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

He cocked his head. “You really are a smart ass, aren’t you?”

Rika winked. “The smartest ever.” She kissed his nose. “I’m going downstairs to start breakfast. I’d like to have it ready by the time everyone wakes up.”

“I’ll make the bed and be right behind you.”

Careful not to rouse the rest of the household, she crept down the carpeted stairs. She peeked inside the room at the bottom. The floor was covered with the same gray-blue carpet as the second story and the stairs. Bookshelves lined every wall beneath the windows. A black leather sofa and recliner sat near the fireplace. A roll-top desk was in the corner. A regular desk with computer, printer, and fax machine were in the other corner.

Rika presumed this was what Ryan and his brothers referred to as “the satellite division of Fletcher Hotels and Resorts.” Mitch and Anna left the day-to-day operation to their sons and handled other matters

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from home. It seemed a cozy and comfortable arrangement. Obviously, it worked well for them. Rika could easily imagine herself curled upon the couch with a good book, or hunched over the keyboard researching on the internet.

She turned away and went on to the kitchen. Cabinets of honey gold wood with white appliances gave her a cheery good morning greeting. She walked straight to the back door for a look outside. When she parted the yellow priscilla curtain, the first thing she saw was three cats seated on the patio table next to the pool. At the sight of her, they began a chorus of meows.

“Are you hungry?” She found their food and filled their bowls. They showed their gratitude by diving nose first into their feast. Purrs filled the air.

Smiling, Rika took the time to scratch each one behind the ears. The purrs deepened. “You guys are drowning out the birds. Brave hunters are supposed to be more stealth-like.”

The orange tabby lifted his head, meowed, and dove back in.

“I see.” She gave him an extra scratch. “I suppose we all have our priorities. The birds will be thankful you let them live another day. Now, as fun as this conversation is, I’d better see about breakfast for everyone else.”

The first rattle of dishes brought the Fletcher Cocker Spaniels scampering down the stairs. They paused by Rika long enough to sniff the air to see what she was cooking. Then they darted through the doggy door for a bathroom run and returned to sit and stare at her...adoringly, of course. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“They are a comical bunch,” she heard Mitch say as he walked in. “What are you up to that has them so enthralled?”

“Breakfast...biscuits, gravy, bacon, and eggs.”

Ryan spoke from the door. “If you add fried potatoes to that, I’ll marry you.”

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Rika shoved the biscuits into the oven. “Now we know the quickest way to your heart.”

“See. And all this time you thought all I wanted was your body.” His smoke gray eyes twinkled with humor.

She darted a wary eye toward Mitch, but he’d already gone to get the morning paper.

Ryan tilted his head from side to side as he looked at her. “Rika Kiley, your cheeks are red. You’re embarrassed?” He slid his arm around her waist, tugging her close. “Is this the woman who ravished me in the shower?”

Behind them Mitch cleared his throat. “I thought it wasn’t her body you were after.”

“Oh, you can bet he lied about that.” She gave Ryan a playful shove. “If you want those fried potatoes, you’d better get to peeling.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave her a mock salute. “And while I’m peeling, maybe you can tell me why you drained that bottle of Mylanta last night.”

Rika spun around. Raw bacon dangled from her fingers. The dogs scooted closer. She slapped the meat in the sizzling pan, dashing their hopes. “You went through my things?” With each second that ticked by, her fury mounted.

Ryan pressed his thumb to the furrow between her eyebrows smoothing the skin. “Chill out. You left your bag open. When I picked it up, everything fell out.”

She couldn’t even get a good mad going. Rika wondered if she hadn’t subconsciously sabotaged herself. “Yeah...well...just peel those potatoes, I’ll be glad to fry them for you.” She offered a weak smile. “I won’t even hold you to your marriage proposal.”

Their gazes locked for a second or two. And, in that space of time, Rika wondered if Ryan was seriously considering marriage. The intensity in his eyes took her breath away.

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“Ahem.” Mitch rattled his newspaper. “Starving man over here.”

“Sorry,” they muttered in unison and turned back to breakfast.

It didn’t take long for the smell of bacon and biscuits to permeate the house. The scent beckoned everyone to wake up. Appreciation ran the gamut from Anna’s effusive hug to Donny’s sulk. Rika ignored the latter and hoped everyone did, too.

Over breakfast she studied the paper, nibbled on a biscuit, and prayed the day would pass without incident. One article drew her immediate attention.

“This Wind Racer Corporation really wants everyone to know about their racing contest. There’s another article in today’s paper.”

“I read that.” Mitch raked up a mouthful of potatoes. “Curious, isn’t it?”

She glanced up. “What do you mean?”

He wiped the corner of his mouth. “Stuart Racer only formed his company a year ago. He and his investors have put a lot of money into building the Wind Racer prototype—”

“So why not just sell it?”

“Exactly,” he said. “If they want to prove how much faster it is, a few timed runs are good enough. A race with nine other sloops isn’t necessary. And where is the prize money coming from? Racer doesn’t have that kind of money and neither does the company. He talked his brother into coming to work for him to help keep things going. Stuart might be the idea man, but Eldon has a better head for business. Word has it he hasn’t been too thrilled with some of Stuart’s decisions.”

“Like this race?” Rika stared ahead, looking but not seeing while she shuffled around pieces of this puzzle. “I wonder what’s going on? And how someone could find out?”

“About the only way would be to enter that race.”

\* \* \*

Ryan regretted his words the second they left his lips. Her emerald

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eyes glowed with anticipation. He could almost see the data her brain processed as she ticked off ideas.

"If I could just be selected." Her eyebrows inched together. Elbows on the table, she propped her chin in her palm. "I know I could pass that physical fitness test. I'm in great shape."

"Yeah, you can tell by all the antacid you suck down."

Rika stuck up her middle finger against her cheek. "My passport and shots are up-to-date. I wonder if their qualification requirements are different for women?" She tapped her finger against her chin.

Then her gaze met Ryan's and the light faded. The dousing of that fire hurt him almost as much as the idea of her taking off for God-knew-how-long on this race.

Robyn placed a hand on her arm. "Rika, please don't do this. What if you're teamed up with a man who tries to...you know. You'll be stuck on that boat with no way off. At his mercy. And if Mrs. Stanhope finds out, she'll take us away. What will we do then?"

Rika patted her hand. "You're right. I wasn't thinking straight. I won't give it another thought." She smiled, but it didn't show in her eyes. "I guess I need to be a little more realistic, huh?"

Although he wasn't sure he meant it, Ryan said, "There's no reason why you shouldn't go after this if you feel there's a story to uncover."

Her eyes brightened. "You are just about the most supportive boyfriend...ever."

"Only because he wants to fuck you," Donny blurted out.

Ryan and Andy stood so fast their chairs toppled over. Ryan reached him first. He grabbed Donny by the shirt and yanked him to his feet so hard the seams ripped.

"I've had just about all I'm going to take from you. You're going to learn a little respect if it's the last thing I do."

"You'd better not hit me," Donny sassed.

"I've got something else in mind."

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He dragged Donny through the back door. The cats shot out of the way.

Picking him up by the seat of his jeans, Ryan hurled him into the swimming pool. The boy bobbed to the surface and swam to the edge. By the time he pulled himself out, Ryan was there to push him back in. Donny tried the other side. Ryan shoved him back. He swam to the side once more, looked up and saw Ryan hovering over him. Tears popped into his eyes.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he shouted.

“Why are you so nasty to your family?”

“You’re not the boss! You can’t tell me what to do! Only my mom and dad can!”

Ryan knelt down, softening his tone. “Don, your parents are gone. They’re never coming back. You have to rely on someone else now...like Rika, Andy...or even me.”

Donny clenched his teeth in a grimace and swam off. Strong, angry strokes took him to the shallow end of the pool where he climbed out. He stumbled a few feet before falling to his knees in a sobbing heap.

Rika ran to enfold him in her arms. He clutched at her as if she were his salvation.

“I miss Mom and Dad so much,” he sobbed.

Rika kissed his sopping head. “I know, Donny. I miss them, too.”

“It’s so hard. It’s just so hard. Everything’s all messed up. I’m scared. I hate it.”

She looked up through a veil of tears when Ryan knelt beside them and offered a towel to Donny.

“I’m sorry, Ryan,” the boy said.

Ryan handed him a towel. “It’s okay, Don. Get out of those wet clothes and dry off.”

Donny slipped the terrycloth from his fingers. “Dad’s the only one who ever called me Don. I miss that. Everyone else calls me Donny. It

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makes me sound like a little kid and I'm not."

Rika stared at him in open-mouthed surprise. It was clear she never knew how he felt, that it had never even occurred to her. He'd obviously always been her little brother Donny.

"You need to remember that, Don. You aren't a little kid." Ryan's voice was calm, yet firm. "You've got three cousins who look up to you. You have to set a good example. I don't ever want to hear the 'f' word out of your mouth again. Understand?"

He swallowed as he nodded. Ryan's intent was pretty clear—there would be repercussions.

Don sniffled and wiped his face. "And I'll do my best to help."

Ryan ruffled his hair and smiled. "That's all anyone can ask. Get into some dry clothes."

Once they were alone, Ryan forced himself to look at Rika. How would she react over him punishing the boy? He'd just jumped right in. Helping her was one thing, but would she view this as taking over? What else could he do? Being with her meant dealing with the kids. It was a package deal. He sure as hell wasn't going to sit on his hands and let shit like this go by. Forget that it was wrong—it wasn't who he was.

He'd watched one friend's marriage disintegrate because Chuck Bellfield's wife refused to allow him to discipline her young son. She'd wanted a husband only, not a father for the boy. And the kid was a little hellion who needed discipline badly. Even Ryan had been tempted to paddle him a few times.

Maybe it was time he and Rika laid all their cards on the table. Even seriously trot out the marriage word. That's where he was headed anyway. If she wasn't... Ryan didn't want to entertain that idea. He plunged forward, ready to defend his actions, to fight for her if necessary.

Rika pulled in a breath. "Thank you." She cupped her palm to his cheek. "I never had a clue how he felt. Maybe he'll feel better talking

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to you than me. I'm so glad you'll be there for him. But, you know there's still a long road ahead."

Ryan released the breath he'd been holding. They *were* on the same wavelength. "I know. But we'll stumble along it together." He kissed her palm. "Now, let's see what we can do to help you get that Wind Racer story."

She gave a humorless chuckle. "It's just not plausible. The kids need me here."

"Never say never. Where there's a will, there's a way. Every cloud has its silver lining. Tomorrow is another day."

"If you start singing any songs from *Annie*..." Rika pinched his nipple.

"Ow! I give." He peeled her fingers away.

"Good. Now come inside and help with the dishes." She dusted her fingers over his shoulder as she left. "And don't forget...we still have all that sewing to do."

Ryan feigned a groan. "If you overwork me, I'll probably need a nap later."

Rika's giggle followed her into the house. Ryan was right behind it.



## CHAPTER 6

Ryan pulled to a stop across the street from Rika's newspaper building. She had to admit she rather liked being chauffeured. A good thing since they'd yet to retrieve her van from the police parking lot. Not that she should drive it anymore when they did. It needed new glass and she didn't have enough saved up to pay the deductible on her insurance. In fact, she hadn't even bothered to report it to her insurance company for fear her rates would go up.

He draped his arm over the seat after he put the vehicle in park. "There's no reason why I can't deliver you right to the door."

"Are you going to kiss me goodbye?"

"Well...yeah." He looked at her like she was stupid for suggesting otherwise.

"Then trust me...here is much safer." She pointed across the street where several of her coworkers were already starting to ogle. The longer Rika waited to leave, the more people came out—including Art.

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Ryan grinned. "They're going to tease you no matter what, so let's give them something to talk about." He covered her lips with a kiss guaranteed to fire their imaginations.

Rika pulled free on a contented sigh. She wanted to have him right here in front of everyone. "Now you have lipstick on you." She wiped the smudge off his lips with the pad of her thumb.

"Man, you look hot!" He tried to suck the digit in his mouth and missed.

Rika laughed as she ruffled her fingers through her new, short haircut. He'd only said that about three dozen times since Muriel had cut it yesterday. But she had to admit, it looked great and felt great without all that weight. It drew attention to her face, made her look more professional and mature, not to mention it was a breeze to take care of. Who would have thought it would have turned into a marathon haircutting session?

When Muriel learned Rika was thinking of going short, she suggested donating the hair to one of the organizations that make wigs for cancer patients. Rika agreed without hesitation. Parked in the Fletcher kitchen, Muriel bound Rika's hair in a ponytail and cut, then styled it. Before they could blink, Kristi wanted to do the same thing, then Amy. Seeing the little girls' unselfish gift, Chesney and Robyn "ponied up." They sealed each ponytail in a plastic bag, then put them in a large padded envelope with the donation form and a very healthy monetary donation from the rest of the Fletchers.

"I just can't get over it!" Ryan said again.

"Obviously. Has to be my suit." She'd worn her favorite one today—the linen one that looked like fresh cream. She normally saved it for interviews with high profile society people, but today felt special.

"Good enough to eat."

That sent a shiver through her. "I'll meet you for lunch. My treat."

"You can bet it will be." Another kiss followed by a wink sent her

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on her way.

The second her leg touched the street, it started.

"Hey, Freddy, travelin' in style."

"Freddy's got herself a man."

"Good job, Freddy, he's a looker."

"And check out the new 'do!"

*"Well, she's a brick...house. She's mighty, mighty, lettin' all hang out."*

Rika's cheeks burned as they sang. She tried to ignore them as she started to walk across the street, but it was impossible.

"Give him another kiss!" someone shouted.

The chant lifted. "Kiss, kiss, kiss..."

Laughing, she tossed her hands in the air and went back to Ryan.

"Freddy?" he asked.

"They're treating me like one of the guys. It's short for Fredrika. They do that to all us girls. Give me another kiss so they'll quit hassling me."

"Somehow I don't think it bothers you that much."

Their kiss was accompanied by hoots, cheers, and cat-calls. The song came up again, louder this time. Rika hid her laughter behind a shake of her head as she started back across the street.

The squeal of tires jerked heads up. A powder blue Lincoln sped her way. Rika stood there, afraid to move in case she found herself in its direct path. Then she realized—she was the target!

"Run!" Ryan shouted.

Rika's heels clicked on the street as she dashed for safety. She was almost there. The curb was only a foot away when her heel caught on the sewer grate. She tumbled to the gutter. A scream caught in her throat as the car barreled toward her. She kicked her foot free as two reporters yanked her into the air. They flung her against the building, and covered her body with theirs. Burning rubber filled the air as the

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car sped away.

Before her coworkers could pull away, Ryan was at her side. She fell into his arms, numb with fright.

“Someone call the police,” Art barked. “Did anyone get the license number?”

“I did,” someone replied, but Rika was too shaken to know who.

“Good. Let’s get her inside. One of you boys find the lady a drink. A good stiff drink,” Art said.

It was actually one of the women who supplied Rika with a shot of bourbon from Art’s stash. Rika could barely hold the cup in her trembling hands. As she brought it to her lips, bourbon sloshed onto her creamy linen skirt.

She stared at the golden blot. It was just another spot on the smudged material. She finally gave up and set the drink aside. After combing the fringe of bangs in place, she clutched her hands on her lap.

Ryan took them in his and caressed her fingers with his thumb. It was the only thing that gave her comfort. Once she looked up and saw a frown adding an extra crease in his forehead. She wanted to reassure him she was fine, but at that point she wasn’t sure of it herself.

“The police will be here any minute,” Art told them.

Rika looked at him and almost smiled. The way he worried about his people, it was no wonder he was bald. He should have been born a woman—he’d make a perfect mother. He’d been clucking around the office like a hen with chicks ever since she came inside.

“You can talk to them in my office.” He motioned them to follow him.

Detective Molina met them halfway. “This man is very persistent, Miss Kiley. The vehicle he drove today was stolen, too. Did anyone get a good look at his face?”

“He wore a nylon stocking over his head,” Ryan said.

Molina shook his head. “He knows where you live. Where you

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work. What you drive.”

“He’s probably watching the building now just looking for another chance,” Art blurted out.

“If he keeps up, he might succeed,” Molina said.

“Then I suggest you catch him before he can get to her.” Ryan’s jaw was tight with anger.

Rika nodded. How long before he found her at the Fletchers? He’d already gone to her house, which proved he had no regard for anyone who got in his way. It was bad enough he was after her, but the kids? Now Ryan’s parents were in danger.

“We intend to do just that, with a little cooperation from Miss Kiley, Mr. Steffanson, and the news media.”

\* \* \*

“The news broadcast is starting,” Art called out.

The employees who remained crowded around the television in his office. Pizza boxes, bags from fast-food joints, soda cans, and half-eaten boxes of donuts littered the area. Was there always this much food around or were they overeating because of worry?

Rika laced her fingers through Ryan’s. He hadn’t left her side all day. She was too selfish to lie and tell him she’d be fine and he could go on to work. She wasn’t fine. She didn’t know if she ever would be. For the rest of her life, she’d always be looking over her shoulder, jumping at every shadow, even if they did manage to catch this guy. She’d triple lock all the doors, bolt the windows, check the van before she got inside—all things she should have already been doing. Just the thought of being out at night freaked her out. Hopefully, she could get beyond that fear. She couldn’t live the rest of her life in a cocoon.

Ryan had phoned his parents and let them know what had happened. Although he didn’t say anything more than the fact they were concerned, it didn’t take a psychic to know everyone was frantic. Ten bucks said they were glued to the news as well.

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She was the third story down. Local news reporter attacked...

"Okay, pipe down," Art ordered. Yet no one had uttered a word. The poor man was a wreck. Rika could sure sympathize.

"For the second time in just about that many days, an attempt was made on the life of Fredrika Kiley, reporter for the *Sentinel*. Last Friday, Miss Kiley thwarted a bank robbery at the First Coast Bank. Police now speculate the robber, or his partner, are behind the murder attempts. Our Live Action News Chief, Mike Sanchez, had the chance to interview Miss Kiley earlier today. Here's what he found out."

The cameras cut to a close-up of Rika. To the sharp eye of the lens she looked poised and unshaken. It was a lie. She'd been scared then and she was now.

"Miss Kiley, this has been a terrible ordeal for you. Do you have any idea why someone would try to kill you?"

"None whatsoever. The police haven't been able to turn up a clue. This person always uses a stolen vehicle and always covers his head with a nylon stocking."

"He's also a very determined man. What are you going to do? This man will obviously try again. Do the police have plans to guard you? To take you into protective custody?" He shoved the microphone in her face. Rika remembered he'd nearly hit her chin.

"I've had my life and schedule interrupted enough. I don't want any more interference from anyone. I have a feature article that's behind schedule. I'm going to have to work 'til midnight as it is just to get caught up. The more people who hang around me, the longer it's going to take me to get my work done."

"Miss Kiley, are you saying you intend to stay at work after hours alone with a killer stalking you?"

"You make it sound like I'm crazy. I'm not. The building will be locked. I'll stay here through the night. No one can get in and I won't leave. What could possibly happen? Besides, I'm sure he's long gone

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by now.”

“You sound convinced. How does your boss feel about this?...Mr. Steffanson, what do you say?”

The camera focused on Art, who shook his head. “She’s a stubborn woman, but I see her point. And I need that story. If she needs to work late and alone to get it done, so be it. I’ve got a paper to run.”

“And you aren’t afraid, Miss Kiley?”

Rika snorted with amusement for the man. No one knew how much she’d quivered inside. “Of course not. I feel perfectly safe locked inside the office.”

Sanchez turned to face the audience. “There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. That’s what we journalists call dedication. Even with her life threatened, for Fredrika Kiley, her story comes first. Back to you in the studio.”

Detective Molina clicked off the set. “Real good job. Very convincing. It’s time we started clearing out of here.”

“I’m scared. Can’t someone stay here with me?” Rika’s voice quivered. She couldn’t help it. This idea was insane. How could she have let him talk her into this?

“Miss Kiley, it might seem like you’re alone, but you’re not. A dozen of my men snuck in on one of your delivery trucks. As far as the killer knows, they aren’t here. My people are well hidden, but able to help you at a second’s notice.”

His words did little to reassure her. “Please. If Ryan could just stay with me...”

Molina was adamant. “We aren’t sure how closely he’s watched the building. We have to believe he’s made note of everyone who came in here today. He’ll watch for us to leave. We have to play this through in order for our plan to work. Let’s go.”

He touched her shoulder, then walked away, expecting the others to follow. They did, but each of the ten said goodbye to Rika in their own

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special way—a chuck on the chin, a squeeze of the shoulder, a hug. Then Rika was left alone with Ryan. Asserting his right to do so, he hugged her close. She swore his arms shook.

“I’ll see you soon. I won’t be far away.” He brushed his thumb against her cheek.

All she could do was nod.

“All set?” Molina asked.

“Nothing better happen to her,” Ryan growled.

“Nothing will,” Molina shot back.

Rika walked them to the door and watched Art lock it. She waited until she saw them get into their respective vehicles. They planned to rendezvous at the bar around her corner.

Hugging herself against her fear, she walked back to her desk.

\* \* \*

The hands on the clock were straight up. Midnight. They’d been waiting for five-and-a-half hours. The tension had given her a pounding headache. Rika wondered how the police officers were doing in their cramped hiding places.

How much longer was it going to be? It was agonizing just sitting here waiting for an attack to happen. If her nerves were stretched any tighter, they’d snap.

Maybe he hadn’t seen the phony broadcast. Maybe he wasn’t coming. Or, worse yet, maybe he was in the building that very minute waiting for a clear shot at her.

Rika scooted down in her chair, trying to make herself a smaller target. Why couldn’t they have let Ryan stay? It would have made the wait easier. She definitely would have felt safer. The unseen policemen did little to ease her fears.

Maybe he’d already been by and didn’t think she was really working. She spent a lot of time surfing the internet. She’d even downloaded an e-book to read. Maybe she shouldn’t have done that.



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Maybe he'd been watching over her shoulder and seen it was a ruse. Fear trickled down her spine. She'd tried to be observant. The thought he might have been here and she not known made her stomach churn.

She pulled open her bottom drawer. Her ever-present bottle of antacid lay there. What if Ryan was right? What if she was working on an ulcer? But wouldn't she be bothered all the time? She took a slug then eased the drawer closed.

She wrapped her arms around her midriff and rocked back in her chair. Would this ever end? The silence was maddening, yet she was afraid to make a sound for fear she wouldn't hear the killer's approach.

Ryan had to be out of his mind with worry. She thought back to that morning. He'd tried to tempt her into an extra special good morning wake-up. She'd laughingly slipped free of his soapy grasp, afraid she'd be late for work. If only she'd caved in. She would have been late and wouldn't have to go through this now.

Rika knew that was ridiculous. The killer wouldn't have cared how late she was, he was determined to wait.

Breaking glass shattered the silence. Rika tensed. Fingers dug into the armrests. This was it! He was coming! A silent alarm would be signaling the security company. Molina would know in seconds. Hopefully, his people inside already knew.

Scooting around, she gripped the edge of her desk and faced the only entrance into the press room. Her view was obstructed by a large filing cabinet, but she didn't dare move. If she couldn't see him clearly, he couldn't see her. She strained to hear footsteps...nothing. Something in the darkened passageway moved. The form took the shape of a man dressed in black. Rika ducked behind the cabinet.

"No use hiding," he said into the darkness.

Rika recognized the voice of the robber she'd slugged in the bank. At least she thought it was him. But then she'd been expecting it to be. She was going to have to testify in court. She had to get this right.

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His rubber soles squished as he walked slowly toward her. She crawled under her desk and pulled the chair in place.

He chuckled. "Thought you weren't afraid. Don't worry. I won't make you suffer. Just one bullet and it's all over."

The chair slid away from Rika's desk. She drew her knees to her chest and covered her head with her arms. Someone crawled in beside her. Rika cringed.

"Shh," a voice whispered.

She peeked under her arm and saw a police uniform. She nodded once.

"I see you under that desk." He was so close she could smell that nauseating musk cologne he wore. "Come out. Don't make me come get you."

When Rika didn't budge, he stomped toward her. "Have it your way."

The officer beside her jumped out. "Police! Put the weapon down!"  
"Like hell!"

Gunshots echoed through the building, but Rika was too scared to scream. She stayed curled in a tight ball until the young policeman slipped an arm around her shoulders.

"It's all right, ma'am. It's over."

She heard the other officers running forward and looked up. Through a veil of unshed tears, she saw the young black officer. He wore a look of devastation upon his face, a look that deepened when a fellow officer announced the killer was dead. The cop shut his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. Without a word, he helped Rika from under the desk, shielding her view of the dead man.

Molina rushed up to them. "Good job." He gave the officer a pat on the back. "Don't let it get to you, Gus. You did what you had to do. We caught his partner outside. Miss Kiley, you okay?"

She looked past him to see Ryan run into the room. "I am now."

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She brushed by him and ran into Ryan's strong embrace.

"I was never so scared of losing someone in my whole life." Ryan burrowed his face into her hair.

"Take me out of here...please."

"Andy's already got the car running. I know just the thing to relax us both. A bottle of wine and a soak in the hot tub."

With his arm still around her, they started to walk away.

"Hey, Freddy," Art called. "Take a week off. You've got it coming." He tossed Rika's purse to Ryan and waved the couple away.

\* \* \*

Robyn hurled herself into her sister's arms before Rika could take two steps inside the Fletcher home. All Rika was able to do was hold her and reassure her while she sobbed. Arm in arm they walked to the living room and sat down. Robyn's brown eyes were so dilated with tears they looked twice their size, her nose red and puffy, proof of her emotional turmoil while waiting for word. Poor girl had cried more these last few days than she had the last six months.

Anna squeezed Rika's hand. "Thank God you're all right. We didn't let on to the children what was going on. They just thought you'd gone out to dinner."

"Thank you, Anna. I appreciate it more than I can say," Rika told her.

Robyn brushed away the last of her tears. "Anna did her best to help me and Chesney pass the time. She taught me how to quilt."

Anna smiled. "Like she said...it helped pass the time."

Chesney linked her fingers through Andy's. "What happened?"

"He's dead, and Rika doesn't feel like talking about it." Ryan ignored Chesney's wounded look and went on. "The waiting and worrying we went through is nothing compared to the hell Rika had tonight. She's upset and tense. I thought some wine and time in the hot tub would help her relax. I know it would me."

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“That’s a good idea.” Mitch clapped his thighs as he stood. “It’ll probably do us all some good. Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

Ryan stared after them with mouth agape. He wanted Rika to himself. Now his romantic interlude was going to be shared with five other people? He sat there wondering how to get rid of the interlopers until Rika came down the stairs in her yellow swimsuit. Her red hair curled in short little wisps against her neck.

She paused before him. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I’ll be along in a few minutes,” he replied, and she walked on.

By the time Ryan joined them, the only seat in the spa was across from Rika. What could he say? *Everyone leave. I want to make love to this woman now!* ran through his mind. He accepted the glass of chardonnay his father gave him then raised the crystal in mock toast to Rika. She smiled and returned the salute. Disappointment backlit her eyes. It made him want her all the more.

He’d pictured only the two of them in this secluded little nook. It was a place for lovers, not all these people. Latticed walls decorated with plants separated the spa from the rest of the patio. No one could see inside or out once the gate was latched. There was also a privacy lock. He longed to shoo the others away and seat the lock. Instead, he eased lower into the bubbly warmth of the water, stretching his legs out. He couldn’t even play footsie with her.

He needed to touch her, bond with her, reassure himself she was still here and not the victim of a vengeful robber. When he thought of how close he’d come to losing her...

Ryan drained his glass. There was smoldering heat in the gaze they exchanged. He was only half aware of when his dad poured them both a second glass of wine. Surely the others could see and have the courtesy to leave. But they just sat there, enjoying the hot water, the wine, the companionship.

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Ryan was so hard he thought he'd burst. He would have loved to make an excuse for him and Rika to leave. It was impossible considering how damned hard his cock was. There was no way he could leave the water with the others around. All he could do was sit here and suffer.

Finally, his father stifled a yawn. "I'm more tired than I thought."

"Yeah, it's been a long night. We really should be getting some sleep. The kids will be up early." Andy hoisted himself out of the water.

That seemed to be the cue everyone had been waiting for. They climbed out of the tub and dried off.

"Come on, Rika. You need some sleep." Robyn handed her a towel.

Rika set it behind her. "I'll be along shortly."

"Are you sure?"

Ryan's mom put an arm around the girl's shoulders. "I believe she's very sure, dear." Flashing them a knowing smile, she led the others all away.

Ryan waited a full five minutes before he moved, just to be sure they wouldn't return. Simultaneously they set aside their empty glasses. Ryan reached for her. Rika glided across the tub and into the curve of his arm.

"I thought they'd never leave." She traced her finger across his lips.

Ryan parted his lips, then sucked the digit slowly into his mouth. Rika pulled in a soft breath as his tongue drew circles around it. Her teeth caught her lower lip as she followed the action.

"Do you wish I was doing that to your dick?" she asked softly.

Ryan grunted an animalistic response. Smiling, Rika eased her hand away and replaced it with her lips. Her tongue feathered across his in lazy exploration. With a flick of his wrist, Ryan pulled open the ties on the front of her suit and slipped his hand inside.

Rika sucked in a breath as she peeled her lips from his when his

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fingers curled around her breast. "I need you so much," she whispered against his ear.

"As much as I need you?" He pulled her hand to his throbbing erection.

Rika wiggled her hand into his swimsuit and stroked. "If not more. I'm hard, too. My clit is hot...and aching for attention...aching for you."

A shiver tickled down his spine. He jerked open the tie at her neck and yanked her top down. Grasping her by the waist, he pulled her over him until her chest was out of the water. Pink little peaks offered themselves to him. Instead of tasting them, he pulled her higher until she was able to stand astride him on the seat, then wiggled the yellow swimsuit from her body.

She was a nude goddess hovering over him, her most intimate parts open to his eyes. Ryan jerked his trunks off and tossed them aside.

Goosebumps rose on her skin. From the night air? Or for want of him? He trembled from the force of her lustful gaze as he eased his shoulders behind her legs. Urging her downward, he cradled her buttocks in his hands until her kitty was parallel with his mouth. Groaning, he dove into her honey, flicking his tongue around and around in a teasing, snake-like dance.

Clutching his head, Rika cried out. Her hips twitched with each swipe of his tongue. He felt her muscles contract. He wanted her to come, wanted to be fucking her hard when she did so, wanted to taste her orgasm on his lips. While her fingers furrowed mindlessly through his hair, Ryan warred with his wants. Drawing the hard little pearl between his lips, he sucked hard flicking his tongue rapidly over the tip. A guttural cry tore from her throat as she came.

Ryan caught her as she sagged into his arms. He slid her over the length of his body until his mouth could capture the pink tips of her breasts. He nipped at each one over and over, building her up once

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more, then suckled one deep.

With her soft cry, arrows of pleasure shot to his dick. He seized the other breast, twirling his tongue over the beaded nipple. Her short nails bit into his shoulders as she writhed beneath this onslaught, raking her pussy against his aching cock.

“Good God, honey, take it. Fuck me,” Ryan urged in a husky whisper.

She eased over him with agonizing slowness then gasped for air. “Oh, my...”

“Yes, it feels wonderful. Show me how you like it. How hard. How deep. How fast. How slow.”

“Oh, Ry—”

“Show me.” He dug his fingers into her ass.

Head tossed back in wild abandon, she thrust herself onto him. Ryan gritted his teeth against the orgasm threatening to rip him apart. Her muscles rippled along his cock in a smooth, steady rhythm so tight he knew an inexperienced man could not have held on. He shoved his hand between them, giving her clit the extra friction it needed.

Rika rocked above him, oblivious to anything but the glorious rush consuming her. The closer it came, the faster she moved. Ryan gave up his battle to hang on. It was too sweet...she was too hot, too tight. Her orgasm gripped his cock, demanding he join her. She froze, lost in the moment. Ryan dug his fingers into her ass, pivoting his dick in deeper. An instant later, he exploded within her, unmindful of the strangled sounds he made as he did so. Then they slumped into the water.

Rika rested on his shoulder while he gathered her close. “That was so good.”

“The best.” His heart still raced.

“I’m so relaxed I could fall asleep right here.”

“Please don’t. I don’t think I have the energy to carry you to bed tonight.”

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Rika giggled, and he rubbed her bottom. “Come on. Let’s get upstairs.”

With towels wrapped around them, they padded to the attic room.

He led her to the sofa and pressed her down. Smiling, he combed his fingers through her short, red hair. “So soft. So beautiful.”

She pulled her towel away, then his, smiling when she felt his hard cock rub against her belly.

His lips nipped their way down her body. He found her clit hard and ready, and rediscovered its curves and hollows. Her release was quick, as if she hadn’t already come twice. Ryan gloried in his ability to give this to her. Lifting her hips, he shoved a large floor pillow under her hips, then he seated himself with a deep thrust that lifted her even higher.



## CHAPTER 7

A child's scream for help jolted Rika from a sound sleep. Ryan leaped up. Dazed from the abrupt awakening, both struggled to clear their heads enough to determine two things—which child and where? A second screech answered both questions.

“Evan's stuck in that damn tree.” Ryan jumped into a pair of jeans and ran to the windows while Rika threw on shorts and a shirt.

Sure enough, Evan teetered on a weak limb near the top of the pepper tree—the weakest part of the tree.

“Help! I'm scared.”

“Stay still.” Ryan motioned him back in place. “We'll get you down. Just don't move.”

“Hurry.”

“I'm on my way. Rika, stay here and talk to him. Try to keep him still.”

Without waiting for her to respond, Ryan zipped away. Rika could

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hear his footsteps thunder down the stairs. The back screen door crashed open, and he appeared below the tree, Mitch and Andy beside him.

“Have you lost your mind?” Ryan shouted up at the tree.

“I can reach him. I know it.” Rika heard Don’s reply from within the leaves, then she saw him below the younger boy.

“The branches won’t hold you,” Ryan shouted up. “Stay where you are for now. We’ll get Evan.”

As if to verify his statement, the tree branch groaned from the weight it bore. An ominous creak followed.

“Ryan, the branch is breaking,” she yelled down.

“Hang on, Evan. Be still.”

Ryan inched an extension ladder into the tree. The branch cracked open. Evan lost his balance and slipped to one side. His small hands grasped for a place to hold.

“Hurry! It’s breaking!” Rika’s panic made her voice shrill.

\* \* \*

Ryan scurried up the ladder. He was within arm’s reach of the boy when the branch gave way. Evan plummeted toward the ground, taking Don, Ryan, and the ladder with him. Ryan snagged a branch with one arm then grabbed for Evan with the other. He felt the boy’s arm pop out of its socket.

Even as the boy screamed from the pain, Ryan winced. He felt the child’s agony, but there was nothing he could do. It was either hold on to him or let him fall to a bone-breaking injury, maybe even death. He heard Don groan as he hit the ground and blamed himself for not being able to help both boys.

“Try to brace your foot on a branch,” Ryan told Evan. “I know it hurts bad and I sure am sorry, but if you can balance yourself, I can hold you better.”

Evan reached one foot for a branch. It slipped from under him.

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Ryan felt himself losing his grip on the branch. Evan started to cry.

“Try again. I know you can do it. Come on, big guy. You can do it.”

Evan took a breath, screwed up his face with determination, and reached for the branch again. Ryan grabbed him securely around the waist. He breathed a sigh of relief. They weren’t safe yet, but it was a hell of a lot better position, especially for the poor kid.

“Good job, Evan.”

He watched his dad slip the ladder in place beside them. By the time they set foot on solid ground, Rika was there fussing over Don and ready to take Evan.

“Careful. He’s got a dislocated shoulder.”

“At least he’s still alive.” She smoothed the boy’s hair and brushed a kiss against his forehead.

Ryan knelt beside Don. The leg looked fine, but the foot was starting to swell.

“Looks broken all right. Dad, you and Andy help these two to my Jeep while Rika and I finish dressing. We shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

As the couple dressed, Rika noticed what Ryan casually ignored—he hadn’t escaped the fall unscathed. Cuts, scrapes, and bruises dotted his bare torso. Before he could cover himself with a shirt, she delicately touched her palm to a long cut on his side.

Her voice quivered with emotion. “How did I ever get so lucky to find you?”

He tilted her chin upward. Tears pooled in her green eyes.

“I’m the one who’s lucky,” he softly told her, then planted a quick kiss on her lips.

\* \* \*

“Boy, you’re really banged up,” the doctor said to Evan.

“That’s what normally happens when you fall out of a tree.” Rika was still shaking from the incident. They could have been killed.

## *TREASURE HUNTERS*

The doctor studied the boy. "How did your shoulder get messed up?"

How many times did she have to tell him? Maybe he was trying to put Evan at ease, take his mind off the pain.

"Ryan did it," Evan replied.

"Who's Ryan?"

"Rika's boyfriend."

"I see." The doctor turned to Rika. "Miss Kiley, it would be better for Evan if he were sedated before we try to work on that shoulder. It'll be less painful for him that way."

"Whatever you think is best."

"We'll leave him with the nurse and get the paperwork started. Permission slips and all that."

When that was done, Rika joined Ryan and Andy in the waiting room. "How's Don doing?"

"Fine," Andy replied. "Too grown up to have his brother in there with him. Especially when there's a pretty nurse's aide standing close by to lend a hand."

Rika smiled and shook her head. Yep, girls weren't so yucky after all.

"And Evan?" Ryan asked.

Rika explained what was going on with the ten-year-old. There was nothing more they could do but wait. The staccato click of heels on tile drew their attention down the hallway. Her stomach tied up in knots when Rika saw Claudia Stanhope swooping upon them.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath. "That's all we need."

Ryan leaned closer. "Who is she?"

She pushed the answer through gritted teeth. "Claudia Stanhope. Social worker. Child Protective Services." And the real Wicked Witch of the West.

"Maybe she's not here for you."

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“She’s here to see me all right. I can tell by the scowl on her ugly, old face.”

\* \* \*

Ryan watched the old woman barrel down the hallway toward them. She looked more suited to the role of prison matron than protector of children. The sour look on her skinny face would be enough to give any child nightmares. Her gray hair was pulled back in a tight bun, making her eyes bug out. Her dowdy black dress did nothing to enhance her stick-thin figure.

Her gaze never left Rika as she plodded purposefully onward. She stopped five feet away and eyed Rika with contempt, her thin lips forming a grim line.

In a high-pitched voice she began. “Miss Kiley, I understand there has been some ‘accident’ with young Evan.”

Rika tucked her arms across her chest. “He fell from a tree.”

“I’ve just spoken to the doctor. He feels there’s more to it than that. There are numerous cuts and bruises on him—”

“Well, no shit, lady.” Ryan snapped to his feet. “He fell from a tree. I’ve got cuts and bruises on me, too.”

She tilted her head back and looked down her nose at him. Not easy to do since he hovered over her, but she somehow managed. “And who are you, young man?”

“Ryan Fletcher.”

“The person who yanked the child’s arm out of its socket?”

“I grabbed him to keep him from falling.”

“I see. And what was he doing up in the tree in the first place?”

“Disobeying me by climbing that tree.” Ryan’s answer came through clenched teeth.

“He disobeyed you so you beat him?”

He threw his hands in the air. “I can’t believe this crap.”

Stanhope zeroed in on Rika once more. “And where were you when

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this was going on?"

She raised her chin a notch. "When he climbed the tree, I was asleep."

"Asleep...at noon?"

Ryan didn't like her assumptions or her sarcasm. "Now just a damn minute—"

"No, you wait a minute." She snapped her bony finger at him. "There have been quite a few questionable activities the past few days involving Miss Kiley. Now this happens. I'm afraid the matter will have to be fully investigated. Until the results of that investigation are known, Evan and Donald will be removed from Miss Kiley's care and placed in a foster home."

"You can't do that!" Rika jumped to her feet.

"I assure you I can." Stanhope gestured to a policeman and he started forward. "He's here to make sure you do as you're told."

"This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. You're making this into something it's not." But Ryan knew the social worker was beyond reasoning with. Her mind was already made up.

"That's for the judge to decide," she said.

The young officer whipped out a paper and handed it to Rika. With shaking fingers, she opened it.

"I can't believe this." The words came out on a choked whisper.

Ryan eased the paper from her. The hearing was set for tomorrow afternoon. She was to be there with the remaining children. "This is stupid!"

"I'm sorry, sir," the officer said. "But I have orders to escort Don and Evan to a foster home and see that no one interferes."

"Officer—" Andy peeked at his name tag. "—Ramsey, this is a terrible misunderstanding."

As Andy explained the situation, confusion wrinkled the officer's forehead. The scales tipped slightly in favor of the Kileys when Don

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hobbled out on crutches and told him an identical story.

But the clincher came when a drowsy-eyed Evan was wheeled to them. Through bleary eyes, the child looked up at Ryan and smiled. "Thanks for saving my life, Ryan."

It was all Ramsey needed to hear. He made a telephone call. After a mumbled conversation, he made another call. A few more words were exchanged before he handed the phone to Stanhope.

"You can all go home," Ramsey told them. "But there will still be a hearing tomorrow. Make sure you're there."

Ryan thanked him and they left before Stanhope could get off the phone.

\* \* \*

Back at the Fletcher house, Rika tried her best to explain about the hearing to the children. It was no use. No one understood. Not the kids, not the Fletchers, and, most especially, herself. Frightened, the little ones clutched at her and Anna. Robyn looked like she wanted to do so as well. Ryan's jaw was tight with fury. She half-expected an explosion at any minute.

Perhaps Anna noticed it, too. She tried to alleviate any eruption he might make. Shortly after dinner she insisted Ryan and Rika accompany her on a walk with the dogs. A few yards down the path, Ryan took two of the dogs and broke into a run, leaving Rika and Anna behind with the older two.

"Good," his mother said. "It's just what he needs to burn off his irritation. Maybe you should run, too."

Rika shook her head. "No. He needs the time to himself. He's having a hard time dealing with this. He doesn't understand."

"And you do?"

Rika stopped. "No, Anna, I don't, but I do know that this is all my fault. If I'd been watching the kids instead of..." She couldn't finish. This was Ryan's mother.

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Anna smiled and cupped a palm to her cheek. "You can't watch all those kids twenty-four hours a day. You deserve a chance to take care of yourself. You were tired and needed the rest. Don't blame yourself. Ryan fell out of that tree when he was ten, too."

"I know, but you didn't have a social worker ready to make an issue of it. She hounds my every move...Thanks for your concern. I think I'll pass on the walk and go back to the kids."

Before she burst into tears, Rika walked away. She should have been more careful. Should never have let her vigilance relax for even a moment, much less the way she had. Now she...they...would all suffer for her selfishness...again.

\* \* \*

That evening Ryan watched Rika throw all her energy into taking care of the children, refusing all offers of assistance. Her stubbornness grated on his nerves. He would have pressed the issue if it hadn't been for the kids. After they were tucked in, she wouldn't be so lucky.

But once the children were settled, Rika avoided confrontation by parking herself in the living room where the others had gathered to watch TV.

It was all he could take. Determined to settle the matter, Ryan stood between her and the television, legs astride, arms crossed. Rika didn't look up, but the other adults in the living room did.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

"About what?"

"About your new rise to martyrdom."

The sarcasm pulled a green-eyed gaze up to his.

"You're determined to do it yourself. You've refused everyone's help. Mine, my parents, Chesney's, even your own brother and sister. What are you trying to prove? How quickly you can dig your own grave?"

"Ryan, please, I don't feel like arguing in front of everyone."



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“Since you’ve been avoiding me all evening, you don’t leave much of a choice. Why do you continue to shut me out when things get bad?”

“I don’t.”

But she did. Why couldn’t she see it? Why couldn’t she understand he was truly there for her?

“Just let it go.” She slipped from her seat and snatched up her purse. He watched her haul out a bottle of Mylanta with one hand, while the other was poised to uncap it for a long slug.

“Damn it, Rika. Will you stop drinking that stuff like it was water?”

“Leave me alone.” She twisted the cap off, then lifted it to her lips.

The floor rattled with his strides. Before she could take a gulp, he yanked the sea green container from her and hurled it across the room. It clattered to a stop, its chalky contents spilling on the wooden floor.

“Look what you did!” Grabbing a wad of tissue, she dashed to clean up the mess.

Ryan grabbed her arm and swung her back in place. “Let it go...I’ve heard of people who used a bottle as a crutch, but this is ridiculous.”

“Let me go! I should’ve taken the kids and left! If I still had my van, I would!”

“You’ll have it in the morning. I made arrangements to have the glass replaced. Andy and Chesney will pick it up in the morning. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Her shoulders sagged with the news, like all the air had left her. “It is.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Why?”

“Because I knew you’d want to have it. I wanted to help. I told you I’d be here for you. Why are you shoving me aside?”

Rika turned her back to him and wrapped her arms around her middle as if trying to trap her emotions inside. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I...I feel so guilty.” Tears choked her.

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“Why? Because you were in bed with m—” Ryan stopped, recalling they weren’t in the room alone. In fact, they’d made quite a scene.

He took Rika’s elbow and steered her to the privacy of the kitchen. “Because you were in bed with me?”

“Yes...but there’s more to it than that.”

“Like what?”

She brushed away a falling tear before turning her emerald eyes up to his. “I’m one of the reasons we’re struggling the way we are. Becky and I never wanted for a thing. We had it all. My parents gave it all to us. They spent it all on us. There’s nothing left, Ryan, and it’s all because of me and Becky.”

He caught her shoulders in a gentle hold. “So now you’re going to spend the rest of your life punishing yourself? Honey, you can’t control how your parents handled their lives. You certainly didn’t cause your sister’s financial problems. They were all poor money managers. It seems to me they had a live-for-today-the-hell-with-tomorrow attitude. You said that yourself. You aren’t to blame. Stop trying to kill yourself making up for their mistakes.”

“Why should you care about me?” she cried.

“Because I love you. You know that.”

“But you keep getting the bad end of the stick. Don’t you see? It’s never going to be any better than this...sometimes even worse. Cut your losses while you can, Ryan, and head for the hills.”

She got two steps passed him before Ryan snagged her arm and pulled her back. “I think you’re worth the stay.”

She fell against him in a sob. “Oh, Ryan, what am I going to do?”

He hugged her close. “We’ll manage. We’ll find a way.”

\* \* \*

Rika clenched her hands on her lap. Her case had been called five minutes before, and the judge had yet to speak. Instead, he was studying the pile of documents Claudia Stanhope had presented to him.

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Behind Rika, in the spectator's section, her family sat quietly, all dressed in their best clothes. Ryan and his parents sat with them.

Judge McGuire peered over his glasses at her, then at Stanhope. "Mrs. Stanhope, you initiated this hearing because a child fell out of a tree?"

"Yes, Your Honor, the child was not carefully watched. Other information came to me that the child's injury may have been inflicted by physical abuse. A bruise to little Amy's face proves that."

"That was a karate chop from me," Evan hollered out.

Rika glanced back, afraid any action from her would be misinterpreted.

Anna shushed the boy and tugged him into his seat. When Rika faced the judge, it looked like he was smiling.

"Donald and Evan...tell me what happened."

Both boys snapped to their feet.

"I climbed the tree and I wasn't s'pose to. Ryan told me no 'cause he got hurt doin' it when he was my age. But I did it anyway. I got stuck. Donny tried to help me. Ryan came to get me. The branch broke and we all fell. Ryan grabbed my arm and saved my life." Evan finished, flashing a smile to Ryan.

McGuire hid a smile behind his hand. "Thank you, you may sit down. Mrs. Stanhope, this appears to have been an accident. So does the bruise to Amy."

She sniffed. "Miss Kiley was inattentive. It was noon and she was still asleep."

"Your Honor..." Rika cleared her throat. "I'd been up 'til early morning helping the police catch a man who was trying to kill me."

Stanhope was not to be undone. "An event which never would have occurred if Miss Kiley had not put herself and those children in danger by interfering with an armed robbery."

Rika was quick to defend herself. "It was a reflex action. I was

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protecting our money.”

“I understand your motives, Miss Kiley,” McGuire told her. “I don’t see any evidence which suggests Miss Kiley has been negligent. Nor do I find evidence of child abuse. However...there are other facts of this case which do concern me. Miss Kiley, I have no doubt that you’ve done your best to care for these children. But it is my judgment that you have vastly overextended yourself. Your finances—”

“Your Honor, the children never go without food or clothing. The bills are paid on time. There’s money for birthdays, school things, health insurance—”

“But what about emergencies like the tree injuries?” he asked.

“Our health insurance covered most of it.”

“And the rest of it.”

Rika swallowed. “Ryan Fletcher paid for it.”

“And the repairs to your car? The newspaper article indicated there was substantial damage.”

“Only the glass was gone. Ryan paid for that...too.”

“And what is your relationship with this man?”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

The judge sighed and folded his hands before him. “Miss Kiley, raising these children has become a financial hardship. There are six of you in a three-bedroom house. Seven, I suspect, when your oldest brother is out of college. And you share a room with your sister. I feel it would be in everyone’s best interests if the children were temporarily placed in a foster home until your financial situation improves.”

Ryan stood. “That won’t be necessary. I can support them.”

“You must be the boyfriend,” McGuire said. “What is your line of work?”

“I help manage Fletcher Hotels and Resorts.”

“Ah...one of *those* Fletchers.”

Ryan wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

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“How long have you and Miss Kiley been seeing each other?”

“Six months.” The words sounded like a death toll to Ryan. Six months and they hadn’t made a move beyond boyfriend-girlfriend. He didn’t dare tell the judge he’d been gone for ninety-nine percent of that time. His heart plummeted.

McGuire looked at Rika through sad eyes. “I’m sorry, Miss Kiley. If he was your fiancé, I might consider it.”

Ryan drew breath to speak. His father’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Not now, son,” he whispered. “A proposal would be disastrous. She might be grateful, but she’d eventually question it.”

Ryan knew he was right, but it was killing him that he couldn’t help Rika. No wonder she shut him out during the bad times.

“Your Honor, please don’t take them away.” Her voice quivered with suppressed tears.

“Miss Kiley, it’s only a temporary arrangement until your money situation has stabilized.”

“You’re traumatizing those kids by separating them and shoving them into the hands of strangers,” Ryan blurted out.

His father stood and spoke before the judge could. “Is it possible to let the children stay with us?”

McGuire removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Judging from your looks, I’d guess you must be the young man’s father.”

He nodded. “Mitchell Fletcher.”

“Only relatives, qualified foster families, or those individuals deemed appropriate by the Department of Social Services may take the children. It would be best if you consulted with an attorney. Miss Kiley, Mrs. Stanhope will accompany you to your home to get the children and their things. Every effort will be made to keep the children together.”

Robyn shoved to her feet. “Well, I won’t go. I’ll run away every

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time you put me in a foster home. This is ridiculous. Lots of families have money problems and their kids aren't taken away. It's because she's not our mom. That bitch has had it in for us from the start." She jerked her finger toward the social worker.

Rika turned around, and for the first time Ryan could see the torture she was going through. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes watery, her lips pale—all from an effort to keep from becoming hysterical.

"Robyn, please don't make this any worse than it already is." She turned back to the judge. "I'd prefer someone other than Mrs. Stanhope."

Judge McGuire granted her request and called his next case.

\* \* \*

Rika refused to show how defeated she felt, refused to break down in front of the children. She remained strong even when they clung to her as they left the courtroom. She even managed to ignore Claudia Stanhope's victory smirk.

"What are we going to do now?" Robyn wailed when they reached the hallway.

It was Andy who answered. "For now, we have to do what the judge ordered. If we don't, Rika could go to jail for contempt of court."

"Don't worry," Rika told them. "I'll find a way out of this...soon. It'll just be for a short time. Everything's going to be all right. I know it hurts, but we all have to be strong."

An hour later, when the departure began, Rika forgot her own words. She did nothing to hide her tears. They fell freely down her cheeks while she hugged and kissed each one of the children. It was a wrenching experience made doubly hard when five-year-old Amy wrapped her arms and legs around her and refused to let go. The social worker's gentle attempts to take her were met by hysterical screams.

"Don't touch her," Rika ground out through bared teeth. "I'll take her to the car myself."

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The young woman stepped away as if she'd been burned. Rika brushed by her and pushed Amy into Robyn's arms. Then, finger by finger, she pried the little girl's hands from her neck and stepped back. Amy's screams heightened to a deafening level as she groped for her aunt. Rika covered her own mouth to hide the sobs trying to escape. Then she watched in despair as the car drove away, Amy's screams reverberating all the way. Her pathetically outstretched arms were a nightmarish vision Rika knew would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Ryan slipped an arm around her. She burrowed into his chest. There were tears in his eyes, too. She was glad Mitch and Anna weren't here to see this. Rika couldn't have stood to see their pain on top of her own.

He rubbed her back. "We'll start feeding money into your account from mine."

Rika looked up at him. "They'd see through that in a heartbeat."

"We could tell them you're working for Fletcher's."

"Then they'd say I was working two jobs and not giving the kids the attention they deserved." It was a vicious circle. "I'm surprised they didn't catch my part-time work with Fletcher's as it is."

Andy tossed his hands up. "What else can you do, Rika? Dig up buried treasure? Go on a treasure hunt?"

*The Wind Racer* race. She and Ryan stared at each other.

"I...I couldn't be away from work for a month," she managed to say. "Art is understanding, but..."

Hope lit Ryan's smoky gray eyes. "He'd love an exclusive, though. Even if there was nothing going on, he'd still have one of his reporters on the scene."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask. He would love a scoop. But..." He'd said he do whatever he could to help her. Would he?

He cocked his head to one side. "But what?"

"I can't do it without you." She was half tempted to place her hand on his chest in silent pleading, but that felt like a dirty-pool tactic and

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she refused to play the pity card.

“Honey, you’re not going to have to.”

“Getting Art to agree is only half the battle. We still have to pass the requirements and get selected.”

Ryan gave a short nod. “One step at a time. Want me to go with you to talk to Art?”

She pulled in a breath. For the first time in two days she felt energized. “That’ll be better on my own. I’ll meet you back at your parents’ house.”

\* \* \*

Art’s bald head popped up when Rika burst into his office.

“Hey, Freddy, what are you doing here? Thought I gave you time off.”

She pulled up a chair and sat down, her spine ramrod straight. “Art, the court took the kids away from me today. The judge thinks I can’t afford to take care of them properly.”

“Look, Fred, if it’s money you need—”

She held up a hand. “I need money all right, but I have a way to get it...the Wind Racer competition.”

His jaw dropped as he flopped back in his chair. “You can’t be serious.”

“Very serious. I know how to sail. There’s more, Art. There’s something not right about this race, and I want to see if I can find out what it is.”

“What are you talking about?” His eyebrows inched closer together. She’d definitely gotten his attention.

“Where’s the money coming from to pay for the race? It cost a fortune to build Wind Racer. Why doesn’t he just do timed trials then sell the damn thing?”

Art scratched his Adam’s apple while he filtered the information. “Are you sure you can pass the physical fitness test?”



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“Yes,” she replied, then added a nod. “I’m in good shape and I’m damned determined.”

“What if they recognize you? You’ve been in the news a lot yourself lately.”

“I’m not going to make any secret about it. In fact, I’m hoping it’ll work in my favor. If I manage to pass the tests, they won’t dare knock me out of the competition for fear I’ll smell a rat and start snooping. And I’m not afraid to play that angle if I have to.”

“You can’t do this alone.”

“I won’t have to. Ryan’s going with me.”

“Well, that does make me feel a little better.” Art gave a soft whistle. “Boy, if your instincts are right...” He whistled again. “Geez, what a scoop!”

Rika stood. “Try-outs are tomorrow. I’ll keep you posted. One thing’s for sure—you know you’ll get a great story, no matter how this turns out. There’s just one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“If we win, that million dollar prize is mine.”

“Let’s just hope there is a prize.”

## CHAPTER 8

Rika glanced around the small crowd gathered at Balboa Park as they drove in. She was surprised to find no more than fifty people there to sign up for the Wind Racer competition. Whether because of the early morning call for participants or the grueling test itself, she couldn't say, and at that point didn't care. The lower turnout buoyed her spirits. Their chances of being accepted had risen, but they were still taking a big gamble here.

"Your parents didn't have much to say about this."

Ryan pulled into a parking slot and cut the engine. "There wasn't much they could say. They could see how determined we were."

"They didn't seem angry to you?"

He shook his head. "Distracted, yes. But not angry."

Rika would have felt better if they'd at least wished them good luck when they left. But the two were off in their room getting ready for some big meeting they had that morning. It looked like business as

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usual for the Fletchers.

She was surprised at how much their support meant to her after so short a period of acquaintance. It would have pumped up her morale intensely to know they were with her in this decision. When had she become so needy? Rika laughed at herself. Maybe she'd always been that way. She'd always needed to hear her parents' praise, especially after the bike incident.

Who was she kidding? She'd been through hell the last couple of days. Her emotions were definitely on high overload. Who wouldn't be needy?

Ryan patted her knee. "Ready to do this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." More than ready. She'd lain awake half the night worried about the competition. She prayed it wouldn't affect her performance.

With Ryan at her side, they strode to the registration table, nodding and smiling at their competitors as they went. They looked more confident than Rika felt. Maybe that would help rattle the competition.

The registrar glanced up as they approached, a smile frozen on his face. "Here to register?"

Before they could answer, a camera crew appeared seemingly from out of nowhere. *Welcome to reality TV*, she thought. Rika wondered if it would help keep the race honest.

Ryan ignored the camera in his face and reflected the registrar's bright smile. "You bet. Ryan and Rika Fletcher. We were very recently married so all of my wife's documentation is in her maiden name. I hope that's acceptable."

The man assured him it was. A few minutes later they were walking to the staging area for the physical fitness test.

Another hurdle out of the way. Ryan's idea to pose as married had worked like a charm. The coordinators hadn't even batted an eye. She watched the table as they stretched their muscles with the other

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contestants. Yet another cameraman videotaped the scene.

Stuart Racer monitored the entries. The photo the *Sentinel* had on file didn't do his movie star looks justice. He had a tan to rival the heartiest of beach-goers and a white smile to show it off. Streaks of blond highlighted his brown hair. He wore lemon yellow tennis shorts with a matching shirt that boasted of old money. Once he reviewed the list of entrants, he wandered through the group shaking hands, clapping people on the back, welcoming them all.

His charm didn't impress her. In fact, he gave her the creeps. He was the guy a girl prayed wouldn't hit on her at a bar. To call him a lounge lizard would have been an insult—to lounge lizards.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Rika pulled up at the voice and saw a skinny man whose stringy, blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail. At his side was a bosomy young Hispanic woman. She braced herself for him to say something about who she was as he barreled down on them.

She nudged Ryan. He glanced up and, to her surprise, stuck out his hand.

"How are you doing, Chuck?"

"Not bad...considering."

Ryan drew Rika forward. "This is my lady, Rika. Rika, Chuck Bellfield. And the lady with him is Pilar Rivera."

Nods of greeting were exchanged.

The woman's soft brown skin contrasted sharply beside her companion's pale looks. Rika had never met a more mismatched couple.

"You entering the race?" Chuck asked.

Ryan smiled down at Rika. "We thought we'd give it a shot. Nothing to lose, right?"

"And a million bucks to gain." He scuffed his hands together and nudged Pilar. "Looks like we made it just in time." He pointed to where

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the contestants were starting to line up.

Rika stepped to one side. “Doesn’t give you much time to warm up your muscles.”

Chuck shrugged. “Don’t need it. Come on, babe.” He slung his arm over Pilar’s shoulder. After wishing them good luck, he hauled her away to registration.

Ryan merely shrugged and motioned her to get into line.

Of the fifty people vying for selection, ten were women. The coordinators quickly culled men from women. Each would have the standard physical test. Men were required to do pull-ups, sit-ups, and a three-mile run. The women’s portion included arm hang, sit-ups, and a run of a mile-and-a-half.

Rika stood with the women, continuing to stretch as the men ran through their tests. Pride pumped up her chest as she watched Ryan compete. His body moved with the sleekness of an athlete’s, his muscles working in perfect harmony with each other. He placed first in each event. She stopped short of cheering. No sense antagonizing everyone. Still, she beamed a smile his way, then took her place among the women. That was when she realized how out of shape she was.

The arm hang was a humiliating lesson in futility—she only managed to hang for five seconds. She fared better on the sit-ups, completing one hundred in no time. The run allowed her to recoup a little more self-esteem when she finished first in ten minutes. Pilar, she noted, was dead last.

Ryan’s smile had to be as wide as hers had been for him. Pulling in deep breaths through her nose, she gladly accepted the cup of water he held out for her.

“Keep walking so you don’t cramp. Sip the water.”

Rika nodded. She could barely catch her breath. “Arm hang screwed me.”

He shrugged. “I doubt it matters. None of the women passed any

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portion of the test, only you. That has to matter.”

Ryan was right. A few minutes’ later fifteen people were told they needn’t bother to continue. Of the women, only Rika and, surprisingly, Pilar were left. Pilar remained only because Chuck was her partner—he’d aced the physical qualifications.

After a lunch of submarine sandwiches sponsored by Wind Racer, they drove to Mission Bay for the final phase of the selection process—a small demonstration of their sailing ability.

Rika couldn’t see the sense in this next test. A little jaunt around the curves of Mission Bay was nothing compared to what one had to deal with on the open sea. The test proved even more absurd when she learned all that was required was to show skill at reaching. Sailing back and forth at a right angle across the wind was something used for beginner’s practice. She and Ryan passed puzzled looks between them. In the end, all they could do was shrug it off.

They watched Chuck and Pilar settle in their separate one-man boats. In less than a minute Chuck had capsized his. Pilar breezed through her course while Chuck was rescued.

“I was afraid of that,” Ryan muttered to Rika. “He’s never been sailing by himself in his life.”

“Don’t worry. I have.” Then she set out to prove it.

Rika knew she was as graceful as a swan with a sail. Her father had often told her so. It was one of the few perks of having spendthrift parents. He’d bought a sailboat one year, then sold it later to help Becky pay the hospital when she gave birth to Evan.

She shoved the memory away and focused. With confidence born of years of practice, she hauled in the mainsheet until the sails filled. She held the sheet in one hand while the other guided the rudder. She became one with the wind and the boat, gliding back and forth to her marks until her run was over.

When she returned to the dock, she again saw the pride in Ryan’s

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face. After a quick kiss for luck, he took his turn. The power in his skill sent shivers through her. Was there any doubt they were meant to be together? The second his foot touched the dock, Rika wrapped her arms around his waist. Without a word, they wandered to the nearest shade to await the outcome. She hoped it would be soon. It was nearly dinner time. They'd been here all day. A hot shower would feel more than good right about now.

Rika watched Stuart Racer review the panel's result with another man. Judging from the similarity between the two, Rika guessed he was the other Racer brother—Eldon. He wasn't as pretty as his brother, but still very much put together. He'd contributed little to the competition other than to monitor and track what was happening. That seemed odd considering he had as much invested here as his brother. He'd been content to hover in the shadows, taking notes on an oversized clipboard while Stuart acted as the front-man. Rika might have passed it off as a difference in personalities if it hadn't been for the sternness in Eldon's face. His expression hinted of something more, kicking her reporter instincts into overdrive.

Even now, he glowered at Stuart, obviously disagreeing with something. Stuart snatched the clipboard from him and made a heavy-handed annotation before shoving it back into Eldon's chest. Falsifying the scores? Whatever it was, Eldon wasn't happy about it. Clutching the clipboard, he grabbed his brother's elbow and turned him away from the group. Rika longed to get closer to hear their conversation, but by the time she had maneuvered to a better location, they were done talking.

It looked like she was going to have to dig through her old resources. Hopefully, she'd be able to gather enough information before they left in the morning.

Stuart turned that beaming smile to the contestants. Every time he did that, Rika was reminded more and more of a conman. "We have the

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results.”

Cameramen moved into place, ready to capture the announcement and reactions of winners and losers. Rika prayed they wouldn't focus on her. She laced her fingers through Ryan's, pressing close against his arm. Winning this round mattered more than she dared to admit.

“First team presently in the number one position...”

She actually held her breath while she waited. It had to be them. They'd aced everything...except for that damn arm hang.

“Ryan and Rika Fletcher.” The cameras swung around.

Rika sagged in relief.

Ryan kissed her temple. “We made it, sweetheart.”

Yes, another hurdle behind them. They were in the race. But so were Chuck and Pilar. Now Rika was convinced this was a farce. By rights the couple should have been disqualified. Was that the bone of contention between the Racer brothers? What she wouldn't give for a peek at that list.

While she puzzled through this, Stuart rattled off further instructions while Eldon handed out the list of items they'd need for the trip. The other bad news was, they had to leave for Miami early the next morning. That didn't give them much time to prepare. Considering how things looked, maybe the Racers were counting on people not having enough time to get ready.

Stuart lifted a wave to everyone with a promise to see them early tomorrow morning at the airport. Eldon cracked a half-hearted smile, then walked away, leaving his brother to follow.

Now the cameras focused exclusively on the contestants. As one cameraman zeroed in on them, Ryan blocked his angle and motioned Rika to his vehicle. She wasted no time taking advantage of the chance for freedom. The last thing she wanted to deal with was a camera in her face.

“I certainly hope they don't plan on having a cameraman on each



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boat,” Ryan said once they were safely behind closed doors. “That would make for some very tight quarters.”

Not to mention hamper their investigation, as well as what little private time they could manage out of a day of sailing.

“I wonder what the big rush is.” He frowned as he pulled from the parking lot. “Did you see them arguing?”

“I sure did. I’d give my eye teeth to see that list.” She glanced at the clock on the dash. Everyone would be gone from the newspaper by the time she could shower and get down there. She wasn’t too keen on the idea of being at the paper alone at night. The whole incident with the bank robber had spooked her more than she was ready to admit. Still, she needed that information.

“I’ve got so much to do. I don’t know where to start...besides desperately needing a shower.”

Ryan chuckled. “I hear you on that one. I’ve got to throw some things together for this trip, too. Want me to drop you off at your place? I’ll be back once I’m done.”

Rika didn’t think she could stand being in the house without the kids. Andy wouldn’t be there. He’d been spending most of his time with Chesney since they met.

“You’re going to want to see your folks before we leave. And everything I need is already there.”

He nodded. “Then I’ll leave you there and be over later.”

They were silent during the ride over. Rika spent the time ticking off things she needed to check. Maybe Mitch would let her use his computer to do a little internet snooping. She could access the *Sentinel* records from there, too. A lot to do.

They parted at the Fletcher house with a kiss and a promise to, “See you later.”

Rika watched until he disappeared around a curve in the driveway, then turned toward the house. It didn’t look like Anna and Mitch were

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home yet. It was probably just as well. Despite their win, depression settled heavily on her shoulders. She needed a little time to pull her thoughts together before seeing anyone. Using the key Anna had given her days before, Rika let herself in. The dogs greeted her with tails awag, but the children's absence was noticeable. They'd filled the house just by being in it. Now it was vacant, like the gaping hole in her heart.

Blinking back tears, Rika trotted up the stairs. A quick shower set her physically to rights, but her emotions still hovered on the edge. The house felt cavernous. It crept her out. She wished Ryan would hurry up and get back, or that Anna and Mitch would come home. She paced the circuit from the living room to the kitchen and back, over and over. The dogs gave up trying to follow her and lay down to watch her progress.

Should she start dinner for them or would the other couple have eaten already? Should she presume Mitch wouldn't mind her using his computer and just do it? Rika shook her head. That was just too rude. Stopping in mid-stride, she stared down at the four pooches.

"I suppose I could feed you guys."

They jumped to their feet. That put a smile on her face.

After filling bowls for dogs and cats, Rika searched the pantry for dinner. She and Ryan would have to eat, even if Anna and Mitch already had. She'd just decided on spaghetti when the back door opened and Mitch walked in.

"How did it go?" His tie and suit jacket were slung over one arm. Plastic bags of groceries were strung on the other. The top two buttons of his white shirt were open. It looked like he'd had a day of it.

Rika smiled. "We're in. Have to leave in the morning for Miami, though."

He waved off her assistance and set the bags on the counter. "Ryan around?"

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“Went to get some things for the trip.” She held up the package of pasta. “I was just getting ready to start dinner. Have you two eaten?”

“Nope. Just make sure you fix enough.”

The door behind him opened. Rika’s eyes widened when she saw Robyn and Don trudging through with suitcases.

“What the—”

Kristi and Amy burst through, arms overflowing with stuffed animals and dolls. The two squealed, dropped their possessions, and hurled themselves against Rika. Fighting tears from missing them was nothing compared to the blinding, joyful puddles of seeing them. Rika couldn’t hug them fast enough.

“I don’t...What happened?”

Anna brought up the rear with Evan, followed quickly by Andy and Chesney with more groceries.

“We went to our lawyer first thing this morning.” She handed off more luggage to the older two. “We now have guardianship of the children.”

“But what about Stanhope?” She was afraid to let go of the girls; afraid it was a dream and she’d wake up any minute to fresh heart break.

“Pfft.” Anna flicked her hand in the air. “Didn’t have a leg to stand on once he got through with her. Of course, it helped that we’d had guardianship of Muriel and Chesney all those years.”

“We never in a million years thought the judge would pull that sh...uhm...that crap yesterday. If we did, we’d have been more prepared.” Mitch shoved two gallons of milk into the refrigerator.

“I...I don’t know what to say,” she choked out. “There aren’t enough words...”

Mitch tossed an arm around her shoulders and gave her a tight hug. “Words aren’t necessary.” He gave her another hug. When he pulled back, Rika saw him blink back tears of his own. “Now feed us, woman.

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We're starved. Got some information you might find interesting as well. I'll tell the two of you over dinner."

Rika listened as the decibel level of the house increased...got back to what she'd considered normal. While Andy and Robyn helped the little ones settle, she worked with Chesney to put dinner together. She banished Mitch and Anna to the table and a glass of merlot they richly deserved after their day of battle.

She'd just pulled the garlic bread from the oven when Ryan arrived. Judging from his puzzled expression, she guessed he'd been kept in the dark as well about his parents' plans. He glanced at the kids, then his parents, then back and forth again.

"Aren't you the sneaky ones?" he said with a grin.

Mitch hid his smile behind a sip of wine. "Just righting a wrong."

Rika fanned her face. "Stop it or I'll be crying again. Everyone! Dinner!"

They raced in like the starving horde Mitch had claimed them to be. Whatever information he had, though, he kept to himself until after the children had left the table. Even then, Rika had to press him to tell.

Forearms braced on table, she leaned forward. "So...what have you got?"

He mirrored her position. "After the hearing was over, our attorney and I got to doing a little talking. His wife is also a lawyer. The two of them were invited to an investment meeting of Wind Racer. Stuart Racer was running the show as usual. But they said it was clear that, while Stuart might be the mastermind behind the prototype, Eldon is the man who keeps the corporation afloat. Sorry for the pun."

"Did your lawyer invest?"

"No. They didn't feel good about it. Said Stuart talked too fast...almost like a used car salesman instead of a businessman. He was too pushy and very evasive when they asked to see the work being done, indicated he couldn't afford to allow trade secrets to leak out.

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And he deferred all business questions to Eldon who was very careful with his answers. When our lawyer said something about the brothers being partners, Eldon was very quick to point out he was an employee, not a partner. In fact, he was emphatic about that.”

“Interesting.” She’d forgotten that, but the story did reinforce Eldon’s dissatisfaction, something she’d seen for herself that day. “Mitch, mind if I use your computer to do a little research?”

“Of course.” He pressed his hands to the table, ready to lead the way.

“Won’t be necessary.” Ryan pointed to the small black case next to his duffel bag by the back door. “Santa came a little early for Rika.”

She fanned her fingers against her chest. “You bought me a present?”

“Yep. Laptop.”

“You bought me a laptop?” She jumped up to retrieve it, then had to fight the urge to jump up and down like her young nieces.

“It even has wireless internet hook-up so you can email reports back to Art whenever you want, email home, you know.”

“I’ll say!”

“And you do have regular internet access. There are jacks all over the house. Just plug it in.”

She glanced toward the kitchen. Looked like Andy, Robyn, and Chesney had the dishes. The night, or what was left of it, was hers. “Then...I’m off.” She took the stairs two at a time to the attic room.

She didn’t know how much time had passed before Ryan joined her. She’d been too involved in finding every tidbit, real or rumored, about the Racers.

Stifling a yawn, he kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the sofa to watch her.

“You earned about twenty years of hero points today. You know that, don’t you?”

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“Mmmm.” He released another yawn and readjusted the pillow beneath his head. “A hero’s work is never done. But how will you ever repay me?”

Rika could think of one good way. She saved her notes and glanced up, ready to ravish him a million times over, only to find him fast asleep. Smiling, she crept to his side and dropped a kiss to his forehead. Ryan’s eyes flashed open.

“Come on, hero.” She tugged him to his feet. “We could both do with a good night’s sleep.”

Undressed down to their underwear, they crawled beneath the cool sheets. Rika had to admit the day was catching up to her fast, too.

Ryan snuggled against her. In seconds, he was out.

*I really should do a little more research*, she thought. But it was too sweet lying in his arms. Smiling, she closed her eyes and gave in to exhaustion.

## CHAPTER 9

Miami on a warm June afternoon. Under normal circumstances, Ryan would have swept Rika off to the white sand beach to soak up the last rays of sun. The best they could hope for on this trip was a glimpse of the beach as they sailed away. The official start of the race was at six the following morning. Their destination—Nassau in the Bahamas.

Ryan glanced her way. She rested her head against the seat as the bus carried the contestants to the harbor. She hadn't looked well since they boarded the plane that morning. Her face was pale and drawn. Little sleep and all the stress of the last several days had caught up with her.

He rubbed his hand over her thigh, trying to offer sympathy the only way he could. "You'll be able to curl up soon and rest. Hopefully the beds on these boats will be comfortable. If not, we can rent a hotel room for the night."

"The bed on the boat will be just fine." She snuggled against his

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arm. “You *are* the best boyfriend ever.”

He was sure trying to be.

It wasn't long before the bus pulled to a stop before the ten sailboats. Except for coloring in the trim, they were identical. The names on each one had been painted over—only the number given to each for the race identified one from the other. If one of these boats was the prototype, the qualities that set it above the rest had to be in the engine, not the design.

After a brief motivational speech and a promise to see them in the morning, Eldon Racer made the boat assignments then left the ten teams on the dock.

Chuck hovered over Ryan's shoulder for a peek at their boat assignment. “Which one's yours?”

“*Number Seven*. And yours?”

“*Number Six*. Looks like we're right beside you. We'll probably just drift with you the whole trip. This'll be the best vacation I've ever had.” He threw an arm around Pilar's shoulders and walked onto their vessel with a cocky swagger.

“Vacation? What's he talking about?” Rika whispered.

“I stopped by his place yesterday after I left you at the house. They could care less about the money. They're looking at this as a way to take a free trip around the Caribbean.”

“They took off work for a lark?” She stared after them, mouth agape.

“Chuck stopped working after his wife left him. She really took him to the cleaners. He swore he'd rather have nothing than to work for it and have a woman take it again. I honestly don't know what Pilar sees in him.”

“So, obviously work isn't an issue with him, but still...this isn't a game. Well, it is, but...oh, you know what I mean.” She waved her hand. “In any event, you'd think they'd be smart enough to realize



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Wind Racer isn't sending them on a vacation."

Ryan lifted his eyebrow. "This is Chuck we're talking about. The divorce changed him, and not for the better. Once he was generous to a fault, now he's one hundred percent self-centered and intensely negative. Even Ryan had taken to avoiding the man.

Rika stared after the couple. "All they'll see is harbors and water. Surely the rules must cover long stops."

He scanned the list and found that particular rule halfway down the sheet.

*All stops longer than overnight rest stops will be verified. Anyone caught sightseeing will be disqualified.*

"Hey, Chuck." He lifted the sheet of rules. "Better read rule number five."

Chuck waved him away.

Ryan shook his head. Maybe, with any luck, the two would be disqualified. They needed to be, if only for their own safety. "Let's go check out our accommodations." He cupped Rika's elbow and led her to their boat.

Like all the others, *Number Seven* was a thirty-foot sloop, sleek and sparkling with new paint. The trim on this one was yellow. They hopped on board. The vessel barely rocked with their weight—nice and stable. Ryan hoped it did as nicely on the open ocean.

Rika pulled open the hatch to the companionway for a peek inside. Three steps led down; a small sleeping berth was on each side of the passage. She trotted down the steps and pressed her hand into the mattress.

"Foam. Feels all right, but you're going to be awfully cramped," she said as he ducked in.

Tight was an understatement. The space was no longer than six feet—his height exactly.

"Good thing I'm not claustrophobic." He pulled up one mattress

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and found water storage tanks. Good, but they'd rely on bottled water for drinking.

A tiny galley was further inside the cabin with table and seating for two, a small refrigerator, stove, and sink. The space was stocked with the cooking and eating utensils they'd need, yet no food.

All drawers lifted and pulled out—a safety feature to prevent them falling out at sea. In one drawer Ryan discovered sadly outdated navigational charts and all the instruments needed to chart a course.

The bathroom was next—hardly big enough for one person, with only a toilet and shower. Beside this were two larger sleeping berths.

He patted the mattress. “At least that’s one saving grace.”

There were small cabinets and hidden storage places throughout the pale green, windowless interior. Ryan even found emergency replacements for the engine as well as any other supplies they might possibly need. A radio sat on a shelf above the table next to a GPS system. To all outward appearances, the sailboat appeared well equipped for an ocean voyage. It was the twenty-year-old charts that concerned him. They'd be monitored during the race by a larger vessel, but Ryan wasn't leaving anything to chance. A storm could brew up fast out there. Without proper tools, they were screwed.

“It has to be a mistake,” Rika said. “Unless they’re trying to make sure someone has an accident. Do you suppose anyone else has noticed? Maybe we should tell them. Maybe it’s a test. If you don’t notice and fix it, it’s a mark against you.”

Ryan ruffled through the maps—all were sadly outdated. “We will, but first let me get us some new charts. If any of them are good sailors, they’ll notice on their own. If they haven’t by the time I get back, we’ll tell them.”

She tossed her bag to the berth near the door. “I’ll get things stowed while you’re gone.”

“A nap probably wouldn’t hurt you either.”

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Rika smiled. "What a guy."

He left with her kiss on his lips and a shopping list in his pocket.

\* \* \*

Rika watched Ryan walk to the end of the dock where he called for a cab then passed the time visiting with one of their competitors while he waited. Once the cab arrived, the two men decided to share it. Ryan lifted a wave her way. Rika returned it with a smile, then tucked back inside.

Frankly, she felt like shit. A day of traveling had given her a headache from hell. A nap sounded like sweet heaven.

She stored their clothes and the few personal items they had brought with them. The cabinets were small, but plentiful. There was even a closet with vent holes for wet clothing. She stashed Ryan's fishing gear inside. She nestled her new laptop in a drawer under her berth where her clothes could pad it. Finally, she buried the bottles of antacid under her clothing where she hoped Ryan wouldn't see.

After swallowing a couple of Tylenol, she tossed a pillow onto her berth, and settled down to review the rules. The list wasn't very long and took her no time to read.

*1. Unless otherwise specified, no night sailing until departure from the Panama Canal.*

*2. All boats will radio in their coordinates at sunset each day if port of destination has not been reached. Coordinates are subject to verification.*

*3. Captains must report to the port captain and immigration upon arrival at destinations.*

*4. While night sailing is forbidden, morning departures will be no later than six.*

*5. All stops longer than overnight rest stops will be verified. Anyone caught sightseeing will be disqualified.*

The rest of the information sheet gave instructions on motoring into

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and out of harbors, refueling, visas, and days the Panama Canal was open. All things anyone contemplating such a voyage should already know.

Rika tossed the paper aside and settled down for a nap. It seemed she'd barely dropped off when she heard the *thunk* of someone jumping onto the deck. Seconds later the companionway darkened with the shape of a man. She swung to her feet. All alone and not anything in sight to use as a weapon. She sure wouldn't let that happen again.

"Ahoy! Anyone here?"

"All depends on what you want." Rika walked to the man before he could get any further into the cabin. She'd have to get by on bravado to defend herself. With the sun behind him and in Rika's eyes, it was impossible for her to see his features.

"I'm Eldon Racer. You must be Mrs. Fletcher. My brother will be along shortly. Where's your husband?"

"He left to get supplies for the trip." She moved to one side to get a better look at him.

Eldon stepped in and leaned against the sink counter. "It's just as well. I wanted to speak to you alone."

Rika propped herself against the bulkhead and waited for him to continue. He was a striking man up close. Each strand of hair fell neatly in place, as if it dared not obey his will. Tiny lines framed his eyes and mouth. Looked like the man did know how to smile.

"It's going to be a rigorous trip. Weeks on the water. The two of you cooped up in this tiny cabin day after day. It'll be hard on your marriage, don't you think?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "It's hard to say since we haven't been married that long."

"But you naturally want to get off to a good start. Why not forget this and go home?"

*So that's what he's up to. Eliminate some competition.* "Mr. Racer,

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we've come all this way. We can't turn back now. Money is tight. We were counting on a chance at that one million."

"Why take a chance and get nothing when I'm willing to give you ten thousand now if you quit?"

How could she answer that? She didn't have to—Ryan's shape darkened the door.

"That's a very generous offer, Mr. Racer, but we really had our hearts and minds set on this race." He passed a grocery bag to Rika and reached for one of the others on deck. "We thank you for your concern, but we can handle our marriage just fine."

Eldon pushed his way to the door. "Just trying to help. Stuart will be along soon to wish you good luck."

"I talked to him topside," Ryan said. "He gave me money for our expenses. And also said he'd make sure we had up-to-date maps before we sail. Odd how something so important could have been botched, isn't it?"

"Yes...well...mistakes happen. Excuse me and good luck." He ducked through and was gone.

"Do you think we've gotten in over our heads?" Rika asked.

Ryan braced his arm on the cabinets, framing her with his body. "Did you feel he was intimidating you?"

"Most definitely. I'm not going to lie. I was a little scared."

"That should be answer enough."

\* \* \*

It was six o'clock to the minute when the starter's pistol signaled the beginning of the race. All ten sloops motored from the harbor and set a course for Nassau. If Eldon Racer had made an offer of ten thousand dollars to anyone else, there were no takers.

An hour before the race began, Stuart had personally delivered maps to each contestant. His apology didn't sway Rika. As far as she was concerned, his sincerity and assistance were nothing but an act.

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How could he not know about the error when he had coordinated the event?

She spent the first part of the trip to Nassau drafting an email to Art detailing all that had occurred. Maybe he'd be able to do a little snooping on his end.

After eighteen hours on the water, the racers docked in Nassau. The sunset rule had been waived for this particular leg of the journey. All racers finished the trip at about the same time. Only Chuck and Pilar lagged behind. Rika noticed Ryan shaking his head at the couple's inept attempt to secure the sails.

"Racer should've offered them the ten grand," he mumbled, then set about arranging for the next day's departure while Rika took care of email.

After a meal in town, they returned for a well-deserved sleep, both weary from a long day at sea and knowing it was the first of many to come.

They'd barely closed their eyes when shouts of, "Fire," pierced the air. They scrambled to the deck and saw *Number One's* cabin fully ablaze. The occupants stood on the dock watching helplessly. There wasn't a water hose or fire extinguisher in sight. Before Ryan could grab his cell to call for help, the dock rattled with the tread of emergency personnel.

"What happened?" Chuck called.

"Faulty connection on the stove we think," a voice shouted back.

Ryan led Rika back into their cabin. It wasn't necessary to say anything. The full impact of the dangerous situation was enough. She didn't know what bothered her more—that it looked like foul play or that no one jumped in to stop the fire, not even the team who had possession of the boat. Rika had to wonder—did Racer pay the team to set fire to it?

\* \* \*

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Three days later, only eight sailboats reached San Juan, Puerto Rico—*Number Ten's* engine had given out.

"Kind of like ten little Indians, isn't it?" Ryan said.

Rika wrapped her arms around her midriff to quell the fear that engulfed her. Someone obviously had a different agenda planned. She couldn't help but wonder if it included murder.

"All we have to do is go home," he said.

Tempting, but... "If I give up now, Art will never trust me again with anything bigger than garden shows. My career will be finished. My reputation as a reporter ruined. Ryan...I can't quit. You know what I mean?"

He squeezed her shoulder. "Yeah...I do. But Art would never put a story before your life."

So he felt it, too. That would make them doubly watchful. "While we're in port, we might want to grab some fresh fruit and vegetables...more bottled water."

"I'll do it. The way things are going, someone needs to stay with the boat, and I don't want you going to town alone."

And they couldn't risk leaving the boat unattended. That would be an open invite to sabotage.

He pulled a butcher knife from the drawer and slapped it on the counter. "Use it if you have to."

Rika had to admit she was frightened to be alone, either in the city or on the boat. While she counted the minutes to Ryan's return, she rehearsed answers to any possible questions the Racer brothers might toss her way should they stop by.

Was she a fool for continuing? Many times she questioned her sanity in turning down Eldon's bribe. It would be simple to take his money, get the kids, and work on the story from another angle. But in her heart, Rika knew accepting that money would taint any story she might uncover. She and Ryan were in this for the duration.

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A cry from Chuck and Pilar's boat set her nerves on edge. Then she recognized the sounds for what they were—hot, heavy sex. She cursed the couple's indiscretion.

This was all a game to them. Neither of them had any business being on open water. They had no idea what they were doing. The fact they had been following in the wake of Ryan and Rika's boat the last three days proved that. It was absurd.

Rika heard a louder squawk from Pilar and winced. Why did they have to be so noisy? It was embarrassing. Sure, she and Ryan got into it when they had sex, but not when they knew they were in earshot of others.

She spun around to shut the hatch in the hope of drowning out the sound. She stopped short of her goal. If the door was shut, how could she hear an intruder? With a grumbled complaint, she plopped down on the companionway steps. A few minutes later, her neighbors quieted.

"Thank you."

"Having a nice conversation with yourself?" Ryan sat on the steps behind her.

After setting his purchases on the floor, he placed a leg on either side of her and pulled her back against him.

"What did you get?" She peeked inside the bag.

"Oranges, bananas, mangoes. And a couple of cases of bottled water. Those are on the deck." Placing a leg on either side of her, he pulled her against him. "Things quiet here?" He dotted kisses down her neck, then lifted his head on a sigh and pulled her tighter against him.

Rika jerked her thumb toward Chuck and Pilar's boat and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Thanks to them, no. I don't know why they have to let everyone in the vicinity know they're having sex. It was embarrassing."

"She's probably faking it. From what I understand, she's pretty good at that."



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She craned her neck back to look at him. "Is that experience talking?"

"Let's just say Chuck likes to kiss and tell."

"Great relationship." The more she heard about these two, the less she liked them. "Let me guess... He's in it for the sex and isn't bothering to put forth any effort."

He nodded. "Yep, that's it in a nutshell."

"What the hell's in it for her? He won't even make sure she comes."

Ryan massaged the furrow from between her brows. "It's been a mystery since day one." He smiled. "We could show them what it's really all about."

Rika laughed. The hard-on pressed against her backside was a temptation she couldn't resist. She kissed his chin. "Are you as needful as I am?"

He grunted a response and molded his lips over hers. Rika's breath caught. His hands seemed everywhere all at once. One found its way under her shirt and curled around her breast. He dove the other down the waistband of her shorts and straight to her crotch. She fell against him, spreading her thighs wide.

Ryan muffled a groan against her lips then stood, taking her with him. She was vaguely aware of him shutting the hatch as he pressed her into the nearest berth. Rika fumbled to unzip her shorts. She desperately needed to come. Days of falling into bed exhausted now felt like months. He fingered her clit fast and hard until all she could do was lay sprawled on the mattress. Grabbing the bottom of her shirt, he pulled it over her head. One yank pulled her bra down. Her breasts popped free. Another groan reached her as his mouth descended on one peaked nipple. He suckled hard.

Gasping, she arched into the sensation piercing her body. Orgasm washed over her. Rika jerked with the release. With the last spasm, Ryan flipped her to her stomach. His zipper sliced opened and she felt

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velvet steel caress her backside. She held her breath waiting to see what he'd do, intrigued and somewhat fearful when he probed her anus. She'd never done that. He was so big. A word from her was all it would take, yet just the thought of trying it excited her more than she could say. Her clit swelled once more. She pressed her fingers to it.

"I need to come again," she said on a rush of breath.

"You will, sweetheart."

He lifted her hips and gently pushed her shoulders down. Her ass was high now, the perfect target.

"Ryan, I don't think I can do *that*."

"We're not going to." His breath was ragged and she realized he was buying time for himself while he fought premature release. He slipped his cock against her slit until the head nudged her clitoris.

Rika smothered a moan into the pillow.

"Thighs together, baby," he said. "I need to fuck your slit."

She did as he asked, squeezing hard. The pulse of his dick throbbed against her. Ryan pumped, slowly at first, rasping against her clit. Then faster, holding the head to her so she got every hard, demanding stroke. He parked his legs on either side of hers, wedging her thighs together when she could not. Pre-cum slickened her. She felt hot, hard...explosive. A climax rippled through her in long, sweet waves calling him to join her. A strangled cry choked in his throat as hot semen spurted from his hand to her belly. He spread it further, around her breasts as another jet poured from him to her. Deep breaths pulled them back down to earth. He dotted kisses down her back, over her butt cheeks.

The dull thud of footsteps striking the deck reached them. "Hey, Ryan," Chuck called out. "You said I needed to change the oil and filter on the engine. Can you help me?"

"I'm going to fucking kill him," he muttered.

Rika snickered. "At least he waited until we were done."

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“Who said we’re done?” He patted her bottom and pulled away. “I’ll be right there,” he shouted.

\* \* \*

Ryan shook his head over Chuck and Pilar. Why didn’t they just go home if it was games they wanted to play? Neither one of them had any business being on a boat, not to mention the ocean. It was disaster waiting to happen. He supposed he wasn’t doing them any favors by helping Chuck with maintenance. But he just couldn’t live with himself if his refusal to do so caused them harm.

“Well, it looks like that’ll do it.” He wiped his hands on a rag while Chuck stared, oblivious to even the simplest of concepts, and sucked down yet another beer.

“You know you need to lay off the booze while you’re sailing.”

Chuck merely shrugged. “What could happen? Not like I’m on a road with a hundred other cars around.”

“No. You’re on water where the slightest mistake could get you killed. And, in case you haven’t noticed, our competitors seem to be dropping like flies.”

“Shit happens,” he said, taking another long gulp.

Even hinting about the possibility of sabotage didn’t seem to faze him.

“Besides...we’ll just continue to follow you the rest of the trip.”

Now that pissed Ryan off. How lackadaisical could a person get? Well, he’d done them the last favor he was ever going to do.

He tossed the rag to the deck. “Why don’t you do us all a favor and go home before you get hurt or, worse yet, kill yourselves? Rika and I are in this race to win. We can’t be babysitting you.”

Chuck gave Ryan a wounded look, and Ryan knew further talk would be useless. He hopped onto the dock and returned to prepare *Number Seven* for the next day’s voyage...and a little more loving with Rika.

## CHAPTER 10

The Caribbean coast of Panama was a welcome sight. After five days of sailing with a faulty auto pilot, Rika and Ryan were more than glad for a break. Thanks to the GPS system, they'd been able to stay on course. At least it seemed to be working. Ryan had double-checked against his own, cruder navigational readings with a compass. Still, they alternated sailing the vessel, switching every two hours. It made for some tense moments, especially when Chuck and Pilar rode their ass the whole time. Rika was surprised the couple didn't tie up to them each night when they dropped anchor.

*Leeches.* She couldn't stop the thought.

By the time night came, she and Ryan had been exhausted. Yet each night Ryan took the auto pilot apart trying his best to fix it. She admired his determination. It said a lot about the man. Ryan Fletcher wasn't a quitter.

Rika watched the coast inch closer. A shower would feel like

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heaven. In an effort to conserve water, they'd limited themselves to sponge baths. Although better than nothing, Rika still felt she stank. The hair was so long on her legs she could braid it if she wanted to. Shaving was definitely a luxury saved for the shore, too. Ryan hadn't bothered with it either, but somehow the beard he sported looked much more attractive than her hairy legs and underarms.

She rather liked the look of his beard, but it was much too prickly for snuggling, so it was probably a good thing they'd been too tired at night to even consider sex. He looked dashing, sort of roguish. All he needed was a hoop of gold in his ear and a parrot on his shoulder to definitely pass for a pirate.

The thought made her shudder. A radioed plea for help had come from *Number Five* the day before. Dealing with a faulty satellite navigation system and auto pilot, the team had ventured into Colombian waters. Local pirates attacked, seized the sailboat, and set the men adrift. Fortunately, they were rescued by a passing fisherman, but the boat was never recovered. Only seven teams remained and all were closing in on the Canal Zone with Chuck and Pilar leading the way...for once. Of course, seeing the coast ahead, they could hardly get lost. The teams neared the harbor mere minutes from each other. Each pulled in the sails to motor into the dock.

Ryan was smoothly maneuvering into place when *Number Eight* came barreling toward the adjacent slip. From the sound of the revved engine, Rika surmised the throttle was stuck. The team frantically tried to slow the boat—all to no avail. Minutes later the hull was a mess of splintered fiberglass shattered into the dock.

"And then there were none," Ryan mumbled.

"What did you say?" Rika asked.

"Nothing. I'm going to check in then see if I can set us up some line handlers for tomorrow. I'll get supplies, too." He slid his fishing knife across the deck to her. "If anyone tries anything with you, use that. I

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won't be long."

Rika put the sheathed knife into her pocket. "Don't worry. No one's going to fuck with me. I'd rather you go while it's still light out."

He gave a nod and started to walk off, only to double-back and give her a quick kiss.

Once he'd left, she sat in the entrance to the companionway, alert to anything that might go awry. Her nerves were taut, her muscles tense, and she knew she could do whatever she had to do in order to protect their lives.

Ryan hadn't been gone more than five minutes when Stuart and Eldon Racer arrived to survey the damage done to *Number Eight*.

Eldon gave her a mock salute and a smirk. "Told you this was a dangerous business, Mrs. Fletcher."

Chuck jumped up and craned his neck her way. "Hey, you and Ryan been holding out on me? When'd you two get married?"

"Very recently," she ground out through her teeth.

Chuck laughed. "Well, well. Ryan Fletcher and Rika Kiley married. Imagine that." He dropped into the cabin.

"Newlyweds, huh?" Stuart smiled. "Not much of a honeymoon, is it?"

"We'll manage," Rika replied.

The two men returned to their inspection, but not before Eldon spent what Rika considered an overly long time looking at her. She could have strangled Chuck with her bare hands for spouting off the way he did. If the Racer brothers somehow discovered she was doing an exposé on them, no telling what they might do. She knew then that her best defense would have to be a strong offense should they challenge her.

She watched Stuart shake his head over the remains of *Number Eight*. This was the fourth team to be dropped from the race. If this kept up, there would be no one left to finish. It was almost like a curse was

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hovering over them—a curse Rika called the Racers.

\* \* \*

Rika stared at the new speargun Ryan laid across the table. “Just in case.”

“It’s a shame it came to this,” she said. “But I won’t hesitate to use it. Chuck blurted out my name in front of the Racers. Neither of them questioned me when I told them we’ve only been married a short time, but I didn’t like the look Eldon was giving me. Guess we’d better keep an eye out.”

“As if we don’t already.” He gave a humorless laugh. “Now that our water tanks are full again, I’m going to shower and shave...unless you want to go first.”

She fanned him away. “I’ll just catch up on my email.” As he ducked into the bathroom, she pulled the gun within easy reach, then turned on her computer.

She opened the email from Robyn first. The kids were fine. She’d gotten a summer job as a lifeguard at the community center near where the Fletchers were. Mitch and Anna’s email was next, a more detailed listing of life with the kids—chores assigned, allowances given, plans for extracurricular activities. *Sounds like home*, she thought with a smile. Andy’s was next. All he did was talk about Chesney. Had to be love.

Art’s was last. When she read it, Rika wished she’d selected it first. She stared ahead, mouth agape. This was almost too incredible to believe! But what if it was true? She dashed to the bathroom and burst through the door.

“There’s no prototype!”

Ryan twisted the water off and jerked aside the shower curtain. “What?” Droplets of water trickled down his clean-shaven face.

“Art got one of the Wind Racer workers to talk. Anonymously, of course.”

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“Of course.”

“They built the Wind Racer out of parts from other boats. The builders joked it was the Frankenstein of sailboats. The only thing new on the whole thing is the paint job. All we have to do is find out which sloop is supposed to be the prototype and we can blow the lid on this thing. But how?”

“We’ll figure something out.”

He snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her to his wet body. Rika was aware of every drop of water that soaked into her clothing—they welded her to him.

His mouth covered her in a long, slow kiss. Nimble, determined fingers stripped her clothing away until her skin touched his. While his lips seared hers, he pressed her against the wall and yanked her one leg over his hip.

Rika wrapped her calf around his waist, releasing a smothered gasp when he stabbed himself deep within her. All too soon it was over, the short abstinence forcing their needs to be fulfilled quickly.

“God knows I’ve missed being with you.” He butted his forehead to hers then pulled in a breath. “Now, let’s figure out how to find the prototype.”

\* \* \*

“Hello there!”

Rika greeted the team of *Number Three* as she hoisted herself over the rail. Both men smiled. “I’m Rika from *Number Seven*. We seem to be having a little trouble with our engine. My husband sent me over to see if I could take a look at yours. He thinks he may have a connection wrong. He told me to draw a picture of the area around your carburetor. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Right this way.” They led her to the engine compartment, then stood aside while she squatted closer for a more detailed look. Rika glanced around the engine until she found what she



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was looking for—the identification number. While making a big show of sketching carburetor connections, she scribbled the number at the bottom of the paper. Then she stood, pretended to stretch out the stiffness in her legs, thanked them, and left.

That was easy enough. Only four more to go.

In less time than it took to think of the plan, Rika was returning to her boat with the identification numbers of every sloop left in the race. Now all she had to do was email the information to Art and wait.

“Now what do we do with the rest of the evening?” She tickled her fingers up Ryan’s thigh.

Grabbing her around the waist, he hauled her into the bunk with him. “What do you think?”

\* \* \*

It was noon before they motored into the first lock. As the captain, Ryan guided the boat. Rika, along with three local men, worked the ropes. The line handlers were positioned on each side of the vessel as well as the bow and stern. It was their job to keep the boat steady while the lock filled with water. Rika kept her line taut, pulling in rope as the water level rose.

This first passage was a short one leading to Gatun Lake. They’d spend the night there and continue through the locks in the morning. As they left Gatun Locks, they motored onto a glassy lake of olive green nestled in the mountains. It was a first time either of them had been able to relax and enjoy the scenery.

Rika longed to take the dingy into one of the towns kissing the water’s edge just for the chance to soak up a little local culture. But they didn’t dare leave the boat unattended. Their time today would be spent working on their sloop. The oil and filter needed a change, and Ryan was determined to fix the auto pilot.

Rika watched him work until she could stand the quiet no more. She left him to admire the lush green landscape. Soon the stars dotted the

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sky and she stretched out on top of the cabin to pick out constellations.

\* \* \*

Ryan watched her from the rail. He'd abandoned his fruitless attempts to repair the auto pilot. They'd have to manage without it. As his eyes traced her barely perceptible silhouette in the pale light of a crescent moon, he wondered what she was thinking about.

He joined her on the cabin, lacing his fingers behind his head as he lay down beside her. "It's a beautiful night. Hot and muggy as hell, but still beautiful."

Rika continued to stare at the heavens. "Sure is. I love looking at the stars. Seems like forever since I've done so."

"With everything you've had to do, that's understandable."

"Well, I'm beginning to think I should've spent more time relaxing with the kids and less time worrying."

Ryan propped himself on one elbow. "You know, Ryan and Rika Fletcher has a nice ring to it."

She glanced his way, tracing a lazy finger across his chest. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

He grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers before he lay back down. "Yeah, I am. When we get back home, I want to marry you. Actually, I'd marry you right this second if I could." He held his breath, waiting for her to state the obvious—that marrying her was a package deal that came with kids.

Instead, she rolled to her side, slipped her hand under his shirt, and raked her nails across his chest. Ryan shivered, despite the heat of the night, and his nipples became hard little dots.

"Then my answer is yes," she whispered next to his ear, nipping at the lobe for extra measure. "I'd like that very much."

Her hand dropped to his fly and eased it open. Ryan was hard before she reached in to touch him. He lay there content in her caress, a soft gasp hissing through his teeth every now and then.

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"I think we'd better go below," he forced himself to say.

"But I'm already *below*." She dipped her head downward and pulled him into her mouth.

Ryan clenched his teeth to keep from crying out. His body shuddered as Rika's head bobbed slowly up and down. His gasps turned to heavy pants as her tongue swirled around him. She put him through exquisite agony, pulling up then pausing before drawing him back in again.

He longed to grab her head and force a faster movement. His hands balled into fists to fight the urge. Finally, he could stand it no longer.

"Damn it, don't tease me like this." He raked his fingers through her hair, pinning her head in place.

Rika took him fully, never once protesting the frantic pumping of his hips. In fact, she encouraged it, kneading his tight buttocks, urging him onward. Her nails dug into his butt cheeks. He jerked spasmodically in her hands, her willing captive. His body tensed. Heat soared to his groin, scorching him as semen rushed to freedom. Every muscle went taut while pinpricks of pleasure absorbed him. Then he collapsed, his breath ragged.

Rika leaned back on her elbows with a self-satisfied smirk.

"As soon as I can move again," he panted, "you're in for it."

Rika gave a husky laugh. "I can hardly wait. My bunk or yours?"

A chuckle rumbled in Ryan's chest. "Oh, I see. You ravish me in front of God and everyone, but when the tables are turned you expect privacy."

"I'll be waiting." She slipped into the cabin without another word.

After a few minutes, Ryan followed. He found her naked on his berth, her legs parted slightly, her eyes inviting him closer. He dropped his clothes on the floor beside hers. Kneeling at the end of the bed, he pulled her calves over his shoulders.

\* \* \*

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Rika shivered with anticipation. Her fingers twisted the sheets while he swathed his tongue along hidden folds. He was teasing her as mercilessly as she'd teased him, and from the position he had her in, there was nothing she could do to alter the situation. Nothing but surrender and enjoy it.

Ryan taunted her until her soft cries filtered to his ears. He lowered her carefully and brought their bodies together.

Rika rose to meet his thrusts, conscience only of the delicious vibrations from the steel impaling her. Finally, bodies slick with passion, senses unleashed, a soul-shattering climax seized them.

Ryan relieved her of his weight and pulled her into the crook of his arm. "Yep, something about the name Freddy Fletcher."

"Why you..."

Laughing, he dodged her attempt to pinch his nipple and started loving her all over again.

## CHAPTER 11

Vera Cruz at night. With the exception of the Panama Canal, they'd seen nothing but foreign ports and harbors since they began this trip. This city was no exception. She'd waited with speargun at the ready while Ryan got supplies and had the water tanks topped off. Then she and Ryan had a quick dinner of sandwiches while she sorted through the information in Art's latest email.

"*Number Six* is the prototype," she told him. "Should we tell Chuck and Pilar?"

He shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good. They wouldn't care. We'll make a report to the Securities and Exchange Commission when we get back to San Diego. They'll inspect the sloop. There will be an investigation."

*If we all make it back to San Diego in once piece.* Rika dusted the chill from her arms at that thought.

"Could I have everyone's attention?" Eldon Racer called from the

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dock.

One by one, the teams stepped out on the decks of their boats. Eldon stood there, hands on his hips, studying each one. Stuart was by his side, arms crossed. Both wore angry scowls that deepened the furrows of their faces.

“We’re calling a meeting in our hotel suite. All contestants should be there.” Eldon’s voice was loud enough to filter to all contestants.

The sailors moved nearer their railings, but didn’t leave their boats.

“You want a meeting, you’ll have to have it here,” a man shouted from two slips away. “We’re not leaving our boat for a second.”

“And why not?” Eldon shouted back.

“Are you blind, mister?” another man shouted. “These accidents aren’t a coincidence. Someone’s been deliberately trying to sabotage this race. Where the hell are all those cameramen now?”

“Yeah,” someone else called, “and I think it’s someone who’ll do anything to win. I’d like to see that captured on film.”

Eldon’s eyes zeroed in on Rika. “Is that what our little reporter lady is looking for? A little dirt from an innocent race? You ought to be disqualified for lying about your so-called marriage.”

“What does it matter?” Ryan braced his foot on the railing. “They aren’t married.” He jerked a thumb toward Chuck and Pilar. “We’re in this race for the money. Rika needs it to get her wards back. Her profession is irrelevant.”

Eldon looked away and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Well, it hardly matters anymore. The race will have to be canceled. There’s a storm in the Pacific. It’s too risky and we can’t stay here indefinitely waiting for it to pass. You’ll each receive ten thousand dollars for your trouble.”

A low murmur rolled through the group. Surprisingly, it was Stuart Racer who objected. “What do you mean canceled? This is my company, not yours. You can’t make a decision like that. They signed

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on for this race. A good sailor can weather a storm. Let them show just how good they are.” Ever the huckster, he appealed to the small crowd. “What’s it going to be? A paltry ten thousand dollars or one million?”

The response was overwhelming—the race would continue.

“That’s the spirit.” He boarded each sailboat to spend a few minutes personally congratulating the contestants.

Eldon spun around and stomped off the dock, his footsteps shaking the wooden structure. Chuck hopped the rail into Rika and Ryan’s boat. “What do you think?” he whispered to Ryan.

“Don’t know.” He watched Stuart work the others like a politician up for reelection.

“But this storm—”

“I’ve been mapping it. I think we can avoid it. I’ll set a course for you. Just make sure you follow it.”

Chuck gave a nod and returned to his vessel.

So much for his vow to not help them.

“It’s getting harder and harder to figure out which one of those brothers is the bad guy,” Rika said after he’d gone.

“If you ask me, they’re both dirty,” Ryan told her.

Stuart bounded over the rail spewing gracious platitudes about their sportsmanship and ready to pump each one’s hand. He was gone before his over-exuberance grated too harshly on their nerves, leaving them free to plan the next leg of their journey.

\* \* \*

As always, Ryan was meticulous in his calculations. This time, however, his course would have to be designed to outrun a storm. Not only did his and Rika’s lives depend on his precision, but so did those of Chuck and Pilar. He occasionally shook his head while he worked, thinking how ridiculous it was to allow novice sailors to go on. Even Chuck had finally seemed to realize the seriousness of their rash decision to enter the race. Ryan wanted to believe it would be a simple

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matter for Chuck and Pilar to quit, but he knew Stuart would never allow that to happen. His prototype had to win. He'd find some way—some threat or promise—to force them to continue.

He and Rika heard a shuffling behind them and looked over their shoulders to find Eldon hovering in the doorway.

“Mind if I come in?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Do we really have a choice?”

He sauntered in and sat in the only remaining seat. For several minutes he quietly watched Ryan plot the map and make notes.

“You’re very diligent.”

Ryan glanced up then returned to his work. “Hawaii’s not around the corner, you know. It’s rough enough crossing the Pacific in good weather—imagine what it’s like now. One mistake and people could lose their lives.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “That’s why I came back to talk to you.”

“What you really mean to say is that you came back to bribe us into quitting,” Rika told him.

Eldon didn’t bother to look surprised. “Call it what you want. I think this race is absurd. I’ve been against it from the start. It’s a ridiculous waste of time and money.”

Rika curved a brow his way. “Is that why you’ve been arranging all these mishaps?”

Ryan shot her a glance from the corner of his eye.

Eldon ignored her question. “The offer stands at ten thousand dollars. One other team was smart enough to take it. Are you? Maybe you should carefully consider your family, before you answer.”

Ryan slapped his compass down. “That almost sounds like a threat, Racer. I suppose if we refuse, you’ll sabotage our sailboat in some way. Or will pirates attack us? Or maybe we’ll catch fire? Or perhaps sink?”

Eldon’s face flushed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He stood with all the effort of a man trying to maintain his self-control.



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“Do you want the money or not?”

“No.”

With fists clenched by his sides, Eldon left.

Rika waited to speak until she heard his footsteps recede on the dock. “There isn’t going to be any one million dollar prize, is there?”

“I doubt it,” Ryan said. “We can always quit and go home. You certainly have enough information to report them.”

Rika thought for a few minutes. “No...no. I want to go on. Someone has to finish this race. If there’s no prize money, I want to get them on that, too. Maybe we can prove they’ve been responsible for the accidents.”

Ryan was skeptical. “No one was hurt. It probably won’t matter.”

“It will to the insurance companies of those boats.”

That much was true. “You realize we’ve put ourselves on the skyline tonight.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to hunker down low and watch out.”

“If you’re willing, then so am I.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m ready, willing, and able.”

\* \* \*

“You must follow these coordinates carefully,” Ryan emphasized for the third time.

Chuck and Pilar nodded.

“Are you sure this will work?” Chuck asked.

“So sure that Rika and I will be using the same course.”

Chuck looked skeptical.

“Relax,” Ryan told him. “If you’ll remember your history, this is the same route Spanish galleons used on their way to Manila. The trade winds carried them there in less than a week. There’s no reason why we can’t use that same principle to get us to Hawaii well ahead of the storm. Sailing round the clock won’t hurt either.”

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“Around the clock?”

“In shifts of one or two hours. That’s what we’re doing.”

Chuck screwed up his face in disgust. “This is all too much for me. I’m gonna find myself a bar.”

He pushed Ryan’s notations into Pilar’s hands, hopped onto the dock, and strolled away, hands shoved deep in his pockets and head low.

Pilar’s gaze went from the paper in her hands to Ryan. In the brown depths of her eyes, he saw her despair. Or perhaps it was only his imagination. Raised voices from her sloop the night before had made every bystander aware there was a problem between the couple.

“You really don’t know a person until you’re cooped up with him,” she said. “He’s not the man I thought he was. He’s lazy, incompetent, and selfish. Once we get home, we won’t be seeing each other again.”

“That’s too bad,” Ryan said.

“Yes...too bad he isn’t more like...you.”

Ryan felt his stomach knot. There was a hint of seduction in her little smile. She sat beside him—he on the railing of his boat, she on hers. After a few seconds hesitation, she dropped her hand over his.

“Relationships can be so boring sometimes. Maybe what we need is a change from each other. New partners for a while. You know what I mean? He’s very attracted to Rika. I don’t think he’d mind if we traded...temporarily, of course.”

Ryan stared at her in disbelief. He picked up her hand between his thumb and forefinger and dropped it aside as if it were diseased.

“I hope this is only some weird reaction you’re having to stress. Let me tell *you* a few things, Pilar. If I were Chuck, I’d have tossed you overboard long ago. He might have his faults, but you’re no saint either. You bitch, whine, and nag. You two aren’t a team. You’re like children fighting.

“As for your suggestion...Who the hell do you think you are? And

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what kind of man do you take me for? I love Rika...love her like crazy. If anything ever happened to make me lose her, it would take me a lifetime to get over it. No one, no one, will ever be able to replace her in my heart, my mind, or my bed."

His gaze pierced through Pilar. She avoided it, stumbled over an apology and backed off as she blinked away tears.

"That was really stupid of me," she awkwardly added. "I don't know where my head was. I hope you can forgive me."

"Let's just try to forget it happened."

\* \* \*

Ryan stared down at Rika's sleeping figure. Freshly showered, dressed only in panties and one of his T-shirts, she looked as pure and innocent as five-year-old Amy. He was suddenly overwhelmed with love for her, the force of the feeling so strong it constricted his heart. How could Pilar have made such a suggestion? Just thinking about it aggravated his stomach into burning knots.

*Now I know how Rika feels.* He rubbed his hand over his stomach. Knowing Rika wouldn't go anywhere without her faithful bottle of antacid, he knelt before her drawers. His search was rewarded quickly. The bottle was full. The seal hadn't even been broken.

Ryan got some small satisfaction that so far the trip hadn't caused Rika undue stress. He was also grateful for the relief the antacid would soon give him. After a short slug of the liquid, he sat on his berth to watch Rika.

He was one lucky man. Here before him was a hell of a woman, the kind he'd envied other men having. She was a partner, a teammate. No nag, no clinging vine. A woman unafraid to work for what she wanted in life. Yes, it was true they sniped at each other on occasion, but what couple didn't? He'd heard his parents argue and subsequently make up many times. Their love and togetherness was as strong as ever after decades together.

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Ryan slipped into her berth, pulling her gently to him just for the joy of feeling her close. He'd be content to lay with her in his arms until the end of time. He was ready to whisk her back to San Diego that very minute and to hell with everything else. They'd get the kids, find a house, and...

"Rika, honey, wake up."

She regarded him through sleepy eyes. "Don't tell me it's morning already."

He chuckled. "No, not yet... If we leave now, we can be in San Diego in a few days."

Rika rolled over to face him. "But the race—"

"To hell with the race. You've got enough to hang Racer. When we leave, so will Chuck and Pilar."

"No." She cupped her hand to his cheek. "We have to see this through. We agreed."

"Yes, honey, we did, but not at the risk to your life."

She sighed and snuggled closer. "You have a point. But I am so beat, I just can't think straight."

He kissed her forehead. "Sorry, baby. Sleep on it. Morning will come soon enough."

Within seconds, she'd dozed off. Sleep didn't come so easily to Ryan. Behind every creak the boat made against the dock, he imagined a murderer lurking, waiting for the perfect opportunity to turn things in his favor.

## CHAPTER 12

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Ryan’s angry words jolted Rika awake. As she stumbled to her feet, she heard Eldon Racer reply.

“I want to talk to your girlfriend.”

Rika jumped into a pair of slacks then peered around Ryan.

Eldon sat on the companionway steps, a duffel bag by his side. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your voice down. It would be best for all of us if no one knew I was here.” He craned his neck Rika’s way. “Miss Kiley, if it’s a story you’re after, I’ve got one for you.”

He pulled a computer diskette from the side of his bag and handed it to her. “The financial records of the Wind Racer Corporation. I can give you a more detailed report on the way to Hawaii.”

Ryan crossed his arms over his chest. “You intend to travel with us?”

“Yes. There’s a lot of information. I might not remember it all at

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once.”

“I don’t get it.” Rika frowned at the yellow diskette in his hand. “Why are you doing this to your brother?”

“I guess you could say I’ve had it.” Eldon massaged his temple. “This race is a fraud. There’s no million-dollar prize. Stuart kept insisting *Wind Racer* would be sold the minute she won and he’d have the one mil that way. Then he thought he could sell the competition as a reality series. That hasn’t worked too well either.”

“How could he be sure *Wind Racer*’s sloop would win?” Ryan asked.

“You already know the answer to that one...By making sure only our boat completed the race.” He pulled in a sigh. “I found out about it last night. I’m ashamed to admit it. I’ve had enough of him and of this company. Do you want the story or not?”

Ryan studied him through narrowed eyes. “How can we be sure you’re on the level?”

Eldon tapped the diskette. “This might help.”

Ryan took it from him while Rika pulled out the laptop. With Eldon standing to one side, Ryan ran a virus scan first before accessing the disk. It was clean. He opened the file. As page after page flashed on the screen, Rika tried to contain her excitement. The document was a treasure trove of information. It would take days of detailed study to extract the data.

Ryan glanced up, questioning her desires with a look. She replied with a single nod and turned to Eldon.

“Why is it that you sat by while your brother embezzled this money?” Rika asked.

“I wouldn’t call it embezzlement. The prototype took more money than originally planned. I didn’t say anything because I kept expecting us to make it back when *Wind Racer* was sold.”

Rika jammed her fists onto her hips. “So much for you being on the

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level.”

He clenched his jaw. “I *am* on the level.”

“Then why won’t you admit there is no prototype?”

“There is so. It’s *Number*—”

“*Six*?” Ryan finished for him. “Yeah, we know. It’s made from parts of other sailboats. Nothing’s new or innovative about her.”

Eldon looked as if he’d just been punched in the stomach. Clutching the edge of the table, he eased into a seat. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it.”

“Then you really were investigating him.”

“Yes and no,” Rika said. “I really wanted that prize money. Since there isn’t any, the story will have to do.”

“We’re finishing this race,” Ryan told him. “Do you still intend to stay?”

Eldon nodded.

“Okay. The berths by the passageway are yours. I’ll tell you when we get out of view of the others so you can come up on deck.”

“I’ll do my best to stay out of your way,” Eldon said.

Rika felt sorry for him. He took the news of his brother’s betrayal hard, almost as if he couldn’t believe what he knew was the truth. She knew Ryan refused to waste sympathy on the man. Because Ryan and his brothers were so close, she knew it was impossible for him to understand how one brother could use another. To him, that type of thing just didn’t happen.

Rika knew that if her brothers or sister had done something similar to her, it would have emotionally killed her. And when she finally cornered Ryan on the subject, he agreed that he’d feel the same way. His annoyance with Eldon lessened.

It was on the second day of travel that Eldon began to give Rika the information she needed. He spoke in monotone at first, then with angry bursts through clenched teeth. Finally, he was calm enough to deal with

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the betrayal, although Rika could still see the hurt lurking in his eyes. Despite Ryan's snide comments about coddling, she allowed Eldon his moments alone at those times she felt he needed privacy.

As Ryan had predicted, the trade winds carried them swiftly across the Pacific. Around the clock shifts brought them within a day's reach of the Hawaiian Islands after four days and nights of travel. Always in the distance, and getting further behind each day, were Chuck and Pilar. On the dawn of the fifth day, they could no longer be seen.

As the hours ticked by and still no sight of a sail appeared, Ryan's concern deepened...with good cause. The storm, now a tropical depression, loomed on the horizon to the east and south. When he could stand the worry no longer, he radioed for them.

From her position at the wheel, Rika listened for a reply. There was none.

"Maybe they're on deck and can't hear you," she called over her shoulder.

He agreed that was possible, yet when fifteen minutes had passed with still no response to his continuous summons, his worry grew.

"Do you want to drop anchor?" Rika asked.

"No. Turn about. Luff her," he said.

She hesitated. She was no weakling, but in this weather... "Okay, but I'm going to need some help. This wind's strong."

He was by her side before she could finish her sentence. Together they maneuvered *Number Seven* into the wind and back the way they had just traveled.

Backtracking their course wasn't as timely as forward motion had been. With every mile they retraced, worry ate at her stomach. Worry for the lost vessel and worry for the storm growing closer. For the first time Ryan actually seemed glad Eldon was with them, since he was able to spell them at the wheel for a much needed break.

Under a blanket of stars with a full moon to light their way, they



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pressed onward. Still there was no sign of the other vessel. With the first rays of dawn, and with it the scattered fringes of the storm, they found themselves debating the sanity of continuing the search.

"This is ridiculous," Rika said. "It's like looking for a needle—"

"In a haystack. I know," Ryan said.

"What do you want to do now?" Eldon asked.

Through high powered binoculars Ryan scanned the horizon in all directions. The wind shifted. Next would be dead calm, the prelude to the storm.

"We've done all we can," he said.

"And more," Rika grumbled.

"Let's get out of here. Rika and I will have to take it from here, Eldon. Don't want to be accused of cheating now, do we?"

Eldon relinquished the helm, once again relegated to the role of observer.

Other than to stand behind the wheel, Ryan didn't move. He kept squinting across the ocean, as if by narrowing his vision he could see better. His conscience wouldn't let him leave until he'd exhausted all possibilities.

"Damn." He smacked the wheel with his palm. "One of you hold her steady. I'm going up the mast for a better look."

"What?" Rika stomped toward him. "Have you lost your mind? That mast must be at least fifty feet high!"

"Thirty maybe...fifty? I doubt it. Anyway, it ought to give me a better view."

She tried to bar his passage, but he plucked her out of his way.

Rika gnawed the inside of her cheek as she watched him inch up the mast. "The least you could do is wear a safety belt!"

"We don't have one." He shimmied higher.

It was the pepper tree incident all over again. Rika wanted to hide in the cabin until he was safely back on deck, but was afraid she'd jinx

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him if her gaze strayed from him for the merest second. So she stared, gluing him to the mast with her eyes while her nails carved crescents into her palms.

\* \* \*

Ryan reached the masthead and hooked his legs and an arm around it as tightly as he could. He'd underestimated the height and his own reaction to it. This was a lot different than the sheltering branches and leaves of a tree. Here he was vulnerable, exposed, the distance between him and safety so very far away. He found himself wishing Rika had argued with him more about climbing up here—he might have changed his mind.

He took a deep breath to quell his fear. Then, with a shaking hand, he brought the binoculars up. Nothing. He felt the boat list to the port side. Rika screamed something up to him, but he was too busy tightening his grip on the mast to understand what she was saying.

"Hold her steady, damn it!" he shouted.

"Ryan! My God, get down!" Rika yelled.

"Ease down! Ease down!" Eldon shouted.

Ryan felt the mast tip and heard another muffled scream from Rika. Only then did he realize—this wasn't heavy seas. The mast was breaking. An instant later he plummeted downward in a tangle of sails, ropes, and mast.

\* \* \*

If Rika could have caught him, she would have. Instead, she had to watch in helpless horror as he fell.

Eldon yanked her out of the mast's path. It clattered to the deck, bounced up and clipped him on the back of the head. He staggered then slumped to the deck in an unconscious heap.

By luck alone, Ryan missed the deck and hurtled toward the water in a snarl of sail and ropes. Cocooned within this mess, he slammed

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against the hull when the ropes snagged the rail. She watched him tuck into a tight ball. The cradle he was in swung back and smashed him into the side again. Ryan cried out and tried to claw his way free. Rika watched the crimson stain spread out on the white sail.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Can you move?”

“Just banged up,” he answered with a shaky voice. “And every time I move, something cuts my arm.”

But at least he wasn’t being bashed into the hull anymore.

“Just be still. I’ll get you free...somehow.”

Cutting him free was out of the question—if he had broken bones it would be impossible for him to maneuver in the water. Plus there was the added danger of the blood drawing sharks. She had to pull him in the way he was. Again the question was—how? By herself, she just wasn’t strong enough.

She snapped her fingers—the dingy. She’d lower it then hoist herself and Ryan up. It would take a while, but it was her safest plan.

“Hold on. I’m coming.” She dropped the lifeboat into the water, jumped into it, and released one of the safety lines. Still Ryan was several feet away. As she pushed closer she saw the cause of his wound—his own knife had cut him.

“Thank God you’re not higher up or I might not have been able to reach you,” she told him.

“What’s going on? Where’s Eldon?”

“Mast hit him. He’s out cold. Be still. Your knife is what’s cutting you.” Rika slid her hand through an opening and grasped the handle. Turning the blade outward, she pulled it free.

“I’m going to cut the ropes so be prepared to drop...Okay?”

“Yeah. Just do it.”

She sawed on the lines until only a few strands of hemp remained. Then, shielding Ryan as best as she could from impact, she sliced the rope.

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Ryan fell with a soft, “Oof,” then yanked the sail away from his head. “God, I was starting to get claustrophobic.”

“I’ll have us on deck in a few minutes.”

Ryan watched her work them back up. His offer of help had been quickly refused, and for that, he was glad. The pain in his side was true agony and the cut to his left arm throbbed. This time he wasn’t going to argue with her.

Safely on deck, he leaned heavily on her as they picked their way to the cabin. Exhaustion seeped into his muscles, whether from the ordeal or his injuries he didn’t know.

“What about Eldon?” he asked when they stepped around him.

“I’ll take care of him in a minute. You first.” She eased him to his bunk.

He was content to have her nurse him. She stopped his bleeding and bathed the wound. There was little she could do about his ribs.

“I doubt your ribs are broken. You’d be in a hundred times more pain if they were. But they do look bruised. And I think that cut needs stitches.”

Ryan shook his head. “I love you, but there’s no way in hell I’m letting you sew on me.”

Rika had to laugh. “Don’t worry. I won’t. I’ve got something else in mind.”

She retrieved their last two eggs from the refrigerator, broke them into a bowl, and returned to him with the shells.

“What—”

“Just watch.” She peeled the skin from the inside of the shell and draped it over the cut. When the wound was covered, she blew on the egg skin. As it dried, it pulled the edges of the cut together.

“I’ll be darned,” he said with a smile.

“After a while it’ll itch and feel tight, but leave it on. Rest.” She dropped a kiss on his lips and went back for Eldon.

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He was still unconscious, an ugly bump the size of a golf ball blazed on his head. After checking for broken bones, Rika hooked her arms under his shoulders and tugged. Her legs shot out from under her and she landed on her rump.

He was heavier than she'd thought. *Now what?*

"Here, let me." Ryan reached down to help her to her feet.

"But you're hurt."

"So is he. I'll be fine. We'll move him together. You know you can't do this one alone."

He was right about that. Each grabbed one of Eldon's arms and pulled him down into the cabin. It was as far as they could manage. Rika retrieved his pillow and sheet to make him as comfortable as possible on the floor.

"That's all we can do for now," Ryan said. "I'll keep an eye on him. You get that engine started and get us out of here."

Rika prepared to do just that, but as she turned the sailboat toward Hawaii, she caught sight of another sail on the horizon. Snatching up Ryan's binoculars, she took a closer look.

It was Chuck and Pilar. She wanted to say to hell with them and almost did, but her conscience nagged at her until she switched off the engine and went below to radio.

"Chuck and Pilar's sloop just showed up." She snatched up the microphone. "Racer Six, this is Racer Seven...come in...over."

The radio crackled with life as Chuck replied. "This is Racer Six. We've got trouble. We're both bad sick. Can you help? Over."

"What's wrong? Over."

"Flu. Vomiting. Diarrhea. Over."

"Sounds like they took on bad water in Mexico and have been drinking it," Ryan said.

"You mean they didn't have enough sense to drink bottled water?"

"Knowing them, I'd say that's right." He took the microphone from

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Rika and relayed his question to Chuck who vehemently denied the accusation.

“Look, Chuck, we’ve got problems of our own right now. Can you get to us? Over.”

“No, man, it’s all I can do to sit here and talk to you,” he whined.

“What a baby.” Rika snatched the mic away from Ryan. “Look here, slick. If you want our help, you get your worthless ass over here or we’ll leave without you. You’ve got five minutes to head in our direction. Over and out!” She slammed down the mic and stomped up on deck.

\* \* \*

Eldon groaned and made a feeble attempt to sit.

Ryan pushed a hand in his chest to keep him still. “Relax a minute. You took a whack on the head. You’ve been out cold.”

“Sure am glad to see you’re okay.” He eyed Ryan’s bandage. “Well, partially okay. How about Rika? We heading back now?”

“Soon.” Ryan briefly explained the situation as he helped a shaky-legged Eldon to his bunk. Then he went topside to see if Rika’s orders had been followed.

He found her at the rail, legs astride, binoculars focused on the other vessel. Only the pain in his side kept him from laughing.

“Ah-ha,” she triumphantly declared. “Here they come. We’ll tie together and head for port.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Bligh,” Ryan said with a mock salute.

Rika gave him a sidelong glance. “You want to get below before you do more damage to yourself?”

“After they are securely tied to us, and we’re on our way. Eldon’s awake...a little shaky, that’s all. Look at the storm.”

It looked like Chuck was pulling the storm to them. White caps raced before him, lightning cut the dark clouds behind him. Minutes later, fingers of clouds obliterated the sun as the first drops of rain fell

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to the deck.

“Good Lord, would you look at that storm,” Eldon said from behind them.

Neither bothered to turn around.

“Yeah, we’re in for it. We’d better get our life jackets on,” Ryan said.

It took Chuck almost thirty minutes to reach them, and in that time, the swells grew from two feet to ten. No one wasted time on preliminaries when Chuck finally pulled alongside. Working feverishly to lash the two boats together, they ignored Chuck’s groans and complaints.

Rain slashed a wind-driven curtain of water over them. The storm they’d tried so hard to avoid had now engulfed them. Heavy seas tossed them around like a bottle, and Ryan knew any attempt to maneuver to safety would be futile. When the last rope was secured, he whirled around to Chuck with an ugly gray glare.

“Quit bitching. Get your life jackets on and stay in your cabin.” He turned away before Chuck could reply.

The boats listed under the onslaught of a wind gust and Ryan lost his balance. In trying to break his fall, Rika tumbled across the deck with him, taking Eldon, too. The three smashed into the cockpit.

\* \* \*

Cushioned between the men, Rika clearly heard bone snap seconds before Eldon cried out. She saw the jaw-clenching pain in Ryan’s face then twisted around to find Eldon mirroring that look. She wiggled free.

Eldon’s left leg was bent beneath him. Ryan clutched at his ribs. Neither was able to catch his breath. Rika waited while precious minutes passed, minutes in which the ocean played with them like a cat with a mouse.

“This is getting us nowhere!” she shouted above the wind. “I’m dropping anchor and throwing out the drag!”

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As she stood, a breaking wave crashed over the stern. Water engulfed her, its tentacles threatening to pull her over. Ryan snatched her ankle and yanked her back into the cockpit. Rika sputtered for air while Ryan tried to pound the sea water from her lungs.

"Stop it! Stop it! I'm okay. You're gonna crack my spine." She was about to flash him a glare when she saw the concern in his face. She rested her palm against his cheek. "I'm fine, honey. Really. We've got to drop anchor."

"Safety line first...please."

Once the line was tightly bound around her waist, Ryan let her take care of the anchors on both boats, all the while maintaining a death grip on the other end of the line. When she returned, he held her close for only a moment before helping Eldon into the cabin. They splinted Eldon's leg then collapsed on the cabin floor.

"We can't outrun this now. I'd be afraid we'd burn up the engine," Ryan told them.

"Do we hoist the sail on *Number Six* halfway and try to run with the storm?" she asked.

"That would take more strength and endurance than any of us has right now." Eldon winced as he tried to find a comfortable position. "I say we leave the anchor down, man the hand pumps, and pray."

Rika closed her eyes and nodded. "It's the safest way. I'll take the pump on the other boat."

"Let them pump their own damn boat," Ryan snapped.

"Now you know how I felt when we came looking for them in the first place," Rika shot back. "Look...we can't let their incompetence sink us. That bilge has to be kept free of water and I don't trust them to do it. Neither one of you has any business climbing over the rail. It has to be me."

"No. I refuse to let you go over there. I want you here with me. We need you here." He grabbed the mic and radioed Chuck. "You'd better



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start using your pump. You don't want your bilge to fill with water."

"What's a bilge?" Chuck asked.

"Your hull, you damned idiot!" Ryan yelled. "Start pumping. We can't help you, and we won't let your stupidity sink us!"

Pilar's voice was next. "We won't let you down. I swear it."

Ryan replaced the mic and wearily faced Eldon and Rika.

Eldon was already at work on the pump.

Rika stared straight ahead as if in a trance. "I don't think the anchors caught."

"If they didn't, there isn't a hell of a lot we can do," Ryan said. "We've got to depend on the drags to keep us from straying too far. A lot of praying wouldn't hurt either."

"Believe me, I haven't stopped praying since I saw the storm coming," she said.

The next twelve hours were a test of endurance, both physical and emotional, as the storm persistently tugged them across the ocean. Each took their turn at the hand pump until their arms ached from the effort. The cut on Ryan's arm broke open and started to bleed. All Rika could do was bind the wound. Ryan refused to listen to any argument that he rest, and Rika was too tired to make an issue of it.

By the time morning came, exhaustion threatened to overcome them. A sudden lurch in the sloop jolted them back to alertness. The boat no longer rocked, even though the storm roared about them.

"We're stuck," Rika said.

"Yeah, but on what?" Eldon asked.

"There's only one way to find out." Rika opened the hatch. A breaking wave splashed into the cabin as she peeked out. She ducked back in and slammed the door closed. "We've run aground on an island. I caught a glimpse of buildings, but with the dark and the rain, I can't tell much. Do you want to get out?"

Ryan thought for a moment then replied, "No. We're safe for now.

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Let's wait for the storm to pass."

After a message to Chuck and Pilar, the trio sank into their bunks to sleep.

Rika forced herself to stay awake until the men's deep, rhythmic breathing indicated they were soundly sleeping. As quietly as possible, she cracked open the door and squeezed through. They'd just come through hell and she wasn't about to risk getting dragged back.

With a line securely in her grasp, Rika leaped onto the sand and tied the rope to a sturdy palm tree. Shielding her eyes from the pounding rain, she searched the darkness. A pink building showed through the gloom. Rika didn't know whether to laugh or cry. They had landed on Waikiki Beach, right in front of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Digging her steps into the wet sand, she ran for help.

## CHAPTER 13

Ryan slowly opened his eyes to the sky-blue stare of a doctor.

“Good morning. How do you feel?”

Ryan blinked his eyes against the light. “Where am I?”

“A hospital in Honolulu. You ran aground on Waikiki. After your wife found us, we pulled you and her brother out. She insisted you both be sedated so you wouldn’t be disturbed by being moved. I agreed. Then we brought you here.”

“My wife?”

“She’s resting. Your brother-in-law is still asleep.” He pointed to a hospital bed across from Ryan. “The other couple are badly dehydrated. They’re on IV and antibiotics. You rest. You need it.”

Ryan settled into the pillows and closed his eyes. It was three more hours before he woke again. This time, when he opened his eyes, he found Rika smiling down at him. He returned the smile and caressed her cheek with his thumb.

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"I understand I acquired a wife while I was out."

"I was initially afraid they wouldn't treat you and Eldon if they learned I wasn't a relative. So...I lied. Simple as that. After that, I realized how silly that was—it was an emergency and they wouldn't have refused you. Besides, it's a mere technicality."

"I see...You're something else. Most women would've folded under the ordeal we've just been through. I'm damn proud of you."

"Don't be. You don't know how many times I wanted to break down and cry," she said.

"But you didn't. You hung in there and saved all of us. You're *my* hero."

"Oh...stop it." Giggling, she poked his shoulder. "I had the boat inspected. It looks like someone sawed the mast halfway. I'm surprised it didn't break sooner."

Ryan shook his head. "More sabotage. Where do we go from here?"

Rika shrugged. "I don't really know. Chuck and Pilar are in bad shape. You and Eldon need a few days to recuperate. We really have no hope of winning this race, but at least we have the prototype."

"You're wrong about the race, Rika," Eldon mumbled from his bed. "There's still a chance for *Number Six* to win because that's what my brother wants. You can bet there's no competition left. I say if they can make it to San Diego, they can claim the prize."

"It's possible," Ryan agreed. "But it all depends on Chuck and Pilar."

"And the doctor says they can't be bothered." She nibbled on her bottom lip. "He says they're in bad shape. I feel awful for being so mean to them."

"Don't worry about it. With all their bitching, how were we supposed to know they were really sick?" he said.

Rika shrugged. "You can leave the hospital today. I have rooms at one of the hotels near the harbor. In a few days, we'll know about

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Chuck and Pilar. We can make a decision then. I just want this over with.”

But two days later, it was apparent any plans would have to be made without Chuck and Pilar. Although somewhat improved, both were emphatic about never setting foot on the boat again.

“Now what?” Ryan asked.

Eldon shrugged.

Rika picked up the phone. “It’s time to call Art and tell him to release the story.”

After telling him what had transpired since their last talk, she turned to Ryan with a puzzled look. “He wants to talk to you.”

Ryan took the receiver. The only words he said were, “Hello,” at the beginning and, “I’ll let you know,” at the end of the conversation. When he hung up, he turned to Eldon. “We need to talk...alone.”

They walked into Eldon’s room, locking the door behind them while Rika was left outside to guess at what was going on. Five minutes passed. Rika pressed her ear to the door. All she could hear was incoherent mutters.

She stepped back and stomped her foot. “I don’t like this.”

Ryan’s response was quick. “Good!”

As if he could see her, Rika flicked him off then paced beside the connecting door waiting for them to come out. An hour later, it opened and Ryan, with a sweep of his arm, invited her in.

“Well?” She braced her hands on her hips once she was inside.

Ryan motioned her to sit, which she did. “Stuart has had an offer of five million dollars for *Wind Racer*.”

“So?”

“He’s in California handling the paperwork. The buyer put down a deposit of one million. Stuart immediately obtained a cashier’s check for the prize money,” Eldon said. “The minute the winner docks, the check will be presented.”

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"This is the big secret you kept me locked outside for?"

"We didn't want to get your hopes up without discussing a few things first," Ryan told her. "Eldon made some calls and now we're ready."

Their evasiveness made Rika testier by the minute. "Ready for what? Get to the point."

Ryan smiled. "Ready to win one million dollars. Eldon has arranged for us to take over Chuck and Pilar's boat. Stuart approved the team change, although he doesn't know we're the new crew. At this point he's too excited about the sale of the boat to worry about anything more than having *Wind Racer* win. It's important to him now more than ever. He doesn't care how it gets to San Diego, as long as it gets there first."

"But the other teams ought to be halfway there by now. How—"

"There are no other teams left to compete," Eldon said. "They limped into Honolulu on boats too damaged from the storm to continue. After all, that's what Stuart intended to happen."

"The doctor will give written verification that we had to stop here for medical attention. Once we purge the water tanks, sterilize them, and refill, we can leave," Ryan said.

Rika snorted. "There's no way Stuart Racer will give us that money."

"He'll have to. There will be so much publicity when you dock, he won't be able to back out," Eldon said. "Your editor will see to that. Once you have the money, Art will break the story."

"And once it's learned there is no unique prototype, just a collection of parts, we'll have to give the money back," she said.

"No," Eldon said, "Stuart will. He owes you the money for winning. His problems with the buyer are separate."

"We can be on our way by morning," Ryan added.

Rika quietly considered what was being offered. With one million dollars, the children's welfare would be secure. They would want for

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nothing and no court could take them away from her on financial grounds ever again. But Ryan wasn't fit enough to make this trip. No matter what the reward, she refused to put him at risk.

"You have no business making a voyage like this."

He took her hand in his. "I guess this is where I lean on you. After all, that is part of a solid marriage. I'll do all I can to help you, but the bulk of the work will have to fall on your shoulders. I'm sorry about doing this to you, but I want you to have that money."

Tears sprang to her eyes, tears she didn't bother to hide. She loved him so much, words couldn't begin to describe the depth of that emotion. He was all she ever dreamed of having. A man to stand by her no matter what.

"Yes," she squeaked out, "that is part of marriage. And Ryan...I can't wait."

Ryan hugged her as close as he was able. "Me either."

Rika laughed as she flicked at falling tears.

He pulled her to her feet. "Let's get ready to sail."

\* \* \*

*Home to San Diego.* Just thinking the words made Rika feel euphoric. Home to San Diego to live the rest of her life with Ryan. What could be more perfect?

The voyage itself was smooth. Blue skies and seas carried them onward. A school of porpoises guided their way. Not surprising was the fact all the equipment and instruments on this vessel were in top condition. Stuart's folly had been given every advantage over her competitors, making Rika's work easy.

She fussed over Ryan's bruised ribs their first few days out, but when she saw he had every intention of taking care of himself, she left him alone. While she handled manual tasks, he charted their course and radioed their coordinates each evening. So far, Stuart had no clue they were the new crew.

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Evenings were spent planning their future. They'd begin house-hunting the day after they docked. They'd be married as soon as possible.

The red roof of the Hotel Del Coronado welcomed them to San Diego. Further on, their destination—the marina. Crowds of people lined the dock waiting for their arrival. Reporters, both newspaper and television, jostled for position. Rika dropped the sail and Ryan slowly motored in. Cheers greeted them as she jumped to the dock to tie the sailboat to its moorings.

As long as she lived Rika would never forget the look on Stuart Racer's face when he saw her. His white complexion turned a vivid shade of red. His eyes bulged with surprise and his chin fell to his chest. Just like a cartoon character. Behind him a short distance, Eldon stood with Art, both smiling triumphantly.

Hand-in-hand Ryan and Rika mounted the podium where Stuart waited. He had recovered enough from his shock to greet them with forced pleasantries. Once he had everyone's silence, he began.

"It is my pleasure to present this cashier's check of one million dollars to the winners of Wind Racer Corporation race—Ryan Fletcher and Rika Kiley." More cheers erupted as he handed the check to Ryan. "Now let's see which company built the sloop they arrived on." He was handed a sealed envelope which he opened. With a smile to the cameras he announced, "*Wind Racer* by the Wind Racer Corporation."

The crowd cheered and applauded once more. Ryan and Rika were gently pushed forward to answer questions about their trip. They were courteous but brief, giving general answers to the reporters. After a short time, they pleaded exhaustion and slipped back to the boat to retrieve their personal belongings. Stuart replaced them at the microphone. It was then Art moved in.

"Mr. Racer, we have reports and evidence in our possession that indicates this entire race was a sham. That there is actually no



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prototype. That the sailboat sitting here was put together by parts cannibalized from other boats. How do you wish to respond to those allegations?"

Rika didn't bother to look back, but she could easily imagine the mottled rage on Stuart's face. "I wish the family could've been here."

"I know, but Kristi asked for a trip to Disneyland for her birthday. And when you're a kid, birthdays are more important than anything. We'll see them tomorrow." He tucked her under his arm. "Now, let's get to the bank. While you deposit that check, I'll give them a call."

"With all this money, I don't want you leaving my side," she said with a smile. "We'll call your dad's cell phone from the office. I'm sure Art will let us break away from his victory party long enough to do that."

They found Ryan's car where his father had left it a couple days earlier. A last glance at the podium allowed them to see Stuart being served court papers by a United States Marshal. The couple smiled.

"Does it bother you that this is Art's story now?" Ryan asked her.

"Not a bit. I got more out of this trip than I ever expected. I've got you, the money...and you know, I haven't had one sip of antacid since we left."

"No, but I did."

Rika pulled back in surprise then laughed. "Why?"

"It doesn't matter, honey. Let's go."

She kissed him, and they drove away from the marina.

\* \* \*

A loud pop launched a champagne cork across the newsroom.

"We did it, Freddy." Art filled Rika's and Ryan's glasses first then passed the magnum around. "You should've seen him squirm."

"It's on TV," someone called. "Come watch."

The reporters crowded into Art's office. Rika stayed behind while Ryan called his dad. She could hear the joy in Mitch's voice from

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where she stood. After a brief chat with everyone, she and Ryan joined the others.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone come?” Eldon asked from the door.

Ryan met him halfway with a glass of champagne. He took a sip and handed it back.

“Hold on to this while I hobble to the nearest chair.” Once he sat, he took his glass again and raised it in a toast. “To...what? Success?” He lowered his glass. “Some success...I’ve never felt more torn in my life,” he sadly told them. “Shit, my brother...”

Rika sat on the desk beside him and rested a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“You know, my wife always said he was no good. We argued about it a lot. I was so afraid to tell her she was right. I finally called her early this morning. Expected to hear ‘I told you so.’ All she said was she was sorry I had to find out this way. She’s catching the first flight out of Miami to get here. Leaving our two kids with her folks. It’ll give us some time together...and we need it badly. I miss her so much right now. I feel so rotten, all I want to do is get drunk.”

“Go ahead,” Ryan told him. “We’ll make sure you get tucked in.”

Eldon smiled. “Better not. If Laurie gets here tonight, I’d like to be sober.”

“Well, a drink or two won’t hurt,” Rika told him. “Let’s toast our friendship and a safe voyage. And, then, if no one minds, I’d like to go home.”

A final round of toasts followed, then Ryan linked his arm through hers and led her away.

Rika was breathless with excitement as they drove up to the house. The place was quiet. Even the animals were gone—staying with Kevin and Muriel while the family was away. But Rika didn’t feel the vast emptiness she had before. It truly felt like home.

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Arm in arm, she and Ryan trudged up the stairs. After a quick shower, they crawled under the covers and fell into a deep and well deserved sleep.

## CHAPTER 14

Ryan felt all of his thirty years as he creaked out of bed the next morning. There wasn't one muscle that didn't ache. He stumbled to the table where Rika sat with their morning coffee.

"I feel like someone pulled me through a knothole."

Rika smiled sympathetically. "Why don't we spend the day resting?"

"Nope. Today is the day we go house-hunting. I'm not going to let a few tired muscles and bruised ribs stop me."

A smirk lifted her lips. "My goodness, aren't we macho?"

"You'll see how macho when I'm off the walking wounded list."

Rika laughed. "Grab your coffee and come downstairs. I'll fix us a big welcome home breakfast."

"You're on."

Ryan groaned with each step he negotiated until Rika laughed so hard tears came to her eyes. When they reached the second floor, they

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found a Barbie doll in the middle of the floor. Rika picked it up and smoothed her thumb over the dark, long hair.

"Looks like Kristi's. The kids have really taken over. I hope they haven't been too much trouble."

"Are you kidding? Mom and Dad love kids. They moped for days when Chesney moved out. Trust me, they are ecstatic. Come on, where's that breakfast you promised?"

"Oh, I'm too excited to eat. I just can't wait to see everyone and tell them our news." She did a little pirouette in the hallway.

Ryan chuckled. "Okay, let's find a house. We'll eat later."

"Oooh. I'm sooo excited!" She dashed for the stairs to dress, but a knock on the kitchen door pulled her back. She was as surprised as Ryan when he opened the door and saw Chuck and Pilar standing there.

"May we come in?" Pilar asked.

Ryan stepped to one side. As the couple walked in, Rika could swear Pilar was pushing Chuck into the room.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling well," Rika said.

Pilar smiled. "Much better. Thank you. Congratulations on your win."

"Thanks. Did the doctors ever find out what was wrong?"

"They sure did." Chuck flashed a dirty look at Pilar. "Someone gave us bad water. Didn't she, Pilar?"

"I don't understand," Ryan said.

"Pilar did it!" Chuck jerked his thumb in her direction. "Could've killed me and wouldn't tell me why until we came here."

Rika studied the other woman with a frown. "Why?"

"Because Chuck was going to work with Stuart Racer to eliminate you from the race—"

"I never—"

"You did. He made a deal with Racer to eliminate you...at any cost. I also suspect that's why we got picked to compete when we should've

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been disqualified from the start. Racer knew an easy mark when he saw it.”

Ryan leveled an ugly stare at Chuck.

“Hey, man, I swear to you—”

“I know I should have trusted my instincts and never should’ve gone with him, and to this day I still don’t know why I did,” Pilar said. “When he blurted out his arrangement with Racer, I stopped him the only way I knew how. Then I drank the water so he wouldn’t get suspicious.”

“You can’t believe this.” Chuck held out his arms, pleading. “You know I wouldn’t dime out my best pal.”

Ryan held a clenched fist by his side. “Get the hell out of here before I punch you right in the face.”

“But, Ryan, I didn’t—”

“Now!”

Chuck hustled out the door and to his car. Without a backward glance, he drove away.

Pilar stared at the car as it disappeared around the curve. “I’ll be contacting the police next. I just wanted you to hear from us.” She gave a humorless laugh. “Guess I actually expected him to apologize.” She shrugged. “Should have known better.”

Rika just nodded. She put her hand on Pilar’s shoulder. “How can we ever thank you enough?”

“A ride home would do,” she said with a smile.

“You got it.”

Late that same afternoon Ryan and Rika found a house they decided was perfect—four bedrooms with a huge backyard two miles from the Fletchers. It was roomy and bright, carpeted throughout and, to Rika, the most beautiful house she’d ever seen. Over dinner that evening they mulled over more plans, thoroughly caught up in all the excitement the future offered.

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As they cleared away dinner dishes, they heard the toot of a horn, and dashed outside in time to see Mitch pull his RV to a stop beside the garage. In the car behind them were Andy and Chesney. The RV's side door flapped open and kids poured out.

Rika met the children halfway, swinging the little ones into her arms for bear hugs and smothering them with kisses before grabbing the older ones.

"It's so good to see you!" she exclaimed, hugging Mitch and Anna, too.

"Have we got stories to tell you." Ryan winced as little Amy pulled on him for a hug.

"Uncle Andy said you and Aunt Rika went on a treasure hunt. Did you find buried treasure?" Amy asked.

Rika squatted down to her level. "The best treasure ever." She laughed and swung Amy into her arms. "Ryan and I are getting married."

Amy and Kristi squealed. "Can we be flower girls?"

"We'll see about that. But wait 'til you see our new house. It's beautiful. Four bedrooms. A big yard. You'll love it."

An awkward silence fell. Rika's frown mirrored Ryan's.

His father ushered them all into the house. "We need to talk."

He motioned them to the sofa while he dropped into the chair beside them and dangled his hands between his knees. Ryan's forehead knit in concern. Anytime his father did that, the news had to be bad.

"It's about the kids," he began.

"I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am," Rika said.

He forced a smile. "I know, honey. It's been good to have them here...good for all of us." He rubbed his knees before continuing. "You two will be married soon. Starting off together can sometimes be rough—especially with the burden of children to raise."

"We're prepared for that, Dad."

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“Yeah...well...it isn’t necessary, you know. You two deserve a chance to be alone. A chance to...to run naked in your own house...to make love in the living room if you want.” He flushed a little. “A chance to be comfortable with each other before adding children to the picture.”

“Just what are you trying to say?” Rika twisted her hands before her.

When his father paused, Ryan answered for him. “He’s saying he and Mom don’t want to let the kids go.”

“What?” She scooted to the edge of the cushion. “Those kids belong with me. They are my responsibility. I love them.”

“I know that, sweetie. No one denies that,” he said.

“Then why are you doing this?” Ryan demanded.

His father sighed. “It’s just that it might be best for all concerned if the kids stay here.”

Rika snapped to her feet. “I don’t see how—”

“Excuse me,” Robyn interrupted from the doorway. “The kids and I talked and they asked me to talk to you.” She hesitantly walked forward. “Rika, we want you to know we love you very much. You’ve done everything in your power to help us and we appreciate it. But since you’ve had to be our mother and father, we’ve lost you as a sister and aunt. You’re never happy and laughing like before. You’re always tired and irritable. You take medicine all day...every day. We love you, but we’d all rather stay here.”

“All of you?” Rika asked in a choked whisper.

Robyn nodded. Before she could say more, Don walked in. The cast was gone. He’d healed fast.

“She’s right, Rika. Since we’ve been here, it’s like having Mom and Dad back again. Mitch and Anna are really great. Don’t think they spoil us...they don’t. We can’t get away with anything.” He squirmed. “All you do is yell and scream all the time. I can’t talk to you about my



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problems. I've missed having my big sister to talk to. We want to stay here. We want things back to kinda the way they used to be."

"Rika..." Robyn held out her hands, pleading. "We love Mitch and Anna. It's like Don said...it's almost as good as having Mom and Dad. You know...they could be your Mom and Dad, too. They will be when you marry Ryan."

Rika squeezed back tears. She couldn't trust herself to speak. Her stomach churned from the aggravation. She'd come so far—a month without the antacid and now this. It felt like a burning knife stabbing her gut. She had to get out of this stifling room.

"I'm going for a walk." She spun around to leave and found Ryan's hand on her elbow.

"I'll go with you." He slipped an arm around her shoulders and led her outside.

Ryan pointed her toward his mother's walking path. A full moon lit their way. His presence gave her comfort even if he didn't say anything. Poor guy, he was caught in the middle.

Rika watched the path as they walked. She was glad Ryan didn't try to talk to her. Conversation would have been impossible. Her words would have come out harsh and angry or accompanied by a flood of tears. She'd promised to care for the children, to keep them together as a family. The Fletchers were family, or very soon would be. Wasn't it best to leave the children in Anna and Mitch's care?

Rika rubbed her burning stomach. It seemed as though every major decision she had to make with them turned her insides out. On the boat with Ryan there had been no turmoil, only the inner calm that each day she didn't have to be the sole decision-maker—Ryan was there to shoulder the burden with her. But this wasn't his responsibility. No matter what their relationship, Rika knew the choice was ultimately hers. Why did it have to tear her up?

She clutched her stomach. Everything was catching up to her,

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making her stomach feel as though it were on fire.

“I don’t feel so good.”

Before Ryan could express concern, Rika bent forward and threw up. Blood stared back at her.

“Oh, my God!”

“Hospital. Now.” He scooped her under his arm and led her away.

## CHAPTER 15

An ulcer. Ryan had predicted it would happen and she'd worried herself right into one. She stared at her new diet, crinkled her nose in disgust, and tossed it aside.

Flowers adorned her room, bringing cheery get well wishes and an abundance of love. She felt cherished, yet each time she looked at the flowers from the children, her smile faded a little.

The last few days in the hospital had given her time to think. Becoming their guardian had turned them into strangers. Confidences were no longer shared. Gone were the late night giggling sessions with Andy and Robyn. Don didn't look up to her with brotherly adoration. And her little nephew and nieces—no more wrestling and tickling games.

Somewhere she had let responsibilities overload her life and had forgotten how to play. She'd always wanted to keep everyone together as a family. Although she had physically accomplished that, she had

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failed emotionally. Now a solution to that rift was being offered, and the only person who seemed to have a problem with it was her.

It was her pride getting in the way. Rika had always preached that she wanted what was best for the children. She realized now that had only been part of it. It had also been to purge her guilt, guilt she had wrongly placed on her shoulders.

Ryan was right about that, too. It was her parents' fault the money was frittered away, not hers. She knew if she really wanted what was best for her wards, there was only one logical solution.

Ryan walked through the door. "Ready to go home?"

Rika smiled. "More than ready."

"Andy and Dad are down the hall. I'll get them to help us with these flowers."

"Just a minute." She patted the bed, and he sat down beside her.

Rika hooked her arm through his and rested her head against his shoulder. "I've been thinking about what the kids said the other day. You know, they're absolutely right. I've become nothing but a screaming shrew. There were times I actually hated myself for the way I sounded. There were times I wanted to run away from everything, even though I loved them."

She looked up at him. "I've decided it would be best if they stayed where they're happiest. I could still be an active part of their lives."

"You sure could," Ryan said with a smile.

"But what about the money?"

Ryan shrugged. "Well, we've set aside enough for taxes. We can still buy our house and put the rest in the bank for them."

Rika brightened. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. We don't need it. We'll do fine on what we earn."

Rika hugged him. "I'm so glad I met you."

"Me, too. We'll tell them as soon as we get home."

At the house, Rika waited until the excitement of her return had

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died down. Then she asked everyone to sit down, and grabbed Ryan's hand for reassurance.

"We have an announcement to make. I understand how you feel, and if you really want to live with Anna and Mitch...you can."

"Really?" they asked in unison.

Rika smiled. "Really."

While the children cheered, Rika noticed Mitch's and Anna's sighs of relief.

"Can I be maid of honor?" Robyn asked.

"I want to be the flower girl," Amy and Kristi chimed. "Pleeease."

Rika joined the other adults' laughter. "Well, let's get this all planned out."

\* \* \*

A month later, at a wedding with two flower girls and one overly excited maid of honor, Art Steffanson gave Rika away in marriage.

After the wedding, it was back to the Fletcher home for the reception. Champagne flowed freely among the constant flash of cameras.

Art raised his glass. "To a long and happy life blessed with wonderful children."

Rika froze, her glass halfway to her lips. "Children?" She'd forgotten about having children.

"Yes...children," Art repeated.

When Rika continued to stare, Ryan added, "You know...tiny humans who look like me and you."

She gave him a playful smack. "I know what children are."

"Then why do you look so shocked?"

"I forgot about having kids of my own. What if...oh, dear...I just don't know if I could raise kids. Maybe I'd be a bad mother."

Her remark earned nothing but laughter.

"A bad mother?" Andy scoffed. "After what you've been through

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the last six months? I can't think of anyone more qualified to be a mother."

"Here, here," Mitch seconded, raising his drink in toast.

Art refilled his glass. "So...where's the honeymoon going to be?"

"We're going to spend a few quiet days in our new home," Ryan said.

"You sure? I understand cruises are very nice this time of year."

"Bite your tongue," they threw back in unison.

Yet another toast was given.

Ryan leaned close to Rika. "How much longer do we have to stay here?"

She shrugged. "Why?"

"Because the sooner we get home, the sooner we can start practicing the art of baby-making."

Rika smiled. "You mean things like running naked through the house and making love on the living room carpet?"

"Something like that."

She draped her arms around his neck. "I'd like nothing better."

## CAITLYN WILLOWS

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the erotica genre. Readers will find the same quality from “Caitlyn” that they have come to expect from “Catherine,” but the stories will be more over-the-top and more steamy. Sometimes the novels are written singularly, and sometimes they are a collaborative effort with award-winning author Paris Dixon. Always they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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