

Cerridwen Press

TOUGHER
THAN
Diamonds
DELIA CARNELL



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Tougher Than Diamonds

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TOUGHER THAN DIAMONDS

Delia Carnell

Dedication

With a special fondness for Steven's dining room table in Columbia, Maryland, and the classical radio station heard there.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Chanel: Chanel Industries, Inc.

Corona: Cerveceria Modelo S.A. de C.V.

Fortune 500: Time, Inc.

Ivory: Procter & Gamble, Inc.

Jack Daniel's: Jack Daniel's Properties, Inc.

Ritz: The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Inc.

Valium: Hoffman-La Roche Inc. Corporation

Chapter One

Dressed in black from stocking cap to canvas shoes, she stalked from shadow to shadow. Stopping at the back door, she reached with one gloved hand to unscrew the light bulb, pitching her into darkness. From the pocket of her knit pants, she took a set of delicate and illegal lock picks.

Something moved in the grass, startling her. She turned, eyes whipping from side to side. A cat. A big friendly tabby come to explore the unfamiliar figure in the darkness. She started to murmur something reassuring to the animal, then changed her mind. Who knew how far her voice might carry? Down the back lawn and across the water that lapped at the seawall on the bay?

She turned back to the task before her. The thin tools clicked as she manipulated the pins. Not allowing herself to be nervous or afraid, she concentrated on springing the lock. As she'd been taught. As she'd done a hundred times before.

Cool and calm, she worked the lock until it opened. Now she allowed a deep breath to escape. Now she felt a jangle of nerves in her stomach. But only for a moment. This was the easy part. Harsher obstacles lay before her.

She took another breath and played the scene through her mind one more time. In the door, around the island in the center of the kitchen to the alarm control on the left wall. Open the box, manipulate the wires, punch the code. All of this in less than thirty seconds.

She knew she could do it. She'd practiced it over and over. She had it down to twenty-four seconds flat.

She took the tools from her pocket and gripped them tightly, ready. Then she opened the door. Her steps were quiet and sure. Around the island to the controls. Her fingers flew over the box and the system was disabled. Then she put everything back together so the resident would probably never realize the device had been turned off. As long as she'd been in the business, it still amazed her how little attention people paid to the electronic wizardry they relied on to keep them secure. She was standing inside a house that easily cost several million dollars and the security system was one of the simplest on the market to disable.

No time to marvel about it. She listened for any sounds, making sure she was alone. Nothing moved. Quietly, quickly, she went up the stairs. A slight tremble, more anticipation than fear, quivered in her stomach, but she wouldn't give in to it. Too much depended on steady hands and calm nerves.

As light as a dancer, she moved down the hall to the room at the end. The door was open. Stepping inside, she used her penlight to locate the safe. Behind a portrait on a wall. How naïve people were!

She looked around, carefully shining the light toward the tall doors that led to the balcony, her escape route should she need one. The layout was exactly as it had been described to her. This was almost too easy.

She turned back to the safe and very deliberately worked the combination, but there was no satisfying click. The handle wouldn't budge. Nervous fingers, she thought and spun the dial to try again. Still the mechanism refused to spring free.

Now what? She could get inside any building, no matter what security system they used, but safecracking wasn't one of her talents. Frustration threatened, but she quelled it. Perhaps the numbers were off a digit or two. She had time to try again.

Despite her typical coolness, she was starting to sweat in the dark clothing. The stocking cap irritated her forehead where her bangs normally fluttered freely. It was tight and unfamiliar. The gloves made her fingers clumsy. She blew out a breath and turned the dial again.

Before she reached the first number, a sound startled her. The scrape of a lock, the click of a door. No! He can't be home yet! Stifling an instinct to flee, she silently swung the portrait back to cover the wall safe and stepped softly to the double doors.

The balcony was high, but she had no choice. There were two voices echoing up the stairs, both male. Keys rattled as if tossed onto a table. Then footsteps sounded on the stairs and the voices grew louder. No options. She had to get out.

The door closed behind her with a quiet click seconds before light flooded the room she'd just vacated. She had known better than to go inside without a good escape plan, but this was one she'd hoped not to use.

Tiptoeing around a potted palm, she scanned the yard to be certain none of his lackeys remained outside. She saw nothing but the precisely manicured lawn, awash with moonlight all the way down to the bay. This was probably a good time to get over her fear of heights, she told herself as she swung one leg over the railing. Gritting her teeth, she followed the first leg with the rest of her body and inched her hands down the upright supports until she touched concrete.

Her legs dangled a good fourteen feet from the ground. That was her only moment of hesitation. People had survived falls a hundred times higher, she told herself. Then she closed her eyes and let go.

She remembered to bend her knees and roll when she hit the ground. When she came up, she streaked across the lawn. It was easy enough to scabble over the privacy fence where the gate offered foot and handholds. Then she was clear of his property and on her way back to the spot where she'd left her car. All according to plan.

Except she hadn't gotten the diamond.

* * * * *

Jake Crosby sat in the parking lot of the Lakewood Arms apartment complex, telephoto lens trained on 3G. Any minute now, the door would open and Robert

Dunbar would walk out. Jake knew because he'd called Dunbar's office pretending to be his first afternoon appointment, verifying the time. Two o'clock.

He glanced at his watch. 1:47. Dunbar's office was ten minutes away. Cunning of the old guy to stash his mistress close enough for a lunchtime tryst. Jake had to admire the man's foresight, even though the pictures he was about to snap would allow the soon to be ex-Mrs. Dunbar to clean him out in divorce court. He wondered how willing the little piece in 3G would be when Dunbar could no longer bankroll this cozy love nest.

Right on schedule, the door opened. Jake raised the camera and framed Dunbar in the viewfinder. The mistress, bottle blonde hair sexily disheveled, wore a skimpy pink kimono about to fall open at the deep vee neck. Long sleek legs were exposed from upper thigh.

When Dunbar leaned back in for a lingering kiss, Jake recorded the action for prosperity. And the attorneys. They embraced intimately while Jake continued clicking the shutter, pleased when the subject turned enough to reveal his entire face. No question about the identity of the man. When he raised a hand to smooth back a lock of the blonde's hair, sunlight glinted on the gold of his wedding band. Poetic justice, Jake thought. Mrs. Dunbar will be impressed.

Far enough away to be unnoticed, he kept snapping while the subject walked down the stairs to his car. Jake showed no mercy, getting the personalized license plate in the picture. He even captured a shot of the poor guy rearranging the crotch of his trousers.

"Stupid jerk," Jake muttered, still clicking. Why would any self-respecting man get himself into this? The piece upstairs wasn't worth it. No woman was. Did this pathetic guy—easily sixty, nearly bald and slightly paunchy—really believe that the dish was interested in anything other than his wallet?

He'd find out soon enough, Jake thought, lowering the camera as the philandering husband drove toward him on the way back to his office. Lord, he hated this particular slant to detective work, but he hated being hungry even more. It didn't seem right for him to earn his rent based on the stupidity of well-off men. He wasn't too keen on helping the future Mrs. Ex squeeze a hefty settlement out of the proceedings either, but what the hell? He needed the money.

He tossed the camera aside and started up the decade-old car that was the best he could afford at the moment. Of all the things he'd lost—job, woman, self-respect—he missed his hot red sports car most of all.

Though the body showed scars, the engine ran smoothly. Jake gunned it and headed out the same way Dunbar had gone, except he turned in the opposite direction when he reached the street. Dunbar headed for the high-rent district, Jake's office was in a more modest section of Tampa. Much more modest.

The converted one-car garage where he lived and occasionally worked was just enough blocks from the old money Hyde Park area to be affordable. The white stucco

structure was dirty and overgrown with hibiscus and azaleas, both out of control, but they were pretty when they bloomed.

He turned into the narrow drive, noticing the subtle but expensive car parked beside the curb. Someone visiting the landlady next door, he guessed. He picked up the camera and got out, thinking about lunch. Thinking, too, about the bottle of Jack Daniel's he kept in the desk. He shook his head. Too early in the day. He wasn't going to fall into that particular trap despite the hard times he'd come upon.

When he rounded the corner to the side entrance, he came face to face with his second leggy blonde of the day.

"Mr. Crosby?" she asked as he approached.

It was women like this one who made him wish he'd cleaned up. Shaved that morning. Mown the lawn that month. But usually, if he gave it a second, the feeling passed.

"Yeah." He stabbed his key into the lock. "That's me."

"I wonder if I might talk with you for a few minutes."

He leaned his shoulder into the wooden door to force it away from the frame. It didn't fit for days after a hard rain and they'd had one last night. With a jerky sweep of his hand, he gestured for her to enter first. He followed, tossing his keys onto the scarred wooden desk as he took a seat there, his legs dangling over the edge.

He studied her, not even trying to make it subtle. She wore a navy suit, but there was nothing the least bit manly about it. The tailored jacket defined a narrow waist and the knee-length skirt didn't begin to hide exquisite legs. Even her feet were pretty in the plain navy high heels. And he didn't think he'd ever seen sexier ankles.

When he raised his gaze to her face, there were chunks of ice waiting for him in her eyes.

Her eyes. How could they be both blue and green at the same time? Feathery bangs wisped across her forehead. The rest of her hair fell perfectly straight to just past her shoulders. It was an enchanting color, almost gold, reminding him of honey.

As he stared, she folded her arms across her chest. "If you're finished..."

He felt his mouth almost form a tiny smirk at her chilly tone. He waved toward a beat-up wooden chair. "Have a seat, doll."

Rebecca Mallory raised a brow at the demeaning slang. She hadn't gotten where she was by acting on emotion. She let it slide. For now. She sat down, returning the physical assessment as blatantly as he had, though she doubted that she enjoyed it as much.

His too long, messy hair might have been nice with the right cut and style. Still, it was clean and thick, a rich shade of chestnut. His stubbly beard was at least two days old. His plaid cotton shirt was tucked into jeans, which typified the expression "well-worn". The seams were nearly white with age. His sneakers were so old they had a hole in one toe. Like him, she saved the eyes for last. They were riveted to her, as she'd guessed they would be, the color of whiskey, fringed with long dark lashes. And

hinting at amusement, although she sensed they hadn't sparked from a smile in a very long time.

"If you're finished..." he mocked her with her own words. She was past caring. She already had him pegged.

Crossing one leg over the other, she leaned against the chair back, relaxed. "I think so."

"Good." He spun around on the desk top and stumbled into a rickety old chair. The movement might have looked awkward for some men but fit this one as well as his jeans.

She watched him, admiring the way he moved in spite of herself, while he rifled around in a desk drawer and came up with a frayed yellow pad and a pen. "What's your story, doll?"

Her patience snapped despite her effort. After all her research, she'd expected him to be rough, crude. But she needed someone who could really do the job. She leaned forward in the chair. "Mr. Crosby, if you don't take this seriously, perhaps I should look for another detective."

"Suit yourself, doll." He looked up at her. "Doesn't matter to me one way or the other." He leaned back in the chair and laced his fingers behind his head. Not a care in the world, or so it seemed. "But there must be some reason why you came to me. You didn't just pick me out of the yellow pages under 'heroes'."

Rebecca sighed and forced herself to relax. That much was true. He didn't advertise or solicit business in any way. From the looks of this dump he called an office, he didn't get much. It had taken her two days and dozens of phone calls to find him, even with her connections.

She stared at him, weighing her options. Could he do the job? She took a quick glance around. Dented file cabinets. Scarred wooden desk, the perfect rectangle of an elementary classroom. A dinosaur of a computer covered with dust. On the desktop, stacks of unfiled papers and unopened mail. Probably unpaid bills in the clutter. That one detail alone made him a good choice. And all her contacts agreed—Jake Crosby was the man she needed for the job. She brushed at her bangs with an impatient hand. "You're right. I specifically wanted you."

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

She leveled her gaze at him. No pretense. "Someone stole something that belongs to me. I want it back."

He didn't react with so much as a twitch of his brow. "So you want me to knock on the guy's door and ask for it?"

She shook her head. "I've already tried that. I intend to steal it. I want you to help me."

With a light chuckle he threw down his pencil. "See you around, doll."

She didn't miss a beat, she'd expected this. "I'm prepared to pay you twenty thousand dollars for what can't possibly be more than a few hours' work."

One brow arched. "Must be something you want pretty bad."

"It is."

"Worth a lot of money."

"It is."

He picked up the pencil and played it through his long fingers. "What is it?"

"The Kendicott Diamond."

"Okay." He gave her a grin. "Where are the hidden cameras?"

Having no time for childish games, she stood. "I'm quite serious, Mr. Crosby. I'll find someone else to take my money."

They stared across the tired old desk at each other, an unspoken battle of wills. He caved first. "Sit back down, doll."

God, she was trapped in a bad Bogart film! But she needed this man. She had her reasons.

He watched as she settled back into the chair. "Why me?"

"Because you're hungry." She saw on his face that it grated just a little. If he'd expected her to say because he was the best in the business, he was disappointed. But the facts were the facts. He was hungry.

"The Kendicott Diamond was stolen more than fifty years ago."

She nodded. "From Davis Kendicott. My great-grandfather."

She watched him chew on that for a moment. The Kendicotts had pioneered in Florida, building it into a vacation empire along with Flagler and his railroad. It had brought them great wealth, but they'd lost it all in The Depression. She guessed that he knew all of that. It was fairly common knowledge for a native who'd studied Florida history in school.

"The diamond was stolen in the fifties, wasn't it?"

"1943," she corrected. "Harvey Kendicott bought it for his wife Grace. Davis inherited it on her death."

"So more than sixty years later, you think you know where it is."

She couldn't miss the skepticism in his voice. There were details she didn't want to give him. Not yet. He'd have to trust her for now. She figured twenty thousand dollars would buy a fair amount of faith. "I know where it is."

"You're sure?"

"My mother was involved with the man who has it now. She told me where to find it."

"Why doesn't your mother just get it back from the man?"

"Because he killed her."

There was a long pause. Rebecca knew revenge was the worst motive in the world. Too emotional. Good old-fashioned greed was easier any day of the week. But this was what she had. He flipped the pencil down again. "Sounds like you need the police, doll."

She'd expected that, of course. She still wasn't ready to give him everything yet. Besides, if he were as good as she'd heard, he'd find it out on his own. Maybe it was her way of testing him. "I have my reasons for handling this without the police."

He could accept that. There were plenty of times when it was to his advantage to walk just this side of the law. As long as justice prevailed, he figured it didn't make a whole lot of difference. "What do you do for a living, doll?"

Focusing on the leaves beyond the lone dingy window, she swallowed back a retort to his constant use of that demeaning nickname. "I own a security company."

He smiled just a little and propped his feet on the desk. "You wouldn't have installed the system in this guy's house, would you?"

That would be too convenient. "No, but I know the system. I've already been inside."

"Then why do you need me?"

"I can't crack the safe."

His eyebrows rose and he thumped his chest as he spoke. "And you think I can?"

"I know you can."

"How?"

She shrugged. "Things get around."

He wondered why nothing had gotten around to him about her. "What's to stop me from getting in, getting the diamond and splitting?"

Did he think she was stupid? "Because you can't get in without me."

"Okay." He dropped his feet to the floor and leaned his hands on the desk. He met her blue-green gaze, as cool as an ocean breeze. "So we go to this house, you get us in, I crack the safe, then you take off with the diamond. I get twenty thousand dollars. Equal talents. Equal responsibility. Equal risk." He brought one hand up and casually studied his nails. "Payoff seems out of line."

She'd expected that, too. "I'm just getting back what was mine to begin with. You get twenty thousand dollars." She glanced around at the sparsely furnished office, the ominously silent telephone. "Which it looks like you can use."

"Fair enough." He looked at her. "Who's got the diamond?"

It was her last card, deciding the hand as soon as she played it. There was nothing to do but lay it down. "Edward Emerson."

The name ricocheted around the small office like a shot from a .357 with a force just as deadly. "Get out."

"Just think about it."

"Don't have to." He turned away from her and picked up the unruly stack of papers on the desk as if they contained matters of urgent national security. "Nice meeting you, doll. Have a good life."

Dismissed, she stood, drew a business card from her pocket and laid it on the desk. He didn't acknowledge the action. "You can reach me here. We don't have much time."

* * * * *

Rebecca might have enjoyed storming out of Jake Crosby's office and slamming his ill-fitting door, but that wasn't her nature. She wondered at his ability to stir that much emotion in her. The circumstances, she told herself. She was strung tight.

Poking the key in her car's ignition, she brought her emotions under control. By the time she pulled out into the street she was calm again. Well, as close to calm as she'd been since she'd broken into her mother's apartment, found her lifeless on the bed draped in the soft folds of a pretty cotton nightgown.

Two weeks later, her mind still produced that ghastly image, fixating on the tiny roses embroidered on the bodice of the gown. Faded roses, worn and thin from years of laundering. Those sad roses, so pitiful, had broken her heart, sliced it open and let any warmth, any love drain out of her, filling it instead with a dark, icy hatred. Hatred that a man, any man, could do this to her mother.

She turned into traffic on the cross street, settled back into the cool quiet rage that had been her steady companion these past two weeks. Not an inferno, no angry flames consuming her reason and control. Just a frigid sweep through her veins, freezing her thoughts and feelings over the injustice of life.

And love. That incomprehensible emotion that made fools of otherwise normally functioning men and women. Stupid, useless love. She'd seen her mother behave the fool for it a dozen times. She'd done it once herself. Only once.

Brooding, she approached the traffic light and waited for the left-turn signal, peripherally aware of the traffic, the storefronts, the people. Jake Crosby hadn't taken her bait, but he would. Because he needed the money as desperately as she needed his help.

And when it came right down to it, people always did whatever it took to satisfy their most desperate needs.

She turned on the radio and let a violin concerto wash over her on the final few miles to her office. The business she'd built for herself, by herself, was the only thing she had, her only reason for getting up in the morning.

Until now. Now, when her mother lay beneath the bright green lawn of Memory Gardens, a victim of Edward Emerson's misdeeds as surely as if he'd put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger.

Rebecca was tired of being manipulated by men, from her father to her ex-husband and now the likes of Emerson. This time she was taking a stand. This time she was fighting back.

And Jake Crosby was going to help her.

* * * * *

Jake pocketed the cash Dan Vogler paid him for the shots of Dunbar with his blonde and headed for a nearby bar. It was early still, not quite five o'clock, but he knew a place where a small group would already be gathering, where he could listen to smoky jazz, where he could forget about his visit from Miss Kendicott Heiress.

He was lucky, he knew, to have Dan's business. He was just about the only client he'd been able to dredge up when he'd lost his cushy job overseeing security at a huge local corporation. Jake had been the one to find Dan's runaway teenage daughter and talk her into coming home a few years ago. Otherwise Dan would probably have stopped calling him too, along with everyone else, despite the fact that they went way back together.

He didn't kid himself about his abilities or talents. He knew it was Dan's gratitude that kept him in pocket change. He didn't care. It was hard enough to roll out of bed in the morning and look himself in the mirror each day. He didn't have the energy to work on anything more complex than that.

Inside the corner bar, he hooked a stool with his foot and pulled it out, giving a nod to Curt, the bartender. No need for words. He was regular enough for Curt to pour a glass of Jack Daniel's and set it on the bar in front of him. He didn't hang out there every day or even every week. It was just something he did when his mind got too full of the past. Like when he was reduced to snapping adultery photos.

Like when leggy blondes walked into his office and dropped the name Edward Emerson.

She knew his history. She had to. It was evident in the way she'd used the name, saved it 'til last, seen him strike at the twenty-thousand-dollar bait first. She knew.

He wrapped his hand around the short glass and held it. Just held it. He'd been a detective too many years—eight on the force and ten on his own—not to have at least a mild curiosity. How had a Kendicott heir gotten mixed up with Emerson?

He stared at the dark amber liquid, watched the pattern of light reflecting in the gleam, imagined he saw his own face there, staring back. Empty and haunted. As empty as the ice blue eyes of the blonde. An emptiness visited on both of them by Emerson.

Hell with it. Let her chase her own ghosts. He didn't need the aggravation. He lifted the glass to his lips, then stopped and set it back down.

Maybe he could talk to her. Just hear the rest of her story. He knew there were big pieces that she'd left out. Maybe he could see what else she had to say. Maybe talk her

out of this stupid scheme. For all her icy reserve, she was vulnerable. She wasn't even aware of how her expression had warmed when she spoke of her mother, blazed when she'd said what Emerson did to her. If he didn't try to reason with her, who knew what imbecile she might hook up with?

"Something wrong with the drink, Jake?"

"No." He pushed the glass away from him. "Something wrong with me."

He looked at the drink for a moment, looked at Curt, then stood up. No doubt he would regret this later, but he pulled some bills from his pocket and dropped them on the bar. "Changed my mind," he said and walked out the door.

He regretted it by the time he got to his car. What was he doing? It wasn't the woman, he told himself. It wasn't the spark in her eyes that she tried to paint with frost. It wasn't even that she could get herself killed. It was a shot at his own redemption. If he could get Emerson, settle the score...

No! He ground out an oath and started the car. Revenge couldn't play into it. The blonde had enough of that seething in her for both of them. He'd just go to her office and hear the rest of her story. That was all.

Glancing into the rearview mirror before merging into traffic, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection. Frightening. Maybe he'd go home and clean up first.

He didn't even know her name, he realized a little while later as he stepped out of the shower. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he dripped across the bedroom in search of a clean pair of jeans. There was one. Only one. A clean shirt took a little more creativity. He settled on a white dress shirt and rolled the sleeves up to his elbows.

Clean-shaven and with his hair combed, he loped down the outside stairs to his office. There was her business card, lying right on the desk where she'd placed it. Rebecca Mallory. Something tugged on his mind. Some connection he should make. Shrugging it off for now, he booted up the computer.

With a few keystrokes, he was off on an electronic search. He turned the printer on, the monitor off and left. By the time he returned, there should be an accumulation of data about Ms. Rebecca Mallory. Illegal, yes, but he did it anyway. His system wouldn't retrieve anything he couldn't have uncovered with a personal visit to several government offices. This just sped up the process a bit.

* * * * *

Rebecca said goodbye to her assistant and kicked off her shoes. The stack of papers that required her attention seemed to have doubled as the afternoon wore on. True, she had let things slide in the two weeks since her mother's death. Now was as good a time as any to start catching up.

This wasn't her favorite part of the job. She preferred dealing with the clients, assessing their homes or offices and drawing the plans to thwart any intruders. That she

found challenging and even exciting. Answering letters and filling out tax forms were necessary chores. Hated but necessary.

Fear, the great equalizer. Each of her clients wanted an impenetrable fortress. She gave them that. Or the illusion of it, for there was no lock, no electronic gimmick that could keep out the most diligent of burglars. That she knew beyond any doubt.

As she dug into the accumulated paperwork, a knock sounded on the office door. Rebecca glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was nearly six. She frowned. Ruth Ann come back for something she'd left? No, the assistant had her own key.

She ignored it and turned back to the correspondence before her, but the knock came again. Louder, more insistent. Sighing, she pushed up from the desk and padded in her stockings through the reception area to the front door.

Ruth Ann had closed the mini-blinds before she left. Rebecca pulled one slat down a fraction of an inch and peeked through. And gasped. Jake Crosby stood on her doorstep. As she watched in surprise, he raised a fist and pounded again.

Chapter Two

Jake wasn't going away. Not after he'd made this decision, not after he'd cleaned up, not after he'd left the glass of whiskey sitting on the bar. He knew she was there. Her car was parked in the space nearest the door. He'd bang again and again until she answered if only to put a stop to the noise.

He was rewarded sooner than he'd hoped. He heard the locks clicking, then she opened the door. His first thought was that she was smaller than he remembered. Glancing down, he saw that she'd removed her shoes. She'd also taken off the navy jacket, revealing a thin white blouse with a lace insert just above her breasts. The effect was stunning.

Without speaking she stepped back and allowed him to enter. The office was carefully decorated. Thick carpet was a soft gray, the walls a muted pink. The receptionist's desk was shiny black. A tall plant stood in the corner beside a short sofa in a geometric print and framed watercolors adorned the walls. Pretty. Expensive.

She looked up at him, waiting for him to speak first. "You aren't going to make this easy for me, are you?" he asked.

With a shake of her head, she swung her hair over her shoulder. "Why should I?"

He dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You shouldn't. You should forget this stupid scheme, but I don't think you will."

Rebecca took a deep breath and was surprised with the scents of soap and aftershave. He'd cleaned up his act. She wondered why. "Come on in," she said, leading him past the assistant's desk to her private office.

Bypassing the desk, she sat in one of two comfortable chairs and gestured for him to take the other one. "You've reconsidered my offer?"

He couldn't help looking at her feet. Inside the sheer stockings, her toenails were painted a vivid red. That didn't mesh with the icy veneer she projected. It made him wonder what lacy bits of fabric she wore beneath the all-business suit. He raised his gaze to her face, blank of even a hint of curiosity. She'd make a damn fine actress. "I've decided to talk about it a little more."

She leaned back against the chair and crossed her legs. "Talk."

"How do you know Emerson has the diamond?"

"I know."

"You want me to risk arrest and losing my license on no more information than that?"

"I want your agreement to help me before I tell you everything."

He looked around the well-appointed office. They were in the high-rent district. Nothing here had come cheap. "How long you been in business, doll?"

Barely managing not to roll her eyes, she bristled but didn't object to the name. It wasn't worth the hassle. Yet. "Almost three years."

"Business must be very good."

She knew what he was after. She tossed him a small piece of the puzzle. "I divorced well."

That raised his eyebrows. "From?"

She smiled just a little. "You haven't done a background check?"

He returned the smile. "It's running now."

"It will tell you that I was married for two and a half years to Greg Sumner."

He gave a low whistle. "The cattle Sumners?"

"Yes."

That added a new dimension. One he wasn't sure he liked. Not only was he tangled up with "the" Kendicotts of Florida history, now she'd thrown the cattle-baron banking Sumners into the mix. "What other surprises will I find?"

Rebecca shrugged. Let him work for some of it. "I graduated with honors from the University of Florida the same year Greg finished law school. We were married, now we're divorced. I opened this business with part of the settlement. It shows a profit."

The way she said it made him believe she had no qualms about using her ex's money. From what he'd heard about Sumner heirs, she'd probably earned every penny. "What was your mother's connection to Emerson?"

Her eyes frosted with the same chill that claimed her heart. "She'd been seeing him for about a year. She thought he was going to marry her."

"But you didn't."

Had he thought frost? Her eyes were an arctic blue now.

"I would have kidnapped her to keep it from happening."

The overhead fluorescent lights hummed quietly, insistently, like the tension between them. "How did she die?"

Rebecca stood, walked to the small window across the room and looked out. She wrapped her arms across her chest, hugging the thin fabric of her short sleeves. "She swallowed a bottle of Valium."

"You said he killed her."

She turned only her head to look at him over her shoulder. "Are you in or out?"

Jake sighed, tunneled his hands through his still damp hair and closed his eyes. This was going to require more than he had to give. The more this woman talked, the more she sucked him in, intrigued with her colorful background and pointedly dispassionate eyes. It was a front. She wasn't really the Ice Princess she struggled to

project. He'd seen her falter, glimpsed the fire beneath the ice. That alone might be what decided the question.

He opened his eyes. She stood in the same position, waiting for his answer, as if the outcome made no difference one way or the other. He knew in his gut it did. "I'm in."

Her pulse raced, but she made no outward movement. One more hurdle cleared. She made herself walk slowly to her desk and pull open a drawer. "I think we should put our agreement in writing."

When she turned around, he was standing over her. How had he moved so quickly, so quietly?

He took the paper she held in her hand and let it flutter to the desktop. "How would we enforce a contract based on breaking the law?"

He towered nearly a foot over her, so close that she could see the pulse beating at the base of his neck, see the fine scar that webbed up his right cheek, count the hairs that curled at the opening of his crisp white shirt. She forced her gaze to his eyes. Whiskey, had she thought? Warm brandy. Exotic. Fluid.

"You trust me?" She cursed the breathless quality of her voice.

"About as much as you trust me," he countered.

She took a step backward, a futile attempt to regain control. "Shake on it, then." She extended her hand.

He reached for her, closing his fingers around the small elegant hand, surprised to find it steady and strong. There were many layers to this woman. Peeling them away one by one might be worth the entanglements he wanted to avoid. "So finish the story, doll."

She pulled her hand from his. "I hate it when you call me that."

He watched her hand flutter for a place to retreat. "I know."

For the first time Rebecca considered that she'd made a mistake, that Jake Crosby could propose a danger greater than breaking into Emerson's house. She didn't like the way her stomach trembled when he was so near. That hadn't happened to her for a very long time and she had no room or patience for it now. She circled the desk to put distance between them and went back to her chair.

"My mother thought Emerson was going to marry her," she repeated when he'd once again settled opposite her. "He knew about the diamond. He convinced her it would be better kept in his personal safe, so she gave it to him."

She paused, waiting for him to remark on her mother's gullibility, but he just sat, eyes pinned to hers as he waited for her to continue.

"When she told me what she'd done, I let her know it wasn't a very good idea. I convinced her that I could keep it safe for her, so she asked him to give it back. An argument ensued, I'm not really sure about the details, but that was when he told her he no intention of marrying her."

"And he refused to give the diamond back," Jake guessed.

Rebecca nodded. Her fingers plucked at the fabric of her skirt as she spoke. "She called me when she got home, hysterical. I went over there, calmed her and told her I'd get the diamond back. She described the house, the room, even the combination to the safe."

Jake's eyebrows arched in surprise. "He told her the combination?"

"No. I guess she had just enough mistrust to try to protect herself. She watched him." No matter how many times she'd gone over it in her mind, this next part caused her stomach to clench. She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I stayed with her until I thought she was calm enough."

She should have stayed all night. She'd never forgive herself for going home, leaving her mother to dwell on her betrayal and her pain. Nothing could sway her belief that her mother would still be alive if she'd stayed with her that night. "She tidied up the house, put on her favorite nightgown." She still saw those sad, faded roses in her mind. "And swallowed the pills."

Something moved in him, making him want to reach across and cover her fidgeting hands. Instead he gripped the arms of his chair until the feeling passed. "So you broke in, but the combination didn't work."

"Right. I guess she didn't see it clearly. I thought I could play with the numbers until I got it, but Emerson came home."

"He caught you?"

Her chin came up. "Of course not! I got out."

Jake saw the spunk and tried to ignore it, trying also to ignore the something that stirred within him. He needed no emotional entanglements with this wounded sparrow. He was in it for the twenty grand and the satisfaction of putting something over on Emerson. "Have you considered going to Emerson and telling him you want the diamond back?"

"Considered it and done it. He said he didn't know what I was talking about."

"Worth a try."

Worth a lot more than a try. At least she'd taken a look at the interior of the house and the security system. It had almost worked. She'd almost recovered the diamond by herself. She hated dragging someone else into the problem, especially someone as dangerous to her as Jake could be. If she'd known how completely overpowering his presence could be, she never would have gone to him in the first place. Trouble was, she needed him. She'd just have to be extremely careful. On guard at all times.

"How did your mother get possession of the diamond? I thought it was stolen from your family."

"It was. My father was able to get it back."

"Your father?"

"Yes. He died when I was in college."

And that subject was off-limits. She might as well have drawn a big red circle with a slash across the word "father". She wasn't talking. No matter. Something would turn up in the background search. "So what's the plan, doll?"

She ignored it. He was using the name just to irritate her, to put her on edge. She wished it wasn't working. "Emerson goes to a poker game every Wednesday night. We should have several hours to work."

"You're sure?"

"Positive, but there are several ways to check before we break in."

"Suppose he changed the system since you were there the other night?"

"He doesn't know anyone got in."

"How can you be certain?"

She sighed and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Are you going to question me every step of the way?"

He held his hands up, palms out. "It's my butt on the line, doll. I want to be damn sure it's covered."

"Mine too." The confidence had returned to her voice. "And I have a lot more to lose than you do."

That remark shouldn't have stung him so, but he knew it wasn't only the diamond she meant. He was a washed-up has-been. She was on the upward slope of a steep curve. He let it roil within him for a minute or two. He should forget this whole scene, this woman and her diamond and her wounds. Wednesday was two days away. He'd have time to check out her story, assess his options. At least it was something to do, something better than snapping pictures of cheating husbands. "All right. Wednesday night. What time?"

She didn't let him see the relief that she felt. "The game starts at ten. I want to watch him leave the house to be sure he's gone."

Jake leaned forward, steepling his fingers together as he thought. "I'll meet you here at eight. That will give us time to check our equipment and review the game plan. Do you know what kind of safe it is?"

That stopped her train of thought. For all her expertise in areas of security, one safe seemed pretty much the same as any other to her. "It's in a wall."

"Behind a picture?"

"Yes."

He grinned at the stereotype. "Shouldn't be a problem. How did you hear that I'm...shall we say *talented* in that area?"

She moved her shoulders, a restless gesture. He wanted more than she was willing to give, but if he was in, she supposed she owed him something. "You meet some interesting people in this business. Benny Fortuna mentioned your name."

He took a long look at her, trying to picture her in conversation with a convicted jewel thief. "Benny's out on parole?"

"Yes." That Benny was her godfather was information she didn't want to give up. "He's a valuable source of advice."

"I bet he is." He watched her foot swinging and knew it was in direct contrast to the icy expression she projected. "Your clients know you use hardened criminals to help you set up their security systems?"

"Some of them do." She wanted the subject shifted away from herself. "How is it that you know safecracking?"

He shrugged. "Tool of the trade. Many of my jobs require me to get into things that people want me locked out of."

That satisfied her. The fact that he didn't always follow the rules was instrumental in her choosing him for the job. Benny would have been happy to help her, but his recent incarceration had caused him to see the light. He was going straight. Or as straight as a lifelong jewel thief could go.

Jake stood up. He'd had enough for one visit. Obviously, she was filtering the information she gave him. At home he'd find out how many blanks the computer could fill in. "I'll take the first half upfront."

Rebecca stared at him. If she gave him ten thousand now, would he come back on Wednesday? His gaze was intense, locked on hers, challenging. It was a gesture of faith, she supposed. They'd shaken on the deal. Whatever else he'd become, she didn't think he was a man who welshed on his word. Besides, what other option did she have?

"All right." She went to the desk, pulled out a checkbook.

He stepped beside her as quickly and quietly as he had before and covered her hand. "No checks."

She looked at him, trapped by his arm and chest as he leaned over her. "I don't keep that much cash on hand."

Still he held her captive. "Get it. I'll come by tomorrow at noon."

"Fine." She couldn't move her hand from beneath his without drawing attention to how unsettled she felt. He held her there for a moment longer, his eyes intense as they searched. He wanted to know more, all of it, but Rebecca just couldn't tell him. Some things were just too private.

Finally he lifted his hand and straightened. "Tomorrow."

Jake saw the ice melting in her eyes and discovered to his surprise something entirely different. Fear. She was afraid of him? He let his gaze drop to her lips, slightly parted as her breath sighed in and out. At that moment he wanted to kiss her more than he wanted anything. But it was the last thing he should do.

Wavering, he almost did it anyway, but thought of the entanglements it would bring. Far too many for a man as dead on the inside as he was. Turning, he didn't allow himself to even speak as he left.

Rebecca watched him go, heard the door click as he closed it quietly. She sank into the chair. Her fingers gripped the edge of the desk as if she would fall unless she used every ounce of her energy to hold herself erect. It was absurd, she knew, but for one heart-stopping moment, she'd thought he was going to kiss her. Worse still, she'd almost wanted him to.

Ridiculous. Getting up from the desk, she looked around until she found her shoes. There hadn't been a man in her life since the disappointment of Greg. If she were smart, she'd keep it that way. Uncomplicated. Free.

Lonely.

Ready to activate the alarm, she paused by the front door. Where had that thought come from? She wasn't lonely. Her business was a full-time job. It kept her days full of activity.

But not the nights.

No, the nights were dark and empty.

It didn't matter. She punched the code into the control panel and left the office. Avenging her mother's death, returning the Kendicott Diamond to the family consumed her life at the moment. It was all she wanted, all she cared about. And even if she was interested in a man to ease the loneliness, it wouldn't be a burned-out detective. Not a chance.

* * * * *

Rebecca sat in her office, the telephone wedged between ear and shoulder as she made notes, speaking to a new client, taking the preliminary information to begin a security plan. On the fringe of consciousness, she became gradually aware of voices in the outer office. Raised voices. Ruth Ann's voice. And a deep smoky male voice. An all too familiar voice, punctuated now with anger, something she wouldn't have thought Jake Crosby capable of dredging up.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was more than an hour before her noon appointment with the man and forced her attention back to the client, a recent widow who needed little more than a sense of security. Rebecca could give it to her. Easily. She wrapped up the conversation as quickly as she could, made a brief note on the schedule and rose to rescue Ruth Ann from the shaggy detective.

He burst through the door before she was halfway there.

"Harassing my assistant?" she asked as coolly as she could manage.

The petite brunette followed the intruder, anxiety wrinkling the delicate features of her face. In one hand she wielded a stapler, as though it were the first thing she could think to grab as a weapon. "Should I call the police?"

"No." Rebecca took in his unshaven, uncombed appearance. Faded gray sweatshirt stretched over washed-out denim. Anger blazed in his eyes. "I can handle Mr. Crosby, Ruth Ann."

Struggling for control, he arched one brow and didn't allow his gaze to waver. "Close the door, Ruth Ann."

Ruth Ann glanced at Rebecca who nodded an assent. The quiet click was the only sound as Rebecca waited, unmoving, her gaze still latched onto his.

He counted to ten. Absurd, but he'd wrap his hands around her luscious deceitful neck if he didn't garner some measure of control. The memory of the printout spewed from his computer moments ago lit the fire he'd almost banked. He began to pace, circling her, stalking.

Rebecca stood perfectly still and let his fury run around them. Any number of things could have set off these fireworks. She chose not to offer any guesses. Let him say the words.

Finally he stopped, facing her, towering over her. Diminutive, he thought. So small. He looked down at her feet. "Don't you ever wear shoes?"

A wry smile formed on her lips. "Not unless I absolutely have to."

"Put them on," he all but barked at her.

She lifted her chin. "No."

He cursed, low and ugly and circled her again. Her outfit today was the same as yesterday's except for the color. Clinging skirt, delicate blouse. He glanced around and found the matching jacket tossed over one of the chairs. Emerald green. The shoes, black and spiky, lay askew beneath the other chair. Damn those contradictions in her. Rigid business acumen. Careless abandon. Damn the intrigue.

Again, he stopped in front of her. "You left out one important fact, doll."

She held steady. "I told you everything you need to know to carry out the job."

"No." His eyes glittered with controlled emotion. He had it capped now. Now he could speak without snarling. "Sad story about your mother, doll. Pitiful. Made me feel really sorry for you, just as you wanted it to. But you forgot to mention that your father is Frank Mallory."

Her blood chilled. That was the one thing she'd wanted to hold back. Forever, if possible. "Was," she corrected. "He's dead now."

Jake dug his hands into his pockets because he still might slug her given half the chance. "Slain," he said. "Shot by a security guard. With a million dollars' worth of jewels in his pockets. Stolen jewels. Any particular reason you chose to leave out that little piece of your personal history?"

She shrugged. "It's not relevant."

"Not relevant," he muttered and ran one hand through his tangled hair. "Tell me." He spoke very slowly, very carefully. "You want me to help you steal a diamond. Why would the fact that your father was the world's most notorious jewel thief not be relevant?" He said the word with razor-sharp precision.

She stiffened. "He was never convicted."

Jake laughed. "Your loyalty is touching, doll."

She raised her hand as if to slap him. "If you call me that one more time, I'll —"

Quicker than lightning, he caught her hand in a death grip. "You'll what?" he almost whispered, "doll?"

Anger radiated from a place deep within her. Out of control. She was out of control and she hated him for provoking this reaction in her. She was shaking with it, infuriated. Drawing in a long breath, she fought for peace, almost found it. Slowly and gradually, with his gaze boring into her, he began to stroke his thumb across the delicate veins at her wrist.

The action had a strange soothing effect on her. Gradually, she cooled and pulled her hand away from his grasp. "I just don't like it. That's all."

What was happening to her? How did she—who always maintained control—fall so easily to pieces when this man was near? She crossed the soft carpet to put the space of her desk between them.

He followed, dragging one of the chairs to sit facing her. His anger subsided in those few seconds of close contact. He held now only a restless curiosity. "Tell me about your father."

Pulling up those memories brought a swarm of emotions to the surface. She had loved him, but his very being had cost her some valuable things. Including her marriage. She sighed and met the gaze of the man across from her. "When you grow up in a family of thieves, you don't realize there's anything different about it. Dad always described his work as taking beautiful objects from people who didn't appreciate them and relocating them to more deserving owners."

"At a hefty personal profit."

"Well, yes." She picked up a pen from the desk and ran it through her fingers again and again. "It isn't fair to judge me for his past. I've never stolen anything."

"I'm not judging you." He almost added "doll" but choked it back. He wasn't sure why. Perhaps because it was so clearly obvious that someone important—maybe even the Sumner jerk—had held her father's vocation against her.

"Anyway, he spent years tracking down the diamond, following rumors all over Europe and North America. He finally got it back in the family."

"Until your mother gave it to Emerson."

She went rigid, nearly snapping the pen in half. "Yes."

Damn, she had too much emotion tangled up in this quest. That made it dangerous. But then, so did he. "All right," he sighed. "We'll get it back."

She would get it back if she died trying. Nothing could stop her. And if her father's past made a difference to him, she'd do it by herself. Somehow. She pulled open the top drawer and took out a bank envelope. "Here's your money." She slid the packet across the desktop.

He stared at it for a second, almost turning it down in favor of the pure satisfaction of getting even with Emerson. Weakening, he chided himself. Getting soft. He picked up the packet and stood to stuff it into his jeans.

"Aren't you going to count it?"

He looked at her, at the morning sun from the nearby window glinting on her hair, at the steely determination in her eyes, in the set of her chin, in the carriage of her spine. "Tomorrow night. Eight o'clock."

"I'll be ready."

He shut the door when he left. Rebecca let her head fall into her upturned palms and closed her eyes. A shiver passed through her body and she wondered whether she was really up to this insane scheme. She needed steady hands and cool nerves to pull this off. Why was her usual composure deserting her now?

Because it meant too much to her. She'd allowed emotion to dictate her actions for the first time in years. Her body wasn't used to the adrenaline rush of simple feelings.

"Rebecca?"

She looked up at the sound of Ruth Ann's soft voice. She hadn't heard her open the door and stick her head around, peering in. Too absorbed, she thought. Too caught up in the turmoil. A bad sign. She forced a reassuring smile toward the woman. "I'm fine."

Ruth Ann stood behind the chair Jake had vacated, gripping the fabric in tense hands. "You don't look fine."

"Well, I am," she challenged, her voice holding a snap that she never used on this woman, who was a friend as well as employee. The surprise on Ruth Ann's face had her softening with a guilty flush. "I'm sorry. I'm just a bit unsettled."

Ruth Ann rounded the chair and sat down. "Who is he?"

"A private detective I hired."

If she wondered why, it didn't show in her expression. The mark of a true friend, Rebecca thought. One who knows when to keep her silence. That made her feel worse. "It has to do with my mother," she explained. "Something I want to know about her relationship with Emerson."

"Oh." Apparently satisfied, Ruth Ann got up as if to leave, then hesitated. "Don't you think you'd be better off forgetting about Emerson and getting on with the grieving process?"

"No, I don't. Emerson is the reason my mother died. I want to make him pay."

"If the police forces of several counties can't catch him at anything illegal, what makes you think you can?"

"I'm much more determined."

Ruth Ann stood for a moment longer, then started back to her own desk, pausing just before she left the office. "Be careful, Rebecca." Her eyes held the same concern as her voice. "He's dangerous."

Rebecca had to wonder whether she referred to Emerson or Jake Crosby. She thought perhaps the detective was the greater threat. That tightly leashed fury had frightened her for a moment. She didn't like the helpless feeling of fear. She wanted to be in charge. Always.

And she would be. "Don't worry." She tried to assure Ruth Ann with a smile. "I'll be careful."

* * * * *

But the next evening as she changed into her black clothes, she wondered exactly how careful she was being. Breaking into the home of a powerful underworld figure with an erratic detective as accomplice didn't seem like the smartest move she'd ever made.

She held her hands out in front of her and looked at them closely. Steady. Not a hint of a tremble. She could do this. Piece of cake.

She twisted her long hair up into a knot and secured it with pins. She'd add the stocking cap later. That particular piece of clothing would definitely attract attention in the warmth of Florida's October.

Just as she glanced at her wristwatch to check the time, there was a subtle knock on the front door. Punctual. She liked that.

She opened the door. Wearing a black tee shirt and old jeans, he carried a small canvas backpack. Tools, she assumed. She had no idea what one used to crack a safe. Despite her father's business, her experience with that particular activity was limited to what she'd seen in the movies.

Jake sauntered into the room and looked her over from head to foot. His eyes lingered on the cling of her knit shirt. "Are you ready?"

She felt herself grow warm beneath his gaze. She knew he did these things on purpose, deliberately trying to rattle her. That made her more determined not to react. "Yes."

He dropped his pack beside the door and walked over to Ruth Ann's desk. "Draw a plan of the house for me."

"All right." She took paper and pencil from the drawer and quickly sketched a rough outline of Emerson's home. "We enter here." She indicated the kitchen door with the tip of the pencil. "You stay out of my way until I disable the alarm."

He bent over the paper, frowning. "How long?"

"Thirty seconds."

His gaze slid sideways to find hers. "You can do it that quickly?"

She returned his stare quite steadily. "I've already done it once."

He nodded and turned back to the drawings, paying close attention to the layout of Emerson's home, the location of the safe and the emergency escape route off the balcony. "That's how I got out last time," she explained as she finished the description.

His respect for her increased a notch. "You jumped off the balcony?"

She gave him a brief smile. "More like dangled over the edge until I found the courage to let go. The fear of getting caught is a great motivator."

Yes, she was definitely worthy of his respect. He couldn't help noticing how different she was from his first impression when he'd figured her to be someone's bored wife looking for evidence to use in divorce court. If she were his wife, he'd guarantee she never got bored.

That last thought startled him. He'd never had a wife, never wanted one. Preposterous to be thinking what a fine one she would make. "Why did you divorce Sumner?" he asked, surprising both of them.

Rebecca surprised herself further by answering honestly. "He divorced me when the family found out who my father was."

"You'd kept it from him?"

"I told him, he hadn't shared it with his parents."

Jake couldn't help noticing the shadow that crossed her eyes when she spoke. The bastard had hurt her. But it explained her defensiveness about her father. Still, why would it end the marriage?

Rebecca read the question in his expression. She laid down the pencil, aligning it perfectly with the edge of the sketch and wiped her palms on the fabric of her pants. "Greg is a lawyer with his sights on political office. It wouldn't do to have a wife who is the daughter of a notorious jewel thief. I was a poor career move."

"Poor career move," he repeated, almost in disbelief. No, after all the scum he'd encountered at every level of society, he could believe it. "He didn't deserve you, doll."

Oddly, it sounded like an endearment this time. He seemed so sincere in his sentiment that she let it flatter her, touch her in some quiet place that had been left alone for a long time. "Thank you," she whispered, not able to say much more.

They both stood in awkward silence. Finally Rebecca picked up the paper and handed it to him. "Have you seen enough?"

He didn't glance toward the drawing. "Yeah. Let's go."

Chapter Three

With cap and gloves in hand, Rebecca ran through her checklist in her mind, then locked the office door before heading toward her car.

"Over here," he called. "I'll drive."

"I'd rather —"

"Fancy new car," he interrupted. "How many different noises does it make? How many chimes for keys, locks, lights? Mine's quieter."

She glanced skeptically at his beat-up older model, but didn't argue with him. He was right about the alarms and beeps. As long as his car got them there and safely back home, it didn't matter how it looked.

Emerson's home sat on a finger that jutted out into Tampa Bay, the most exclusive area of the city. Without the task of driving to occupy her, Rebecca had too much time to think. She wasn't anxious about the break-in, just eager to get it over with, as if holding the diamond in her hand would ease the tremendous grief. Or possibly help to overcome her guilt for not staying with her mother that night. She should have done more, should have seen how terribly distraught she was. Somehow, she should have saved her mother.

Jake glanced over and saw Rebecca chewing on her bottom lip. Odds were she didn't even know she gave these little signs of her agitation. Not good, he thought. Whatever was eating her had to be out of her mind by the time they got to Emerson's house. "What do you say we get a huge juicy steak to celebrate when we're finished?"

She turned impossibly wide eyes toward him. "Together?"

"Don't worry." She didn't have to sound quite so much like he'd asked her to fly to Mars, did she? "I know how to use a knife and fork."

"I'm sure you do. I just never considered going out with you."

He pretended to be hurt. "Why not?"

"Because." She turned back to watch for Emerson's street through the windshield. "It just never occurred to me, that's all."

Maybe he wasn't pretending. Sure, he was in no shape to get involved with her, but it would be nice to think she was at least interested. Just a little. He thought about that moment in her office yesterday when he'd held her wrist, when her eyes had warmed ever so slightly. She was lying. They both felt the hum of sexual awareness. They both knew it.

So let her deny it if it made things easier for her. They were almost to Emerson's street and she no longer showed any outward signs of anxiety. Good.

"Turn right at the next corner," she said, leaning forward. "I'll show you where I parked last week."

Following her instructions, he made the turn and pulled close to the curb where the street made an unnatural jog around a stately old oak tree. The extra space gave them just a bit of cover. The engine died and sounds of the night crept into the car. A dog barked a few blocks away. A sprinkler chugged somewhere up the street. Night insects struck up a chorus. Jake turned around and reached for his pack.

Her nerves humming, Rebecca put on the stocking cap and stuffed her hair under the dark knit. Then she put on her gloves, methodically stroking the material over each finger until the fit closely matched her own skin.

When she glanced up, she met Jake's studious gaze. "Too much hair," he mumbled and reached across the car to tuck stray tendrils into hiding. "And your skin is too light."

She watched him rummage in the pack and pull out a thick charcoal stick. She understood and closed her eyes, offering him her face. He smudged her pale cheeks with swift strokes of his long fingers. His touch was surprisingly gentle. She jerked back from his touch. "That's enough."

He took her chin in his hand and studied her face. "It will do."

They got out and, keeping to shadows, made their way toward Emerson's house. No cars passed on the quiet street. A row of hedges framed the yard of Emerson's nearest neighbor. Fitting themselves into the thick of the tall bushes, they watched the house and waited.

Soon the sound of a garage door opening carried across the night. Rebecca pushed her body deeper into the hedge, leaves scratching her neck. She held her breath as the car pulled out and drove past. She recognized the driver as a man who worked for Emerson. Her stomach lurched when her gaze shifted to the passenger seat. Hatred filled her, intense and consuming. In her entire life, she'd never had the urge to kill anyone, but she was close to it now. Given the perfect opportunity, could she murder Edward Emerson? Best that the opportunity not arise.

A light touch on her shoulder had her jumping, startled. Jake leaned close and whispered in her ear, "He's not worth your anger."

Had she been that transparent? It scared her a little to realize how easily Jake read her. She'd always been very good at concealing her emotions. Pushing the feelings away, she concentrated on the task before them. "Let's do it."

He nodded and led the way through the darkness to Emerson's home. She showed him the spot where she'd climbed the privacy fence.

Jake went over first, checking for any sound or movement that would indicate someone had remained at the house. Seeing nothing, he motioned for Rebecca to follow him. She scrambled over the wall and pointed toward the kitchen door. The porch light was still out. Either no one had noticed, or they hadn't bothered to turn it on this time.

Exactly as before, Rebecca took the lock picks from her pocket. Manipulating the mechanism was even easier this time. The lock clicked. She tested the knob, turning it just enough to know that it was free.

Her hand still on the door, she turned to look at Jake. His eyes were flat, cold, devoid of any flicker other than total concentration on the job ahead of him. She drew a breath and calmed her nerves. "Thirty seconds. Wait here."

His eyes narrowed, he looked from her hand on the doorknob to her face. Steely. Determined. Ready. He nodded briefly. "Go."

Rebecca turned the knob and hurried into the kitchen, retracing the path she'd taken the week before. Again her steps were sure. Again her fingers flew over the device. Again she succeeded with seconds to spare. But this time, as soon as she put the control box back together, she turned toward the door to alert Jake.

He strode into the room, filling it with his presence and cocked his head to one side, listening, just as she had done. Satisfied that no one remained in the house, he motioned for her to lead the way.

She went toward the stairs and he followed. Once inside the room, he dropped his pack against the wall near the spot where she moved the portrait to reveal the safe.

Just as he'd speculated, it was a brand-new model, impossible to crack with conventional methods. Still, he could try. Give the lady her money's worth. He pulled a stethoscope and surgeon's gloves from his pack. Aware that she watched his every move, he wiggled his fingers into the gloves and put the instrument to his ears.

With one part of her mind listening for any sounds downstairs, Rebecca watched Jake place the chest piece against the door and slowly turn the dial. Adrenaline rushed through her, threatening the cool detachment she'd enforced on her will. Soon she would hold the diamond in her hand. Soon she'd have her revenge.

Long quiet seconds grew, expanded as Jake turned and turned the dial. Rebecca shifted from one foot to the other, impatient, almost urging him to hurry when she knew the task required intense concentration.

Finally he pulled the instrument from his ears and let it dangle around his neck. She watched as he picked up his bag and rummaged through it. She could no longer keep silent when he pulled out a small battery with wires dangling and a packet of some unknown substance. Her stomach jumped. She'd watched enough spy movies to know what this was. She grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?"

He ignored her hand and kept digging in the bag. "You want the safe open or not?"

"I want it open, not blasted to smithereens."

"What difference does it make?" He shot her a brief glance then turned his attention to fiddling with the wires. "Same end result."

Her hand was still on his arm. She gave it a jerk to make him look at her. "You can't do it this way! I don't want him to know anyone was here. I don't want to leave any evidence behind."

"Then what do you suggest, doll?"

"You said you know how to crack a safe!"

"No, you said I know how to crack a safe. And I do. Unless it's a newer model." He pointed with the device, wires dangling. "Like this one."

She wanted to punch him. Instead she let go of his arm and heaved a sigh of exasperation. "Why did I bother to bring you along?"

Carefully replacing everything in his bag, he grinned. "Because you enjoy my company?"

"I don't believe this!" She shoved him away from the safe. "Get out of my way!"

"Careful, doll. You're starting to show some emotion."

She glared at him, at the mocking grin on his face and wished for a way to kill him without getting caught. No, killing was too good for him. Ignore him, she told herself and turned her complete attention to the safe. She knew the numbers her mother had given her had to be close to the combination. It was a place to start.

With his backpack slung over one shoulder, Jake stepped back and watched her move the dial. This could work. Given her aversion to the explosives, it was the only option left. She bit her bottom lip as she tried the combination. Most of the time, she kept her emotions stashed behind her ultra cool façade. But there were moments, he noticed, when the intensity got the best of her.

When the combination failed, she cursed low and tried again. Watching her, he felt a fist tighten in his gut. He wanted her. That was nothing new. She was a beautiful woman. Who wouldn't want her? What made him uncomfortable was that it wasn't her beauty that attracted him. It was her spirit.

She was like him. He didn't much care for the comparison, but there it was. They were both hiding behind false fronts. Both wounded. Both holding Edward Emerson responsible.

The difference was that she wanted to do something about her wrongs. He just wanted to wallow in his. Precisely why he shouldn't be here at this moment, but here he was. In the home of the man who had ruined him.

Emerson may have been the catalyst, suggested the nagging voice of reason. But you own the responsibility for the ruining. God, how he hated that voice. Lately, though, it had been getting louder and louder.

A disappointed groan from Rebecca drew him back to the safe. "Try again," he urged softly. "You have to be close."

She flicked her eyes toward him for a second, then went back to work. He watched her gloved fingers on the dial, silently pulling for her success. He wanted her to win this battle. He wanted her to get what she came for. Because he didn't want her to wind up bitter and useless. Like him.

Impatience was nothing new to her. Giving in to it was. She took a deep breath and tried again, altering the first number one digit. Her hands were steady as she tried again and again, changing the numbers each time.

Aware that Jake watched her, she heard him breathing near her ear. That alone would be enough to unsettle her were she not so bent on opening the safe. When her latest attempt failed, she let out a sigh.

"Again," he whispered.

She lowered her hand and shook it, wanting to remove the glove that seemed to be tightening on her skin. But she knew that was out of the question. She looked at Jake and found a surprising encouragement in his eyes. Maybe he felt guilty for not being able to open the safe.

She turned away. More likely he was worried about the balance of his fee. Technically, she shouldn't have to pay him since he hadn't opened the safe. She raised her tired fingers to the dial and tried another combination. And another. And another.

Frustration was starting to claw at her steady nerves. The silence in the house, the threat of being caught, the huge man standing over her shoulder all began to wear on the layers of control she kept tightly locked on her reactions. Maybe this was futile. What was it going to prove anyway? It was just a diamond. Not even the largest or most valuable one in existence.

But it was hers. She thought of her mother's hysterical tears that night. She thought of the sad faded roses on her once beautiful nightgown. She thought of Emerson's ruthless unconcern. Again she spun the dial.

So quiet she almost missed it, there was a soft click when she reached the last number. A tremble skittered through her body. Jake laid a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Easy."

Nodding an acknowledgement, she slowly moved her hand from the dial to clutch the handle. A gentle tug and the door was open. Now she had to clamp down hard on impatience. Now the prize was inches away.

A sheaf of papers lay on top of the small safe's contents. She lifted them out and handed them to Jake. A stack of cash sat beside a rolled-up velvet cloth. Bypassing the money—an awesome amount by appearance—she took out the velvet cloth and placed it on the nearby desk.

Jake stepped beside her as she slowly pulled the laces and unrolled the cloth, carefully spreading it on the desktop. With a cursory glance, a bitter sickness filled her. She looked up at Jake. "It isn't here."

"You're sure?" He leaned over and sorted through the sparkling items. There was a man's ruby ring, several heavy gold chains and an ornate wedding band. But there was no diamond of any size.

He looked at her, expecting to find her near tears and found instead a dangerous fury heating her eyes. "He's fenced it already, the bastard."

"He couldn't have."

She banged her fist on the desk, making pieces of jewelry leap. "Damn it!"

Jake had an overwhelming urge to take her in his arms and offer comfort. Bad idea, he thought. Very bad idea. Although the frustration shaking her body was something he particularly understood. "Has to be here somewhere," he said as he rolled up the cloth and tied it the way they'd found it. "Maybe if we—"

The bang of a door stopped him. They both stood as if frozen, too stunned to move. Emerson couldn't be coming home already. Shock wasted valuable seconds of escape time. Rebecca recovered first and grabbed the jewelry from Jake's hand, shoving it back in the safe. He replaced the papers and closed the door, then swung the portrait into place.

Rebecca was already headed for the terrace when he turned around, aware of the sound of footsteps downstairs. He grabbed his backpack and dashed to the doors, not taking the time to close them behind him.

They scrambled over the railing together. Jake dropped first and looked up to catch Rebecca, but she was already on the way down. He sprinted toward the fence, Rebecca scant paces behind him. Thinking they'd get out faster if he went over first then pulled her up behind him, he leaped toward the fence.

"Hey!" A voice came from across the lawn. The person in the house had spotted them. Jake heard Rebecca's ragged breath behind him and worked faster to get over the fence.

"Stop!"

The voice was closer now. Half sitting on top of the fence, Jake turned and thrust his arm down to grab Rebecca and pull her up. The man was almost upon her. She reached for Jake with one hand as she dug her foot into the break in the gate. He caught her, locked his fingers around her wrist and yanked. She came up about six inches before the man reached her and wrapped beefy arms around her waist.

Rebecca screamed and kicked against the man who held her. Jake's fingers, still gloved, were slipping on her wrist. It was a tug-of-war with her as the rope and Jake was losing. She would not be captured by this thug who worked for Emerson! Furiously she fought against him, but he was too strong. With one hard yank, he pulled her free with such force that Jake fell backward to the street side of the fence. She heard the thud when he hit the ground. Either he was injured beyond moving or he was already halfway to the car.

He would leave her there, the coward! Desert her in the middle of the night with a burly man who reeked of garlic and onions. The fear of that had her kicking and fighting to get free.

"Fight like a wildcat, don't you, babe?" he said as she struggled against his arms around her. "Why don't you calm down and let's see if we can't straighten this out?"

Straighten this out! The sound of that made her shiver, thinking his plans for her might include something worse than turning her over to the police. She stopped

wrestling with him long enough to analyze her options. Where the hell was Jake? If he didn't come back to help her, he better be dead.

The thug still held her, but he turned her around to face him. "What are you and your boyfriend up to?"

She met his gaze and then looked quickly away. Assuming she got out of this, she didn't want him to be able to describe her eyes.

"Not talking, eh?" He turned her sideways and prodded her toward the house with a death grip on her upper arm. "Looks like your boyfriend left you for me. Might as well go along with it, babe."

That thought sickened her. Looking over her shoulder, she scanned the yard for Jake, but there was no sign of him, no sounds. He wasn't coming back for her.

She dragged her feet in the dewy grass, hoping to prolong whatever he had in store for her until she came up with an opportunity to break free. A solid kick to his crotch would be desirable, but she wasn't in the right position to deliver it effectively. Whatever she did to this man had to put him down. Anything less would only make him angry. And anger was dangerous.

Jerking on her arm, he pulled her toward glass doors open at the back of the house. He must have seen them as they jumped from the balcony and pursued them through that opening. His fingers bit into her flesh, making her wince. She had no time to be afraid. All she could think of was finding something to use as a weapon.

Lacy curtains fluttered beside the open doorway. With a grunt he shoved her into the house. His fingers loosening, she seized the moment to pull away. She spun quickly and aimed her heavy sneaker at his most vulnerable spot. The breath whooshed out of him as pain contorted his features. Grabbing the tender area, he fell over backward.

Onto Jake.

There was a scramble of arms and legs as Jake fought to get up. The man on the floor groaned miserably. Rebecca didn't wait around to see how quickly he would recover. She dashed out the glass doors, not giving a damn whether Jake followed or not.

He did, catching up with her in just a few strides. When they reached the fence, Jake started to vault over first, exactly as he'd done before, intending to turn and pull Rebecca up behind him. She wasn't having it. With a grunted curse, she grabbed him by the waistband of his jeans and jerked. Surprised, he came crashing down on the lawn.

Rebecca smiled sweetly at him as he fought to draw in a breath. "This time, I'm going over first."

Jake didn't have the energy to argue. He also didn't figure the guy in the house would be out long enough for them to dicker over it. Resisting the urge to put his hands on her bottom and shove her over the fence, he waited less than patiently until she was on the other side before scaling the wall himself.

As soon as he hit the sidewalk, he took off running, Rebecca matching his stride. He paused just long enough to pick up his pack where he'd stashed it in the bushes. They raced through the streets to his car.

They ran as if pursued – and they might have been – until they reached Jake's car, jerked open the doors and tumbled inside. The engine roared to life in seconds. Then they sped down the street and out of the neighborhood. Rebecca couldn't resist turning around to see whether anyone followed them, but the residential street was quiet. Jake zipped around corners, keeping to back streets, avoiding the main highway and the multitude of stoplights.

She turned back around and righted herself in the front seat as Jake sped through the night to her office. "Slow down," she cautioned him. "We don't want to attract attention."

Jake nodded and settled into a pace within the speed limit until they pulled into her parking lot. When she unlocked the front door, he followed her inside. Pacing, she ripped off her hat and gloves and flung them at a chair in the corner. "If you'd have let me go over the fence first, we would have gotten away!"

He arched a brow. "We did get away."

"But Emerson's thug got a look at us. Now the whole thing is futile. I can never go after the diamond. He'll know it was me."

Jake was glad to see the emotion stirring in her. At least it wasn't bottled up inside like it had been before. "There's no way that guy could ever recognize you again," he said patiently. "Your face is covered in smudges and he couldn't see your hair."

She hoped he was right, but how could she know? Her hair was falling down around her face in long loopy tendrils. Her hands were sweaty and dirty from the flight. Her stomach was tight with the bitterness of disappointment. She wanted a long hot bath and maybe a glass of wine. Most of all, she wanted Jake Crosby out of her way. She stalked into her office and came back with another envelope of money. "I shouldn't pay you, but I'm a woman of my word." She flung the packet at him. "Here's the rest of your money."

Her aim was off, but he managed to snag it. He stood there for a moment, watching her seethe, running a thumb back and forth along the seam of the envelope. He considered refusing the payment. After all, he hadn't opened the safe. But he'd taken the risk, he'd gone along and he was pretty certain she'd be just another victim by now if he hadn't been there to get her out.

He stuffed the cash into his pocket. "What are you going to do now?"

She brushed at her hair with one hand. "I don't know."

"Give it up?"

Her chin came up. "No. Never. Not as long as Emerson lives and breathes. I will recover my mother's diamond. Somehow."

His gaze settled on hers. Blue diamonds. Sparking with the heat of her anger and disappointment. For the space of a heartbeat, for one instant in time, he almost did something nice. He could help her. He knew a lot more about Emerson's world than she did. But no. He wasn't a risk taker anymore.

"Well." He looked her over one more time. A waif in thief's clothing. "See you around, doll."

He turned, pulled open the door, stepped out into the night. Then he stopped. Cursing himself for a fool, he slowly turned back around, one foot in her office, one out the door. She stood in the precise middle of the room, her arms crossed over her chest, hugging herself. Perhaps it was best for both of them if he just left, but first, this one thing. "He has a home in Miami."

Her eyes sparked. "Emerson?"

Jake nodded. "On the intercoastal. Not a bad stop-off point if you're planning to fence a large diamond."

She chewed her bottom lip, a gesture he was beginning to recognize. "I wonder how hard it would be to get inside."

"Probably not hard at all for you." He leaned casually against the doorframe. "But you don't have the numbers for the safe this time."

"Maybe it's an older safe. Maybe it could be cracked."

He held her gaze. "Maybe."

Rebecca thought about the money in her bank account. She wasn't on the verge of bankruptcy, neither could she afford to be frivolous. Exactly how badly did she want this revenge? Very badly. But even if she went to Miami, even if she got inside the house, she couldn't open the safe. She looked at Jake. Would he go with her? And if he would, how much would he charge? Her funds were not infinite.

Reading her thoughts, Jake shook his head. "No. Don't even think about it."

"I'll pay all expenses. Airfare, meals, hotel."

"No."

Damn it, she needed him. She needed his safecracking abilities and she needed the contacts he undoubtedly had in Miami. She knew nothing about fencing jewels. Those were circles in which she'd never traveled, although her father had made some of them famous. "You'd get your shot at Emerson."

"I no longer want my shot at Emerson."

She took a step closer, relaxing now that she had some scrap of a plan in mind. "Why not?" She took another step. "Scared?"

Damn right he was scared. Scared of himself, scared of Emerson, scared of this gorgeous blonde who looked good enough to eat even with charcoal smeared on her face. He took the step inside and let the door close softly behind him. He lifted one hand and settled it against her cheek, rubbing at the smudge with his thumb. "You've never been really scared, have you, doll?"

Something happened to her when his fingers touched her skin. Something she'd never experienced. She wanted this man. She wanted him to go to Miami with her. She wanted him to be her accomplice. And God help her, she wanted him to kiss her senseless right here and now.

Realizing what she'd just admitted to herself, she took a step backward, but his hand slipped behind her neck and held her in place. She looked up at him, into eyes as fluid as whiskey. She saw him wrestle with the awareness himself. He didn't want to go with her, didn't want to indulge this strange attraction, didn't want any part of the whole scenario. He should have kept walking once he'd had the door open. But he hadn't. "Please, Jake," she whispered. "I can't do it alone. Go with me."

His head tilted, moved closer. His eyes left hers to linger on her mouth. Slowly, very slowly, he bent toward her and grazed his lips across hers. "No," he whispered as lightly as he'd touched.

Closing her eyes, she savored the tingle where his fingers caressed her neck. His soft breath blew against her face and his mouth returned to hers. He pressed his lips against hers and she yielded to him. It was a kiss unlike any she'd ever experienced, starting as a tentative touch, then increasing as the pressure built. The tip of his tongue explored lightly and she opened herself to him. Deep sensations long buried sprang to aching life in response. She laid her hand against his chest and felt him tremble beneath her touch.

Scared? Hell, yes, she was scared. She was scared of everything this man made her feel. She was scared of what could happen if she didn't keep her cool. Thinking of that, she pulled back. "You said no."

He nodded. "I still say no."

She didn't know which bothered her more. That he refused to help her, that he'd kissed her, or that she'd enjoyed it. Quietly and efficiently, she stuffed all her reactions to the circumstances into a remote corner of her mind. She took a step backward and this time his hands slid away as if he too realized the folly of catering to this unwelcome attraction.

They stood for a moment, each waiting for the other to speak first. Jake yielded. "Don't go to Miami. The diamond probably isn't there anyway."

"It's the only lead I have."

Reaching behind himself, he grasped the doorknob, welcoming the cold of the metal to counteract the warmth of her soft smooth skin. "It's dangerous."

She shrugged. "I can take care of myself."

"Oh, yeah. I saw that tonight."

She chose not to argue. As much as she thought she'd enjoy a swift punch to knock the arrogance out of him, he was the kind who would fight back. With words. Deadlier than a right hook. "I'm going."

He wouldn't try to talk her out of it. She probably wouldn't listen if he did. And why did he care anyway? Let her run off on this wild goose chase, get caught, try to talk her way out of it. It was her problem. He'd done his job and received his pay. Case closed. Time to move on.

"Well, then." He opened the door, stepped backward. "Be careful."

She was reaching to flip the lock while the door was still swinging shut. Fine. Let him walk out and leave her to handle this alone. Who needed him anyway? She'd opened the safe, hadn't she? This was her problem and she'd take care of it by herself.

She went into the bathroom and grabbed tissues to wipe the black smudges from her face. Glancing in the mirror, she saw the mark of his thumb in the charcoal on her cheek. She stared, remembering the feel of his hand on her skin, the pressure of his lips against hers.

Looking at the woman in the mirror, she couldn't decide who she hated more—Jake for kissing her or herself for letting him. It was a stupid, pointless thing to do. Her fingers trailed restlessly across her cheek, following the pattern left by his.

It would never, never happen again.

* * * * *

Jake drove past the watering hole. A week ago he would have stopped. He would've bought a round for everyone, flush with cash as he was. He would've found some woman to take him home so he could lose himself in her and walk away by dawn. But not tonight.

Tonight he was already intoxicated and it wasn't the kiss from the gorgeous doll. It was the job. The action had been exhilarating, started his blood pumping for the first time in months. He'd forgotten how good this felt, hadn't realized how much he missed it.

The memory of the soft skin and the aching eyes weighed on him as well. But not so much that he had to do anything about it. She was just another leggy blonde in a long parade of leggy blondes through his life. No, tonight it was all about the job. The quest. The chance to right a wrong. There had been a time when he thrived on it. Now here it was again and he welcomed it. Almost to the point of going to Miami with Rebecca.

He turned the old car into his driveway. No, he didn't need the entanglement, so he wouldn't go. But it wouldn't kill him to ask a few questions around town, would it? There must be a few old contacts who would still take his call.

Even as he climbed the stairs to his apartment, he flipped open his cell phone and began scrolling through names.

Chapter Four

Rebecca pushed on the door to the fast-food restaurant and looked around. Not recognizing anyone, she went to the counter and ordered a coffee. The young woman tried valiantly to sell her on the idea of hash browns, but Rebecca resisted. She didn't even want the coffee. She just didn't want to look out of place while she waited.

She slid into a booth and picked up a section of newspaper some breakfaster had left behind. Sports. Just her luck. She already knew the outcome of the football game. She didn't need to analyze it. Still, it gave her something to stare at while she waited for Benny Fortuna.

She hadn't seen her godfather since his most recent incarceration. She prepared herself for how she knew he would look. Thin and sallow, but still the Uncle Benny that she recalled fondly from her youth. Benny Fortuna and Frank Mallory had been childhood friends, scraping out a living from the poverty they'd both been born into. While Frank had the Irish charm that could talk anyone into anything, Benny had the street smarts. He had older brothers who paved the way for a life on the shady side. Benny watched, listened and learned. Together they'd done quite well for themselves, even if it was at the expense of other people. Even if it was on the wrong side of the law. Rebecca could forgive them both that, she supposed. They'd both paid high prices for their transgressions. She'd taken the same talents and turned them into success on the right side.

Fortunately, she didn't have to wait long. Benny slithered into the booth opposite her and eyed the coffee. "You gonna drink that, my girl?"

She slid the steaming cup across the table and watched him drink deeply. Although she thought she'd expected him to look bad, it almost made her gasp to see how thin he was. Benny wasn't a big man to begin with and being such a picky eater, he looked as if prison had just about starved him. She wanted to buy him a huge plate of pancakes and bacon, fatten him up as her grandmother would've said, but she knew he wouldn't take it.

He put down the cup and grinned at her, his pencil-thin moustache looking elfish rather than sinister as she thought he'd probably intended. "How's my girl?" he asked her with a wink.

"I'm good, Uncle Benny." But she had to stop shredding the napkin on the table if she wanted him to believe it. She gave it up and sighed. "I miss my mother."

He covered her delicate hands with his age-roughened ones. "I know you do, baby. I'm so sorry."

She shrugged. "The diamond wasn't there."

Benny's eyes swept the crowd engrossed in their biscuits and sausage. Rebecca glanced around as well. No one seemed to pay any attention to them, but she knew better than to take any chances in public. "I went to visit my friend as we discussed. But the package has been moved."

He nodded. "Thought that might be the case."

Her fingers were shredding the napkin again. "Uncle Benny, you hear things?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Things?"

She took a pen from her purse and pulled a clean napkin from the dispenser. She wrote one word on the napkin and turned it toward Benny.

"No." He shook his head. "You can't go there."

"He has a house there?"

"Yes, but you can't go."

"I could if you went with me."

Benny ran a hand through the threads of hair left on his head. "No, baby. I can't leave the area."

She lifted her brows. "When has that ever stopped you?"

He stretched one leg out from under the booth and jerked his head toward it. She leaned and watched as he lifted his pant leg just enough for her to see the electronic device around his ankle. "Oh, Uncle Benny!" She smiled affectionately. "They finally got wise to you."

A deep red blush climbed up his neck and filled his face. "Yeah."

"So, if I went there..." She tapped the napkin with a polished fingernail. "Who would I talk to?"

"No one." He drank the coffee. "'Cause you aren't going."

"Let's pretend I am. Who would I talk to?"

He shook his head. "I'm not doing this."

"Please, Uncle Benny." She leaned forward across the table and took his hands in hers. "You're the only one left for me, the only one who cares. Please help me. You know how much this means to me."

"Revenge is a bittersweet pill, girl. Don't do this to yourself."

She picked up the napkin with the word "Miami" on it and began shredding it. When she was sure no one could piece it back together, she looked up at him. "I have to. You know that."

He shook his head. Rebecca pulled a clean napkin from the dispenser and pushed it across the table to him. Then she picked up the pen and laid it on top of the napkin. "Please."

He looked long and deep into her eyes, then he sighed and picked up the pen. When he finished writing, he folded the napkin in half and slid it across the table to her. Without looking at it, she stuffed it into her purse. She wanted to throw her arms

around him and hug him, but she knew that would embarrass him. Instead she said simply, "Thank you."

"I hope I don't regret this." He stood up. "Now go to your nice pretty office. Someone in the family has to do an honest day's work."

They walked out to the parking lot together. With her hand on the car door, she paused. "Uncle Benny, how well do you know Jake Crosby?"

"Not much more than I've already told you. Why?"

She thought for a moment, then opened her door. "Never mind."

Benny laid a hand on her arm. "No, girl. No lovers while you play this dangerous game. You know better."

Now it was her turn to blush. She'd meant to ask him what he knew of Jake professionally. How had he zoomed in on a personal relationship instead?

* * * * *

Late in the evening, Rebecca finally got the chance to take the bubble bath she'd been wanting since the second break-in two nights ago. Her nerves were stretched as thin as they could go. There were too many things on her mind and she needed a way to relax. She made the water as hot as she could stand it, piled her hair up on top of her head and stepped into the deep garden tub. She lit a few candles and leaned back, submerged to her chin, listening to the soft strains of the classical music that came from her CD player. One by one, she willed the muscles in her neck and shoulders to let go, let go, but a loud banging on her front door made her jump. Every nerve tightened again.

Her first response was to ignore it. Her corner of the converted warehouse in South Tampa was secure. She'd designed the system herself and had complete faith in her abilities. She knew she was safe, but the banging continued. Ignore it, she told herself. Let the muscles relax. The noise stopped. Good, she thought. Whoever it was had given up and gone away. She sank lower into the sudsy water and closed her eyes.

"Nice bathtub, doll."

Rebecca shrieked and jumped up from the water, then realized that made her naked before Jake, so she dived back under the bubbles. "What the hell do you think you're doing!"

"You didn't answer your door."

"And what do you suppose that means?" She reached for the terry robe on the floor beside the tub. "Turn around!"

Jake obliged and she started to get out of the water, but then she saw him watching her, grinning, in the large mirrors that adorned every wall. She scooped up a handful of bubbly water and threw it at him. "Wait for me in the living room!"

When he retreated from the bathroom into the hallway, she threw on the robe and scurried into her adjoining bedroom through the other door. In scant minutes she

dressed in faded jeans and a soft knit shirt and strode into the living room where Jake was sitting in her favorite chair reading a book he'd taken from her shelves. Her art deco furniture was femininely curved. Jake looked ridiculous on the red velvet chair. He was too male, too raw for this room. It didn't matter. "I don't know whether to ask you first how you got in or why you're here."

He laid the book on the coffee table. "I know a woman who runs a security company. I'm testing systems for her. Yours failed."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Rebecca didn't wait for an answer. She went to the bar in the corner of the room and picked up a crystal decanter. "I'm having a drink. Do you want one?"

He watched the light play on the amber liquid as she poured it into the glass and shook his head. "I seem to have lost my taste for it lately."

She took a sip and leaned against the bar. "How did you get in?"

"Yeah, that would be your first question." He stood up and went to the bar as well, finding a bottle of spring water. "I'm not going to answer it. The second question," he opened the bottle and drank. "That one I'll answer."

She nodded. "Go ahead."

Jake leaned an elbow on the bar, mirroring her. Slowly he lifted a hand and touched her earlobe, rubbing it gently between thumb and forefinger.

Instantly, liquid heat ran through her bloodstream. She looked at him, curious. He held up his fingers to show her the white foam there.

"Bubbles," he said softly.

She fought to ignore the shiver that ran down her spine from his touch. "You came here to wipe the bubbles from my ear?"

"No, but I would have if you'd asked. Seems I'm good at it."

Rebecca wiped at her ear with her hand, then shook her head, letting her hair fall around her shoulders. "Why did you come?"

"I have some information for you."

Her hand tightened around the glass. She willed it to relax. "What is it?"

"I learned the name of a man in Miami who would be the likely go-to for Emerson if he planned to fence the diamond."

"What is it?"

He capped the bottle and set it down. "Marco Vasquez."

She nodded. "I have that name already."

"Good work. Do you have his cell phone number and the name of the club where he likes to go on Saturday night?"

Her eyes widened. Perhaps he could be more valuable than she thought. "No, I don't."

He held up a folded piece of paper. Rebecca reached for it, but he jerked it away. "This is a rough world, doll. Who's going with you?"

"No one. I can do this alone."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"I can ask for directions to the library."

He shook his head. "We won't need the library."

Her eyes brightened and a little bit of hope sparked for the first time since they'd opened the safe. "We?"

"Yeah, I'm going with you. A woman who can't even lock her own front door has no business in the seedier parts of Miami."

"The door wasn't locked! That's how you got in?"

"Too easy, doll. Next time, could be someone who gets into the bathtub with you."

She turned a furious shade of red, but she knew it was possible. She'd been so distracted coming home that she'd forgotten all about arming the system. What an idiot! But at least it meant he hadn't breached her security after all.

He took the scrap of paper and tucked it into his pocket. "We leave at noon tomorrow. I'll drive."

"We're driving?"

"You want an airplane ticket trail? And we can't take your car. It attracts too much attention."

She only had to think about it for a second. He was right, but down Interstate 75 and across Alligator Alley. It would take hours. They had better get used to each other. It was going to be a long trip in a small space. But the prize at the other end of the Alley was worth it.

"Okay." She looked up at him with challenge in her eyes. "Don't be late."

* * * * *

"You really want to dig up your old grudge against Emerson?" Detective Rick Stevens sat across from Jake in the bar they once frequented together. To Jake, he looked not a day older than when they'd been rookies so long ago. He had one of those boyish faces and the good looks that went along with it. Blonde hair, blue eyes, rangy build. He was the quintessential cop. And he loved it.

He hadn't hesitated for a second when Jake had asked him to meet at the bar. It could have been only a week since they'd seen each other, not years. That's how tight the bonds of the force were. Once you've been shot at together, you're pretty much friends for life.

"It's not my grudge this time." Jake tipped back the bottle of beer then set it on the table. "I'm just making some inquiries on behalf of a client."

"And your client's name is..."

"I can't imagine why that's relevant. And you know I wouldn't tell you anyway. Just tell me what you've got on him."

"I think the better question is, what have you got on him?"

Jake shrugged. "Nothing that's against the law really. That's why I wondered what was going on in his drug business. Why hasn't he been busted yet?"

"Slippery. Too good at covering his tracks."

"But you've got somebody on it." Jake knew it was probably true. He let Rick think he knew more than he did. "How good is your case against him?"

Rick looked around the room at the other cops who frequented the hangout on the edge of downtown. Each one was involved in his or her own little drama and didn't appear to be paying attention. He leaned across the table. "We're close. We know where it comes from and we know how it gets here. All we need is when."

Jake leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. "Maybe I can get that piece for you."

"Who do you know?"

"I don't even know who I know yet. But I'm on it."

Jake drained his beer and threw money down on the table. Rising, he clapped his buddy on the shoulder. "I'll be in touch."

All the way home, he examined the feeling that was growing inside him. That little spark of excitement he'd felt after the break-in with Rebecca was beginning to blaze. This was a good feeling. One he'd been without for a long, long time. He had the doll to thank for a lot of things, it seemed.

* * * * *

Rebecca stuffed a change of clothes and a few necessities into a canvas bag and zipped it shut. She hadn't thought to talk to Jake about his plans, but she figured the lighter she traveled the better. When she answered the knock on her door at exactly noon, she saw he'd dressed the same as her. Comfortable jeans, well-worn sneakers, soft tee shirt. It was a long trip. No need to dress up for it.

"What did you pack?" he asked, eyeing her small bag.

"One change of clothes and a toothbrush."

"Good idea, but we'll probably have our best luck at this nightclub I heard about. You got anything that sparkles?"

Did she have anything that sparkles? What kind of girl did he think he was dealing with? She folded her arms across her chest. "Long or short? Formal or semi? Black or festive?"

Jake sighed. He should have known. "How about something that you can wad up and stuff in a canvas bag? I suppose you have shoes to match?"

Chuckling, Rebecca ducked into her bedroom and returned in just a minute with a little black dress that could stand the trip and a pair of strappy black heels with rhinestones across the toes.

Jake took the shoes from her hand and studied the heels. "I hope you don't have to run in these."

"I'm not planning to do any more balcony drops, but you never know."

She added the clothes to the bag and they were off.

Traffic was light on the interstate highway except for the exits around the larger population centers as they headed south along Florida's west coast. They stopped to stretch and gas up before the highway turned east across the Everglades. Conversation had been sparse, but Rebecca had liked it that way. Let him concentrate on his driving and whatever personal demons he sought to exorcise with this trip. She was smart enough to know he did it for himself, not for her. And that was fine. She didn't need any knights in tarnished armor trying to save the day. If he could help, so be it. If not, he better get out of her way.

It was midafternoon when they stopped at the toll booth that marked the entrance to Alligator Alley, the highway that connected Miami to the other side of Florida. The sky was a brilliant cloudless blue. The sea of grass on either side of the road stretched as far as the eye could see. Rebecca had made this trip by car dozens of times and loved it. She couldn't help thinking about the Native Americans who found a way to live in this vast wilderness. She always marveled at the dichotomy of this primitive area so close to the luxury high-rise condos on the beach end of this road.

Feeling at peace from nature's display around them, she leaned back against her seat and looked at Jake. His body looked relaxed as he drove with one arm propped on the open window, the other stretched across the back of the seat, almost touching her shoulder. The light fall breeze ruffled his thick hair as the car sped across the state. He was in complete control, yet appeared to be as lazy as a cat on a sunny porch.

He must have felt her gaze on him. "What you looking at, doll?"

She wasn't going to let that name bother her. He was determined to use it. She was determined to ignore it. "Nothing," she murmured, then shifted in her seat to turn and face him as much so as the seat belt would allow. "No, I'm looking at you. I'm not sure why, but you intrigue me."

He took his eyes from the road long enough to arch a brow at her. "Intrigue?"

"Yes. I can't quite figure out why you're doing this. I've already given you the money and I haven't promised you any more. So it has to be the thing that I figured I could count on when I first came to see you."

A half smile curved his lips. "Your great legs?"

"Thank you, but no."

"What then?"

She squirmed just a bit in her seat. She knew this would cause an argument and it had been so peaceful thus far. Still, they needed this out in the open. Or she did, anyway. "Emerson."

Every muscle in his body tensed. She watched in awe as it happened one by one, little by little. She doubted he was even aware of it. His eyes, which had a moment ago been warm and inviting, were now frosted. She didn't like that emotion in him and wanted it tamed. "Tell me about him."

He ignored her for a moment then said, "Nothing to tell."

She pushed. "That's not what I hear."

He checked the other lane, signaled and passed a slower truck in front of them. "You think you know already. You tell me."

"Okay." If this were the only way she could get it from him, it was a start. "You were a cop, then you had your own detective agency. You worked on some pretty high profile cases in Tampa and gained a reputation."

He nodded. "All that's easy enough to find out."

"Some of your successes had you rubbing shoulders with the movers and shakers in town. Then you went to work for Adwynn. I've never been really sure what that was, other than some kind of high-tech company headquartered in Clearwater. Not too long after that, Adwynn blew up in a drug scandal, among other things. I suppose that's when you lost your job."

"And reputation, self-respect..." he trailed off, not eager to continue the dialogue.

"I know I have the outline of it," she pressed on. "I just don't know how Emerson fits in."

He rolled his shoulders to work out the kinks. "What makes you think he does?"

"Because the sources that led me to you said you had a grudge against him. I assumed it had to do with the Adwynn scandal."

"It did."

Jake looked sideways at her and decided he might as well tell her. Enough to keep her satisfied anyway. He'd rather tell it his way than have her find out a twisted version from someone else. "The guys who started Adwynn were very smart and very young. They developed something that made major changes in the way people use the internet. It was particularly useful for businesses and many of them paid a high price for it. The guys became quite rich almost over night."

He settled into the slower lane while he talked, as if he couldn't concentrate on the high speed and the old story at the same time. "Plenty of people wanted a piece of the pie. That's when they hired me to help them avoid getting ripped off by their own employees along with everyone else in the world."

He fell silent for a few miles and Rebecca left him alone, waiting for his thoughts to come together. "I don't know where the boys met Emerson. Must have been at a party

or a club. They were too young to have so much money. They hadn't even finished college when the business took off."

She could see his eyes growing dark, stormy. It was clear that he had cared about the two young men he'd worked for. Clear too, that he blamed Emerson for what happened to them. "All my years on the street, the time I had the agency, I'd seen it again and again. Drugs destroy people. No one is immune to it. Emerson hooked them up with some high quality cocaine. Soon, that wasn't enough. They were blowing through thousands of dollars a day. Thousands. Toward the end, the executive suite became Party Central."

The sign for a rest area appeared. Jake put on his signal and slowed. "I did what I could, but that wasn't much. People who are addicted to cocaine and heroin don't listen very well."

He pulled into a space and turned off the engine. "Andy Wynn died of a drug overdose. I found him on the floor of his office. Jared went into rehab, but I don't think he's ever been completely right since. The drugs had Emerson's mark all over them and he knew I had evidence. He planted stuff in my car to implicate me." One by one, he relaxed his fingers on the steering wheel and turned to look at her. "My years on the force were the only thing that kept me out of jail. People knew me. They knew I'd been trying to get help for the boys." He opened his car door and put one foot out on the pavement. "That's why I hate Emerson. And I'd kill him if I could. Same as you."

He stepped out and slammed the door. She watched him stalking across the parking lot to the restrooms before she moved. It wasn't until she stood in front of the mirror washing her hands that she saw the tracks of tears smudging her makeup. She hadn't realized that while he was speaking she had cried.

* * * * *

Jake sat on the trunk of the car and waited for her to return from the ladies' room. He hated himself for telling her that story, hated her for getting it out of him. But he supposed it had only been a matter of time. They were kindred spirits in their hatred of Emerson. Each held him responsible for the death of someone they cared about. The difference was her hurt was too new, too raw. Her mother's death had been recent enough that she was still numb to a large part of reality. She still believed she could do something about it. His was older, had more time to roil within him. He'd had more time to realize the futility of trying to make Emerson pay. Still, here he was in the middle of Alligator Alley on what could only be described as a wild goose chase. They weren't going to get to Emerson. They weren't going to find the diamond. They weren't going to achieve any satisfaction for the unnecessary deaths.

He saw her come out of the restroom and watched her walking across the grass toward him. The sun glinted on her golden hair as the October winds lifted it around her face. Just in the way she walked he could see the grief that was in her from the loss of her mother. And that's why he was here. He recognized it in her. And even though

he knew it was fruitless, he wanted to be with her when she tried. How much would it have mattered to him to have someone who understood his rage, his helplessness?

She stood in front of him almost shyly, not at all like her usual bravado. She looked up at him and he saw the evidence of her hasty repair to the smudges around her eyes. She laid a hand on his arm and almost whispered, "I'm sorry."

For what, he wondered. For making him tell her? For feeling his pain? For all the ugliness in the world? It didn't matter. He smiled at her and wiped at the smudges on her cheeks. "It's good that we understand each other. I know how far I can go. I think you do, too."

They got back in the car and headed east. Toward the Atlantic Ocean, Rebecca thought. Toward the enemy. Toward salvation from the misery Emerson had poured over both of them.

As they approached the crisscross of highways at the end of the Alley, Jake chose the lane that led south. "We should find a place to stay for the night, then get ready to go to the club."

"Isn't it early for the club?"

"It is, but we can't sit in the room all night and we should check out the area."

"The room?" Rebecca lifted a brow. "You don't mean we're just getting one room?"

"Relax, doll." He glanced at her while maneuvering in traffic. "We need to blend in like any tourist couple. Two rooms will attract attention."

He was probably right and she trusted him to know his business, just like he left her alone to dismantle the alarm. But one room! She didn't want to sleep in the same room with him, bathe in the same bathroom, brush her teeth in the same mirror. It was too close, too familiar. She was busy trying to forget the trill down her skin from his kiss and he was putting her in a position to think about nothing else. If not worse!

They checked into a relatively nice motel and dropped their bags in the room. There was a small table flanked by two simple chairs. The garish lights in the bathroom cast a fluorescent glow. A wildly tropical print covered the king-sized bed. It wasn't a suite at the Ritz, Rebecca thought, but she'd seen worse.

Jake got dressed first, then stepped outside to look around while she changed into her black dress and freshened up her hair and makeup. She sat down on the bed to buckle the straps of the high-heeled shoes around her ankles. He rapped lightly on the door, then opened it slowly just as she bent to fasten the second shoe.

She heard him exhale a long, low breath. And when she looked up his eyes were riveted on her. "Wow," he said.

She stood up and looked in the mirror, smoothing down the folds of the slightly flounced hemline. The skirt hit her just at knee level and showed off the shape of her legs. Studying her reflection, she adjusted the tiny spaghetti straps that held the deep vee of the bodice in place. She'd piled her hair up high and secured it with a mahogany clip. As she fussed with wisps of hair that sprang free, she met Jake's eyes in the mirror.

Hunger. It was in his expression, in his stance. He wanted her. The awareness of it trembled through her. No, she told herself. It was dangerous. They were brought together for a mutual purpose, but they had absolutely nothing in common beyond that. Even though they shared a room, they would not share a bed. Even if he did look amazingly good in his black dress pants and crisp white shirt.

"Don't look at me like that."

He stepped closer behind her, meeting her brilliant blue gaze in the mirror. "Like what, Rebecca?"

It was the first time he'd said her name. She was surprised to discover how much it pleased her to hear it in his rich deep voice. Her gaze never wavered, meeting his bravado head-on. "Like you're a starving man and I'm the complimentary buffet."

He stepped closer. Close enough that she could smell the soap and aftershave he'd used just moments before. Close enough that if she leaned back just barely she would be in his arms. He raised his hands to her shoulders. "And you're not hungry?"

His hands were warm against her skin, but the sight of his dark tanned fingers against her pale white shoulders aroused her as well. She stared into the mirror, watching him gently and ever so slightly move his fingers across her skin. She raised her gaze to his eyes and saw how intently he watched her. Testing her? "No," she said forcefully. "Not hungry at all."

He bent his head and kissed her just lightly on the side of her neck. So light, it might have been a butterfly's wings. She could do nothing to stop the shiver that skidded across her skin and settled in the pit of her stomach. Raising his head, he met her gaze in the mirror and dropped his hands from her. "No." He took a step backward. "I didn't think so."

The extra space gave her the chance to get away. She moved toward the bed and picked up a small black purse. "We should be going."

Jake looked at his watch. "It's early."

She threw a light wrap around her shoulders. "It is, but we have to find the place, scout out the area, make sure we know what we're doing." And she wanted to be free of the confining space where he was too close, too tempting.

As if he felt the same, Jake nodded and picked up the keys.

* * * * *

Jake had spent some time in Miami, but it had been a few years. She was right that they needed to be sure they were familiar with their surroundings. He drove through the streets he recognized, noting the changes. But half his mind was on the feel of her skin and the look in her eyes.

She was absolutely right to rebuff him. They were not at all suited to each other. She was a gorgeous, successful businesswoman. He was a washed-up, down-and-out

nobody. She had hired him to help her right a wrong and that was the kind of thing he'd been good at. There was nothing else to it and shouldn't be.

But he'd seen her eyes widen in reaction when he'd touched her. He'd tasted her skin and he wanted more of it. She was right, he was starving. And it had been a very long time since he'd even had an appetite. As sure as he was that they were wrong for each other, he was equally sure they would be great together. All that fire lay inside her, just waiting for the spark he knew he could ignite.

When they came to a red light, he turned to study her. She sat perfectly erect, staring ahead. The chatty animation he'd found in her on the trip down the highway had left now. She was on the job and she was ready. But he could just imagine the inner dialogue. She was chiding herself for reacting to him. He was sure of it.

He meant to reach across the small space of the front seat to touch her cheek, just briefly, but the light changed and he thought better of it. No matter how badly he wanted her—and right now he was aching for her—they were both better off ignoring it. If not forever, at least for the duration of this mission. He needed a clear head and sharp eyes. And so did she.

Cruising toward the nightclub, he shoved the desire away and put on his game face. This was not going to be easy. No sense making it harder than it had to be.

Chapter Five

Black and silver. Everything inside the nightclub was dark but for the flashes of silver accessories. A deejay chose the beat that thumped against the walls and reverberated down Rebecca's spine. They had waited long enough for a crowd to gather and it was almost impossible to move around the dance floor. She was glad Jake was clearing the path for her.

They found one seat at the bar. Jake pulled out the chair for Rebecca to sit down. She didn't want to compromise her alertness with alcohol, but they knew they needed to blend in with the crowd. When the drinks arrived, Jake nodded to the bartender. They had discussed it at length. Have one drink, scope out the crowd, then ask about Marco.

They watched the bodies moving to the music, this time a heavy Latin beat. Women in sparkly low-cut dresses whirled around men in tight pants and unbuttoned shirts. Rebecca found her foot tapping to the throb of the bass. She searched the crowd for anyone who might be the one they sought, but she hadn't a clue what to look for. In a minute, Jake leaned in close so she could hear him over the music. "Look over my left shoulder. See the spiral stairs?"

Discreetly, Rebecca let her gaze drift in that direction. A second-story balcony overlooked the dance floor. Tables sat against the railings. Access was by twin spiral staircases on either end of the main room. She nodded. "Now look up at the top of the stairs," Jake continued. "Small table. Man in a red shirt." She nodded again. "That's our guy."

Her eyes widened, she lifted her chin. "How do you know?"

Jake just smiled and took a pull from his glass of whiskey.

"Jake." She put a hand on his arm and pulled his face close to hers, this time she was the one who wanted to be heard. "How do you know?"

"You hired me for the job, doll. Not to give away trade secrets."

Rebecca accepted that answer and settled back in her chair. Let him play his little game. As long as she got the diamond away from Emerson, she didn't care what Jake did.

Except she did care. Despite what she'd been telling herself from the beginning, she wanted to know more about him. Especially since he'd told her his own sorry Emerson story. She wanted to know the man he'd been before his downfall, before he'd let his life lie in ruins around him. She wanted to know why he didn't fight back.

Song followed song with no interruption. People went to the dance floor, others sat down. The lights flashed around the room in time to the music. The later it got, the

larger the crowd until Rebecca didn't see how they would squeeze one more person into the club.

The bartender came by and inclined his head in question. "Another round," Jake said. He laid a fifty dollar bill on the bar. "Wasn't that Marco Vasquez I saw going up the stairs a few minutes ago?"

"Who?"

Jake pulled out a second fifty and laid it precisely on top of the first one. "Marco Vasquez. Red shirt? Top of the stairs?"

The bartender laid his hand on top of the money and palmed it into his vest pocket. His eyes flicked for a second toward the table on the balcony then back to Jake. He nodded almost imperceptibly and walked off to fix the drinks. Jake leaned his head close to Rebecca's ear. "See the stairs on the other end of the room? It looks like you can go up that staircase, walk the length of the balcony and come down these right here."

Rebecca followed his gaze and nodded.

"We need to know how many people are at the table with him and what they're doing. Can you handle that?"

She slid from the chair and draped her shawl across the back of it. She spoke loud enough to carry over the music. "I'm going to the ladies' room, honey. Don't let any other girl get my chair."

Her heart rate increased as she threaded her way through the crowd, skirting the dance floor as best she could to make it to the stairs on the opposite end of the room. Twice she had to fend off men who wanted to dance with her. Finally, she made it to the duplicate spiral staircase in the back and slowly climbed.

She could see the back of Marco's head as she walked toward his table. The music throbbed from speakers in the corners and she felt the beat along with her pulse. Lights flashed in time, sometimes bathing her in the glow, sometimes leaving her in shadow. She wanted to move slowly to give her more time to observe, but she also wanted to get past without attracting notice.

One table away from her target, she stepped to the side to allow a server with a full tray go past. That gave her a few extra seconds to observe. Quickly, before anyone glanced her way, she stepped back into the aisle and made her way past Marco's table to the top of the stairs.

Jake watched her come down the stairs, guessing she wasn't even aware of the number of heads that turned when she passed. The woman was simply stunning in that slinky black dress. As she moved, it caressed every curve of her body, exactly the way he wanted to caress them with his hands.

Without saying a word, she took her seat and picked up her drink. She took a dainty sip through the straw then looked up at him. "Two guys, probably his flunkies, in some sort of intense conversation. Lots of gold jewelry. A woman, most likely his, looking very bored and actually flirting with a guy at another table."

She crossed her legs, swinging her foot. "The woman's drinking something fruity, red. The two flunkies have beer. He has scotch and soda."

He raised a brow. "How do you know it's scotch and soda?"

She smiled. "I heard the server when she set it on the table."

"Good job." Jake propped one elbow on the bar and leaned as casually as a man on a Saturday night on the town. "Now it's my turn. You sit right here." He took the glass out of her hand and set it on the bar. "And don't drink any more. If I have to drink with him, you'll have to drive."

"Wait!" She grabbed a handful of his shirt. "You aren't going without me!"

He'd known this would be a problem. That's why he hadn't told her before now. "I am going without you."

"Jake, no."

He took her hand from his shirt and held it tightly. "Listen, doll. This guy is not going to talk to a woman. Let me handle this." One by one he released his fingers from around her wrist. "Let me do my job."

She watched him walk away from her. As helpless as it made her feel, she knew he was right. Marco Vasquez wasn't paying attention to his own girlfriend. Why did she think he'd talk business with her? She touched her wrist where she still felt the grip of Jake's strong fingers. Damn him for always being right. And damn him even more for making her feel...what? What was it she wanted to define? How Jake made her feel? That was easy. He made her feel like a doll, like the sexy blonde in a hard-boiled detective movie from the Thirties. And a part of her liked it.

It almost made her wish to put on bright red lipstick and nylons with seams up the back. Fortunately, a more reasonable part of her realized that was a foolish fantasy. They were here to do a job. She had hired him, or he wouldn't be with her at all. They would get the diamond, go back to Tampa and that was that. So she would be smart to ignore these childish reactions to the man and get on with things.

At last she saw him coming back down the stairs, his expression unreadable. He wasn't smiling, but that didn't mean anything. She waited impatiently for him to reach her chair. He picked up the drink he'd left on the bar and took a sip. "Let's go."

Rebecca knew better than to ask too many questions in the crowded nightclub. She didn't speak to him until after the valet had handed over the car. Once inside, she turned to face him. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Jake glanced into the rearview mirror. "He said he didn't know anything about a diamond."

"Do you believe him?"

"No."

"Why not?" she asked but before he could answer, she slammed against the car door as he took a corner very fast.

He glanced again at the mirror and cursed. "Because someone's following us."

Adrenaline shot through her system. "Who?" She turned to look out the back window.

"Don't look!" Jake shouted as he took another corner almost on two wheels. The I-95 on-ramp was just ahead. He floored the old car and shot up the ramp. Rebecca held tight and helped him look for merging vehicles as he started a fast weave in and out of traffic. In the side mirror, she saw a black BMW hot on their tail. He maneuvered between cars and managed to put a truck between them and the chase car. When they came up on an exit, he took a chance and gunned it going down the ramp. The lights were timed perfectly. Jake slid through the intersection on yellow. Before the BMW could reach them, the light was red and the cross traffic was flowing.

Jake zipped down one side street after another, first left, then right, all in an attempt to keep the BMW from running up on them. He didn't know who was chasing and he didn't especially want to find out when they were vulnerable. If they were going to have a confrontation, he needed to know more about the opponent first.

When they finally came to the motel, Jake sped around to the back and cut the engine. Rebecca let her hands relax. She hadn't realized how tense she was until they came to a stop in the shadows behind the complex.

They walked to their motel room, keeping a sharp eye out for whoever had been on the chase. Rebecca waited until they were safely inside to ask the questions she'd been dying to voice since the chase began. She sank into a chair and kicked off her shoes. "Who was that?"

"I don't know." Jake took off his dress shirt and dug a tee shirt out of the bag. "But I have a pretty good guess that it was one of Marco's goons."

"What did he tell you?"

"Nothing. Not only did he not know about your diamond, he had no idea why I would be asking him about it. He was quite sure I'd confused him with someone else. He knew nothing about gems."

"But he was lying."

"Of course he was lying. Why else would he send someone after us?"

She was so disappointed she didn't know what to say. She hadn't expected to hold the diamond in her hand tonight, but she hadn't expected a dead-end either. "Now what?"

Jake pulled the belt from his pants. "Now we sleep."

Dejected, Rebecca went into the bathroom to change her clothes. She scrubbed the makeup from her face, brushed her teeth and put on a pajama set of shorts and tee shirt.

When she went back out, Jake was lying in the bed, a sheet pulled up to his waist. She wondered what he was wearing beneath the covers, then she decided she didn't want to know.

"Come on, doll." He patted the far side of the bed. "I won't hurt you. And we need to sleep. Who knows when we'll have to dodge another tail."

He was right. They were two people with a job to do and they had to sleep. To be prissy about the sleeping arrangement would be silly. She walked around to the other side and pulled back the covers. She got in as close to the edge as she could without falling off and turned to look at him. It really was a big bed and he wasn't very close. Still, she couldn't believe they were doing something as intimate as sleeping in the same bed.

He reached up with one hand and turned off the light. One thin beam filtered in through the curtains from the sentinel light in the parking lot. They were close enough to the highway to hear the big rigs grinding past. There was the occasional slam of a car door in the parking lot. Rebecca turned on her side, away from him.

Jake couldn't sleep. There was just enough light in the room to outline the slope of her shoulders, the curve of her hip beneath the stark white sheets. And he could smell her. The exotic tangle of perfume. The fresh clean soap. Even the minty toothpaste. He lay very still and listened to her breath, even and shallow, but he didn't think she was asleep. Too much had happened tonight for either of them to relax that easily. He knew Marco had lied and maybe he didn't blame him. Why should he give up everything to a man he'd never seen before? There had been a flash of recognition in his eyes when Jake had dropped the name of the man who'd put him on this trail, but still Marco held back. He'd sent his goon, Jake figured, to try to find out more about them, who they were, why they were asking. But he hadn't been comfortable letting anyone stay on their tail when he had Rebecca to protect. If he'd been alone, he'd have let the guy catch him at least long enough to find out who he was, why he was following. But something had happened to him in the past couple of days. He'd thought of Rebecca as a nice chunk of revenue, an easy job that commanded a high price. And a welcome change from chasing philandering husbands. With the added bonus of getting something on Emerson.

But now. Now he knew her. He knew her character and her intelligence. He knew her quick smile and her quicker wit. He knew her disappointment and hurt. And more than anything else they might do on this wild goose chase, he had to protect her.

Maybe it was a shot the fates had given him to make himself real again, make him feel worthwhile. Everything happens for a reason, he'd always thought. There was a reason why this strong yet strangely fragile blonde had walked into his life. Damn if he was going to let anything happen to her.

While he lay there thinking about her, Rebecca inhaled deeply and let her breath out on a long, sad sigh. He was sure she didn't even realize she'd done it. Very carefully, he reached a hand across the sheet and touched her hair. "It's okay," he whispered. "We aren't out yet."

Rebecca dared not move. She wanted his hands on her as desperately as she knew the folly that would be. Their failure tonight had her close to tears. She didn't want him to see that weakness in her. She took a breath before she tried to speak. "You have ideas?"

She felt his fingers stroking her hair. "I always have ideas. Go to sleep."

She came close, oh so close to turning over. She knew how his lips would taste. She knew his hands could make her tremble. She knew his body hungered for her. She wanted him, he wanted her. But it was more entanglement than she could stand. Her grief was still fresh. Her rage was still burning. She didn't think she could give herself to anyone right now. It would be foolish to try.

Somehow, they managed to sleep. The pale pinkness of first light peaked around the dark curtains when Jake opened his eyes. He knew at once where he was and why, but it took him a moment to recognize all the sensations as he came gradually to awareness. He vaguely remembered Rebecca's being disappointed last night, he remembered a small attempt to comfort her. He didn't remember taking her into his arms and shielding her against his body, but there she was.

Sometime during the night, she'd flung an arm across his chest and snuggled against his shoulder. Her blonde hair streamed across his torso and he had one arm around her. He also noticed that her nearness had created a very predictable response in him while he slept, one she'd be none too pleased to wake up with, even if she was the one who had instigated it.

While he debated the best way to get out of this predicament, he couldn't seem to stop himself from running his fingers lightly across her arm, stroking gently, hoping not to wake her.

Nice try.

Rebecca was sure she was dreaming. In this dream, she was held close by some strong, muscular man. And while she knew she didn't need a man to help her through life, it was nice to succumb to his strength and power, just for the duration of a dream. She inhaled deeply and was steeped in the woodsy male scent of him. Her hand lay against solid muscle mass and her arm tingled where he lightly brushed his fingertips across her skin.

Ever so slightly, the line between waking and sleeping blurred as she became aware of the sunlight flirting around the edge of the curtains. She frowned, remembering that she wasn't at home, but a bit disoriented because the male still held her. Then her eyes flew open and she scrambled to the far side of the bed, clutching the sheets around her. "What are you doing?" she demanded in a voice as haughty as the Queen of Hearts, chastising Alice for a misstep in Wonderland.

Jake couldn't help himself. He laughed. "Unfortunately, I didn't do anything." He struggled to keep a straight face. "What did you want me to do?"

Rebecca threw a pillow at him and stalked into the bathroom. Staring at herself in the mirror, she splashed water on her face, but it did nothing to reduce the red flames in her cheeks. It had been a natural reaction to blame it on Jake, but she knew she was the one who had done the snuggling. It was too obvious in the way she draped herself across his body and the very pleasant dream she'd been enchanted with.

This had to stop. She had become so jittery with his very sexual presence that she'd all but lost sight of their purpose. The trip to the nightclub had been almost like a date. The high-speed chase after had done nothing to cool the rush she'd felt with him.

And the sexuality had been there from the beginning. Even at their very first encounter in his office, there had been something sizzling between them. They both knew it. They both had worked to ignore it. It didn't help that the circumstances of their quest kept putting them in more and more compromising situations. Jake was perfectly right that it was best for them to share a motel room. But it wasn't best to wake up wrapped around his body.

She stepped into the shower and let the cool water run all over her, hoping it would stun her senses back to reality.

She dried off and shimmied back into the pajama shorts and shirt to go back into the bedroom and face the very male figure while she rooted around in her bag for a fresh pair of jeans and a clean shirt. But when she opened the bathroom door, he wasn't there.

"Jake?" It was absolutely senseless to call his name when she could step across the room in three strides. Odds were he wasn't under the bed. But where could he be? She pulled out her clothes and scrambled into them, a tiny knot of panic growing in her stomach. With every second, her mind conjured scenarios of Jake being wrested away by Marco's thugs. Or, worse yet, some of Emerson's boys, somehow finding out what they were up to and kidnapping Jake to "teach him a lesson".

She paced around the tiny room, running options through her mind and trying to think what to do, when there was a rattle of the doorknob. She gasped and stood back, hastily looking around the room for protection when the door burst open and in walked Jake, juggling two cups of coffee along with his room key.

"Oh, my God, coffee!" She clasped her hands against her chest and all but fell down onto the bed.

"I thought we could use it." Jake handed one cup to her. "But I didn't expect you to be this flustered about it."

She held the warm cup in both hands and stared at him before taking a sip. She felt like an utter fool, but it was good. She needed to realize how dangerous this mission was instead of thinking about kisses and tangled sheets. "When I came out of the shower and you weren't here..."

He grinned, amused. "You thought I'd left you?"

That hadn't occurred to her. It would have been preferable. That would have made her angry instead of scared. "No, I thought someone had taken you."

"But left you in the shower?"

It did seem silly now that he mentioned it. She set the hot coffee on the nightstand to keep him from seeing her hands shake.

"I guess I'm a little bit jumpy."

"I guess you are." He drank deeply from the coffee cup in his hand, his eyes never leaving her. "Do you think you'll be okay while I take a shower?"

She tossed her head, her long hair flying around her shoulders as she struggled to regain her composure. At least she hoped it looked that way to him. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

Later, showered and fed, they sat in a nearby coffee shop with the remnants of breakfast around them, revising their game plan. "I know a guy," Jake began.

Rebecca pushed her plate to the side and propped her elbows on the table, cradling the diner coffee cup in her hands. "A guy?"

"A bit of an underworld character. Probably knows of another fence. Just in case Marco was telling the truth."

"You think he fenced it?"

"I don't know, but I've studied the options." He ticked off the choices on his fingers. "Marco bought it and lied to us. Some other fence bought it. Or Emerson still has it."

Rebecca leaned across the table. "We know it isn't in the house in Tampa. So maybe it's in the house here. We should at least take a look at it."

"We should. And we will." He laid some money on the table for the breakfast bill. "Let's go see a guy I know."

Rebecca felt exhilarated again now that they had an objective. It was her nature to be optimistic, so she imagined this man could help them find her diamond. And if he couldn't, it would certainly narrow the choices until they did find a path that led them to the end of their search.

As she slid into the car, it struck her that they had twice made a fast getaway. And both times, the old car had performed extremely well. "Jake?"

He looked at her. "What?"

She ran a hand across the dashboard, stroking it lightly. "This car isn't as old as it looks, is it?"

"Sure it is."

She shook her head. "It isn't the beat-up old heap it appears to be."

He gave her a boyish grin. "I tinker with it."

"Tinker?"

"Okay." He turned the ignition and revved the engine to life. "I rebuilt the engine. It's kind of an occupational hazard that I sometimes need to move in a hurry." He shrugged. "Had to have the wheels that could do that."

Jake headed for a gas station on the corner. "We're riding on fumes. I should have filled up before we went out last night." He pulled up to the outside pump and opened his door. "Need anything from inside while I'm paying?"

Rebecca shook her head. She had a newfound respect for the old car. Their trip across the Alley had left its mark. "I'll clean the windshield."

Jake strode into the gas station whistling. It had been a long time since he'd felt this good and he knew it had a lot to do with the leggy blonde. As he stood in line to pay, he remembered how good it felt to wake up with Rebecca draped across his body. And how strong it made him feel to know she turned to him for solace.

It was silly, he knew. But maybe this woman and her quest would be his ticket back to a real life. He'd lived in his cave of disappointment and hurt for too long. He knew it was just a beginning, but he was sneaking back to the edge of sunlight. And it felt really good.

Jake paid for the gas and headed outside just as a loud shriek of tires echoed around the quiet morning. He looked in that direction just in time to see a black BMW speeding away from the intersection.

A fist of fear gripped his stomach and he ran to the car. The front passenger door was open. The squeegee for the windshield lay on the ground beside the right front tire. Her purse was on the front seat. But Rebecca was not there.

His instant reaction was to give chase, but as he looked toward the car again, it had disappeared in the traffic. Even craning his neck he couldn't see a thing. It didn't matter anyway. He had almost no gas. He wouldn't get very far before he was stranded on the side of the road.

Jake forced himself to patience while he pumped the gas into the car. He continued to scan the streets of the nearby intersection for the black BMW, but he knew it was useless. The car was gone. Rebecca was gone.

As he tried to will the gas to pump more quickly into the tank, he mentally blasted himself for two stupid things. He should never have let the car get so low on fuel. He knew better. He had to always be ready and he had let a stupid little detail thwart any action he might take to save Rebecca.

And that was his second mistake. He'd gotten too close, let his feelings for Rebecca make him slack. He'd been so busy remembering the baser feelings of holding her body against him that he'd ceased to pay attention to the really important things. Like keeping her safe.

He knew better. And he would never be able to forgive himself for such incompetent behavior. It didn't matter how good she felt. He may never be able to touch her again. He didn't know why Marco had her, but it couldn't be good. He had to find her and quickly. While he still could.

He couldn't wait any longer. Before he'd even filled up the tank, he slammed the handle back on the pump and jammed the cap back on. He closed Rebecca's car door and jerked open his own. Then he started the car and gunned it. Good thing he'd taken such good care of the engine. He was going to need it today.

Chapter Six

Rebecca lay face down in the backseat of the BMW, a strip of duct tape across her mouth. Everything had happened so quickly, she could hardly comprehend the danger she was in. One moment she'd been humming a tune while she dragged the squeegee across Jake's windshield, the next she was kicking against an unknown assailant who grabbed her from behind.

He'd kept a hand over her mouth until he'd shoved her into the car and slapped the tape across her lips. Meanwhile, a second man drove the car rapidly away from the gas station. And away from Jake, her only hope of rescue.

She'd tried only once to struggle. That had earned her a stinging backhand across the face. She didn't risk it again, knowing she needed to stay alert, to notice every tiny detail she could. If there should be any way to talk to Jake, she had to help him figure out where she was.

They drove rapidly, taking corners too fast, throwing Rebecca around the backseat. With her hands bound behind her, there was little she could do to protect herself from banging against door handles and seat belt hardware. She would be black and blue when they finally reached their destination.

It surprised her to feel anger as her primary emotion before fear. Clearly these were Marco's men. The same ones who sat at the table in the nightclub and chased them through the streets of Miami last night. If Marco wanted to talk to her, all he had to do was ask. If he wanted to know why she was looking for the diamond, she'd be all too happy to tell him.

But she knew this world well enough to know it didn't operate the same as a socialite's tea party.

The two men in the front seat were silent. She finally found a way to wedge her feet against one car door to keep her body from slinging about quite so much. Then the car slowed noticeably.

Since she couldn't see out the window, she could only wait for the car to stop to try to gather some clue as to where they were taking her. And what they were going to do. Finally her initial indignation wore thin allowing fear to creep in.

What were they going to do to her? Even after they found out she was harmless, a grieving daughter trying to locate a stolen heirloom, they couldn't let her go. Kidnapping was a capital crime. They'd get the chair for what they'd already done to her. What did they have to lose at this point? The longer she was facedown in the backseat, the more time she had to think about possible outcomes, each more horrible than the one before.

Finally they stopped. Rough hands grabbed her and pulled her out of the car. The smell told her they were near the water, but when she tried to look around, she was shoved forward, into an old building.

It looked like a deserted office of some sort. A couple of old rusted filing cabinets banked one wall with a scarred desk in the middle. They pushed her through this to a much larger room.

She thought it had probably been a plant for processing seafood at one time. There were long metal tables, now in various stages of disrepair. Machinery sat at the ends of two of the tables, stacks of cardboard next to them. Everything was covered in dust, cobwebs and the telltale droppings of rats.

Marco Vasquez sat on a beat-up armchair near the far corner, talking on his cell phone. When he saw her, he snapped the cell phone shut and motioned for the thugs to bring her to him. They pushed her down onto her knees on the hard concrete floor directly in front of Marco.

Now she had a better chance to look at him than she did last night. He was on the far side of middle age with dark curly hair that was sprinkled liberally with gray. Even though he was dressed casually, he wore a sports coat. That startled her. Was there a gun hiding inside the jacket?

She looked frantically around the room, searching for any route of escape. What were her chances against these three men? So far, she hadn't seen a gun, but she had no doubt there were several in the room with her right now. There was an outside door at the far wall a few yards away. Did she have the courage to try to run even if she could make it to the open door? She didn't know. But maybe she didn't need to. Maybe she could talk her way out of this. If she could talk.

And just as she had that thought, Marco spoke. "The tape."

She braced herself for the sting when one of the thugs grabbed the edge of the tape and ripped it from her mouth. She was proud of herself for not crying out. She thought perhaps she didn't even flinch.

She longed to rub her hands across her mouth, but they were still tied behind her back. She straightened her shoulders and strengthened her spine, then glared across the short distance to Marco, her chin jutting forward in defiance.

He spoke with the precision of one who did not use his native language but who wished to be very accurate. "Who are you?"

She kept her cool. "I'm the woman your thugs have kidnapped."

An insincere smile curved his thin lips ever so slightly. "I do not find you amusing. The sooner you answer my questions, the sooner we can all go home."

He stood and walked all the way around her. Even though she was on her knees, he did not tower over her. He was impeccably dressed down to his Italian loafers, but it did nothing for his battle-scarred face. A thick moustache covered as much as possible, but the man had clearly seen his share of knife points.

"Now I ask you again," he said when he'd circled around her to the front. "Who are you?"

She could think of no reason to conceal her identity. She was sure she wasn't going home once his questions were answered, but what could it hurt to play along? "My name is Rebecca Mallory."

No emotion passed his face. "And your boyfriend?"

She thought to protest the reference, but it was too early to tell how much she could reveal. "Jake Crosby."

"And what is Mr. Crosby's business in Miami?"

Rebecca chewed her bottom lip. This was the man they had hoped would offer a clue to finding the diamond, but the circumstances had changed. Now she was a captive in an abandoned warehouse office. How much did she need to tell him? She wished Jake were with her. His street savvy was far more valuable than her expensive college education. She had nothing to help her now but instinct.

She decided to talk to him as if they shared a platter of claws at Joe's Stone Crab instead of him holding her on her knees in a filthy building. Something moved near the outside doorway, most likely a rat. That was a motivation all on its own.

"I'm the one with business in Miami. Jake came to help me."

His cell phone buzzed. Absently, he pushed the button to silence it. "What would your business be?"

"Someone stole a diamond from me. I was hoping you had seen it."

"Really?" The two thugs giggled until a sharp look from Marco silenced them. "And why would I have seen your diamond?"

He was definitely interested in her story now. His expressionless eyes had sparked. She decided to press what tiny advantage she had. "Please, could you untie my hands? The rope is too tight."

The scratching sound came from near the doorway again. Marco jerked his head toward it. "Fernando! Check to see that we have only the four-legged rats with us now."

As the taller of the two thugs headed toward the sound, Marco turned back to Rebecca. "No, I think we will keep your hands tied just a little bit longer. I apologize for the discomfort, but surely you understand." He sat back down in the beat-up old chair. "Please. Continue."

Rebecca jerked her eyes back to Marco's face. She had seen the one called Fernando exit through the half-open door in the back corner of the building. He had not returned. "I'm sorry." She stalled for time. "What was your question?"

He pounded a fist on the chair. "I grow impatient with you! You know the question. Who told you I might have seen your diamond?"

Her chin trembled, she struggled to calm it. The fear was getting to her, along with the stench and the scurrying of rat feet across the room. She didn't know whether to

give up Benny's name yet, but she couldn't think of another stall. Marco's other thug saved her.

"Boss, Fernando ain't come back yet."

Distracted, Marco glanced in the direction the rat scratching had come from. "Go see where he went."

The second man followed Fernando's path around boxes and piles of trash to the door. Rebecca watched him disappear into the sunlight, then looked back at Marco. She knew where the conversation had stopped, but she waited for him to make her start back up again. He stared at her for a few seconds, then sighed heavily.

He mumbled something that she thought might have been "bumbling fools", then stood up from the chair. "Demetrio!" he called in the direction of the doorway.

Only silence answered him. He frowned and called again, this time with a good bit more force. "Fernando!"

Still no answer.

He turned back to face Rebecca. "You don't suppose your boyfriend has located our little hideout, do you?"

Rebecca desperately hoped so, but she only shrugged.

"Stand up!" he ordered her.

She struggled to stand, but she had been on her knees for a long time and she could not use her hands. Marco did not have the patience to wait for her. He grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet, then positioned her just in front of him. "Call out to him," he hissed into her ear.

"What?" She tried to jerk her arm out of his grip, but he held her tightly.

"Call your boyfriend's name. Tell him you are in here." She felt cold metal against her ribs. "Tell him to come and get you."

Rebecca didn't know when she'd ever felt so helpless. With her hands tight behind her back and Marco's grip about to break the bone in her upper arm, she couldn't move, even without the threat of the gun against her. "Jake," she tried, but it was little more than a whisper.

"Call out to him!" Marco spat the words through gritted teeth as he jerked on her arm.

Despite all the bravado she tried to gather, fear was about to take over. Wasn't it bad enough that she was captive? She had to drag Jake into it too? "Jake!" she called in a voice that was almost natural.

"More," Marco hissed into her ear.

"Jake, I'm in here," she called, her voice growing steadier. "Help me."

Silent seconds ticked past. There was no movement inside or out. Marco jerked her arm again. She didn't want to do this. She didn't want to lure Jake into a trap that they

might never escape. It may be her only hope of survival to have him with her, but she couldn't make herself drag him into this horrible scenario.

"Again!" Marco ordered into her ear.

"Jake?" Her voice broke on the word. He had to be out there. Why didn't he come in? Maybe he wasn't there after all. Maybe the two lackeys had gone for café con leche while the boss wasn't looking. Another jerk on her upper arm was her cue. "Jake! Come and get me!"

"Can't do it, doll."

His voice was as calm as if he'd just ordered a Jack Daniel's on the rocks. To Rebecca, it was as sweet as an angel's song. It would be all right now. Somehow it would be all right. She fought to steady her voice. "Sure you can."

"No, I think I need to keep an eye on my two buddies out here. Come out and help me."

The tip of the gun dug into her ribs. "I can't."

Long moments passed in silence as Rebecca tried to still the trembling that had started to course through her. Finally, Marco grew impatient. "Enough of this stupid game." He cocked the gun. "You have thirty seconds to get him in here."

"Jake! He's got a gun!"

"So do I."

The voice was behind them. They both spun around, but Marco kept his grip on Rebecca. Her eyes widened as she saw a Jake she'd never known. His expression was wild, fierce, with the gun held out in front of him, aimed at Marco.

His hands did not waver, neither did his voice. "Let her go."

Marco smiled. "I don't think so. I think you will put your gun down."

Jake glanced at Rebecca, debating it in his mind. He could possibly take out Marco without Rebecca getting hurt, but then they'd have a dead man on their hands. Not to mention the two thugs who were face down in the grass outside and were likely to come to at any minute.

The two men stared at each other for long seconds. Rebecca could see it in Jake's eyes. He measured it, weighed it, tried to make it work out in their favor, then gave it up. Slowly, very slowly he laid his gun on the floor and kicked it toward Marco.

She knew it cost him to surrender so easily, but it really was the only choice right now. She tried to tell him with her expression that she understood and agreed.

Now Marco released her and pushed her toward Jake, her hands still tied behind her back. He put out a hand to steady her and kept it at her waist. "You're all right?"

She nodded, even though her chin trembled slightly. She took a deep breath and gave him a small smile. "I'm okay."

Keeping his gun trained on them, Marco bent to pick up the piece Jake had kicked away. "Now," he said, straightening, "we finish our little conversation. You two sit

down there," he motioned with the gun to a spot on the floor, "and we behave like civilized people."

Jake and Rebecca sat on the floor where Rebecca had knelt before. Marco perched on the arm of the old chair and set both guns down beside him. Close enough to reach quickly, Jake noted. He wouldn't be able to overpower him.

Both Fernando and Demetrio came sheepishly through the back door, glaring at Jake. Marco looked at them and rolled his eyes. "Keep an eye on our guests," he ordered.

They flanked the old armchair and stood as if guarding the royal palace. Their presence was not threatening, but it did make any physical attempts at escape out of the question. Jake resigned himself to winning this one with his wits and put a reassuring arm around Rebecca.

"You see now that you do not win this battle." Marco looked at Jake. "Your lady will answer my questions finally."

"I'm not his lady." Rebecca jerked away from the protective shelter of Jake's arm and sat up straight. "I am my own person and I have been answering your questions all along. If you wanted to know who we are, you only had to ask us."

Marco nodded. "You have told me your names. Now tell me why you think I might have an interest in your missing diamond."

"Because you're a fence."

His head snapped back as if she'd struck him. "Please! You insult me with such slang. I have been known to place certain items with new owners. Let's not use ugly words."

The reaction was familiar, if unexpected. Her father and his associates had been very particular about describing their work with a more positive spin. It gave her a small measure of comfort to recognize the characteristic that she found in both her father and uncle Benny. "As you say. Have you had occasion to place a large diamond recently?"

He held up a hand. "Not yet. First you tell me how it is you know of me."

She glanced at Jake who only nodded. She turned back to face Marco. "I got your name from Benny Fortuna."

"And how is it you know Benny Fortuna?"

Her arms and shoulders ached. Her hair was in disarray around her face. She longed to use her hands to push it back behind her ears, but she could not. She sighed and looked at her captor. "He's my godfather."

He stared at her, disbelief evident in his expression. So many seconds ticked by that the two thugs shifted impatiently on their feet. Finally, he spoke in a whisper. "The Kendicott Diamond."

It was Jake who answered him. "You have seen it."

But Marco did not look at him. He gestured to Fernando. "Untie her."

"Boss?"

He sent a sharp look to the man. "I said untie her!"

Quickly Fernando stepped behind Rebecca and slid a knife through the bonds that held her. Immediately, she began to rub her wrists. They were bright red and stinging from the tightness. She pushed her hair out of her face, as she'd been longing to do and looked at Marco.

Leaning forward, he took her chin in his hand and looked deeply into her eyes. "You are Becky."

"Obviously." She put both hands on his and pushed him away from her. "I prefer to be called Rebecca. Have you seen my diamond?"

He began to laugh. "We have been chasing each other all over Miami for a day now and it turns out that you are the daughter of Fingers Mallory. I have known of you since you were in diapers."

Rebecca blushed in spite of the impatience that was growing in her. It was clear that they were safe now. He knew that she wasn't a threat. Her relief was not complete however. There were still two guns just at his fingertips.

Jake must have had the same thought. "So since we are old friends here, how about I have my gun back?"

Marco picked up his own weapon and returned it to the holster hidden inside his jacket. Then he picked up Jake's gun and emptied the shells from the chamber before handing it back to him. "Even friends use caution."

Jake nodded and took the weapon.

"Boys," Marco said to the two men. "Wait outside."

Demetrio stepped forward. "Boss, I don't think that's a good idea."

He pinned him with a dark stare. "I do. Now go."

Marco watched the two goons amble out of the building. "Now we can speak freely." He looked at Rebecca. "No, I have not seen your diamond, but I have been approached about it."

Her heart raced. "Emerson?"

Marco nodded. "Not him directly, but one of his men. How does he happen to have it?"

"That's a long story. Let's just say he didn't buy it."

Marco ran a finger across his moustache as he thought. "I'm not certain that it's still available."

Jake spoke up. "Can you find out?"

"Of course." He turned from Jake to Rebecca. "But what of it? You have the money to purchase it?"

Rebecca shook her head. "Leave that to me. Just find out if he still has it. And where he keeps it."

Surprise crossed his face. "You have followed your father's profession?"

Rebecca ran a hand through her tangled hair. "Only if I have to."

"I have inconvenienced you long enough, daughter of my old friend." Marco stood and offered his hand to Rebecca to pull her up. "I will find out where he keeps your diamond. If he still has it."

To avoid the risk of being seen together, they arranged to meet later in an obscure Cuban café. Rebecca got into Jake's car, a bundle of raw emotions as they headed back to the motel. She had so many things to say to Jake, she didn't know where to begin. She started with the obvious. "How did you find me?"

Jake shrugged and concentrated on the traffic. "Cell phone."

"Satellite positioning? How did you get that information?"

"I'm a detective." He glanced at her, at the smudges on her face from the dirty building, at the tangled mass that was her hair, at the fact that she was still alive. The emotion bordered on overwhelming him. "I know a guy."

"Thank goodness." She had the giddy exuberance of someone who has averted disaster. "I'm really glad you found me."

He slowed for traffic, then made a left turn. "It didn't matter. Marco may be a crook, but he's not a murderer. He wasn't going to hurt you."

"True, but we didn't know that at first, did we?"

No. They hadn't known that. The taste of fear was still with him. The helplessness he'd felt when she first disappeared. The frantic tension while he'd waited for Rick to help him pinpoint the location. The terror that he might arrive too late. All of that was still with him.

Along with the knowledge that it was his fault she'd been taken. It was his job to take care of her, to watch out for her, to make sure she got through this ordeal in good shape. And he'd failed. Again.

"No," he answered her finally. "We didn't know."

"So it's a good thing you knew that guy." She brushed at the dirt on her jeans, especially the knees which were filthy from the floor in the abandoned shop. "These were my last clean clothes."

"Me too. I didn't think we'd be here this long."

"Or engaged in such dirty work." She held out her hands, palms up and surveyed the black marks. "Maybe we should go shopping."

"Good idea." Jake searched for a discount department store while Rebecca worked at improving her appearance. In her purse she found a rubber band and hastily tamed her hair into a braid. Further digging in the bag produced a couple of wrinkled tissues which she used to wipe at the dirt on her hands.

Jake pulled the car into a parking lot and found a space. Rebecca was still scrubbing her palms. He watched her for a second, then took the tissues from her. Holding her

chin in one hand, he dabbed at her cheeks. "Seems like I'm always wiping the smudges off your face, doll."

She gripped his hand with both of hers, tension tight in her fingers. "Thank you, Jake. Thank you for coming down here with me, for helping me."

Her eyes were so blue, so earnest. He would never forget the feeling in his chest when he'd stepped into the building and seen her held at gunpoint with her beautiful delicate hands tied behind her back. Now, her luscious lips were only inches away. He knew exactly how soft they would feel, how yielding. He could almost taste her already, but he pulled back. He didn't deserve her. He never would. "I didn't do anything."

"Don't be silly!" She dismissed his protest with a wave of her hand and got out of the car, her mood so light no one would ever guess she'd been kidnapped just hours ago. She was running on adrenaline and banking on Marco to come through for her. Jake followed her into the store, hoping she didn't fall too hard when the euphoria ran out, but promising himself he'd be there to catch her when she did.

* * * * *

Rebecca flitted about the store, picking up jeans and tee shirts. She noticed Jake stayed extremely close to her, even when she browsed through the women's underwear. He let her pick out all of her clothes before moving toward the men's departments. She didn't mind. This was the best she'd felt since her mother died.

She was confident that Marco would get her the information she needed to get her diamond back. And hearing from him that Emerson had offered it for sale confirmed her mother's story. In the back of her mind, a tiny voice had wondered whether Emerson really had the stone. Now she knew for sure. And she would get it back, no matter what she had to do.

Jake picked out a few articles of clothing and they headed for the checkout registers. When she pulled out a credit card, Jake waved it off and took cash from his own wallet instead. Rebecca let him pay rather than make a scene in front of the clerk, but as she thought about it, she realized he'd paid for everything—their drinks at the nightclub, breakfast, gas for the car, even their motel room. Why?

As they walked to the car, she brought it up. "You've paid for everything this whole trip."

He unlocked the trunk of the car and tossed in their bags. "No, you have."

She paused, gripping the door handle and looked at him over the roof of the car. "You're using the twenty thousand I gave you?"

"Right." He got in and slammed his door, leaving her standing in the parking lot.

As he started the engine, she scurried into the passenger seat. "Why?"

"Because unlike certain members of your family, I am not a thief."

That riled her. "How dare you!"

Chuckling, he headed for the motel. "Come on, doll. You don't really think twenty thousand dollars is the going rate for the work I did that night?"

"You certainly had no trouble taking it!"

"And I considered keeping it, but I couldn't prey on your emotions like that. We'll use what we need down here and see how much is left when we get back to Tampa."

Rebecca stared out the windshield. She thought she'd experienced every emotion known to man today, but here was a new one. And this one she couldn't even name. The more time she spent with this man, the more she saw the complexities of him. Had it been only a few days ago that she'd thought him a washed-up, no-good bum? Far from it, he was quite possibly the kindest, most honorable man she'd ever known.

When did he change? Or when did she notice that she'd been wrong about him? When he'd come to her rescue in the abandoned building, gun drawn and eyes blazing? How about last night when he'd tried to comfort her without touching her? Maybe when he told her his Emerson story?

Yes, he was a good man. One of the best, probably.

And what was she going to do about it?

Nothing.

Chapter Seven

The lyrics to the music were in Spanish, but Rebecca felt the sway of the tune as she and Jake walked into the cantina where they had arranged to meet Marco Vasquez. The air was heavy with the succulent aromas of garlic, onions, sausages and peppers.

Ladder-back chairs circled small tables. Ceiling fans stirred the night air. She spotted him in the farthest corner of the dining room, back to the wall. As they made their way between tables, Marco saw them and stood.

He took Rebecca's hand and raised it to his lips, brushing it lightly with a tender kiss. "My sincerest apologies for the way you were treated today on my orders." His gaze rose to meet hers. "You will forgive a scared old man?"

Anything, if it helped her to recover the diamond. But the look in his eyes was so gentle, she wondered how she had ever been afraid. "Of course."

Jake held a chair for her and she sat. With a wave of his hand, Marco had servers at his command. They brought drinks and platters of intriguing food. But Rebecca wanted none of it. From the moment he'd confirmed contact with Emerson, she'd wanted nothing but information about her diamond.

She was past caring about convention and decorum. "You've talked to him?" She leaned across the table to better see him in the subdued light. "He still has my diamond?"

"Relax." He raised the glass the waiter had brought him. "To absent friends."

Both Rebecca and Jake toasted with him and drank. It was a Cuban concoction of rum and crushed mint. Rebecca had never tasted anything quite so refreshing. Coupled with the knowledge that she was closer to the diamond, it buoyed her spirits.

Jake was not as eager to befriend the man who had kidnapped Rebecca. He cut to the business at hand. "You talked to him?"

"I did." He picked up a fried plantain and nibbled. "He still has it, but it is not in Miami. He keeps it at his home in Tampa."

"But it's not in his safe!"

He arched a brow at Rebecca. "I won't ask how you know that."

"It doesn't matter. The good news is he still has it."

The waiter put salads before them on the table. Rebecca had rarely felt less like eating, but she needed the information Marco could give her. He could still be very helpful in obtaining the diamond.

Marco waited until the server had left the table to speak. "What is it you plan to do?"

Jake answered for her. "Arrange a meeting for us. Tell him you have a buyer who wants to see the diamond."

"That is not possible."

"Why?" Rebecca asked.

"You would have me set him up so that you can take the diamond from him? That would end my career. Who would do business with me after that got out?"

Jake leaned in closer. "He's hurt so many people they'd probably throw a party for you."

Marco chuckled. "No, I cannot take such a chance." He looked at Rebecca. "You understand, of course."

She didn't, but she also didn't want to argue with this man on his turf. She'd think of another way. She glanced at Jake who gave her a look that said the same thing. If he wouldn't help, they'd try something else.

Their host continued to make small talk as the meal progressed. He told an anecdote about her father that made them laugh despite their discomfort. As they sipped cups of café con leche, he asked, "How is your mother?"

Rebecca's heart thudded in her chest. Jake put an arm across the back of her chair, as if to protect. Her voice was very small when she spoke. "She died recently."

Sympathy marked his expression. "I'm so sorry. I did not know."

Jake touched her shoulder, ever so lightly. "Tell him."

She turned to Jake, a questioning look on her face. "Tell him," he repeated. "Tell him what happened to your mother."

And so she told it as she had told it to Jake not so long ago. She told him of her mother's blind devotion to Emerson and her belief that he would marry her. Marco interrupted only once. "Forgive me, from time to time I see him about town. The woman on his arm is closer to your age than your mother's."

Rebecca nodded. Then she told him about Emerson's insisting that he keep the diamond for her in his safe. Finally, she told him about the last night of her life.

When she finished, she felt almost as wrung out as if she'd lived through it again, so intense and fresh were the feelings. She picked up her coffee, but her hand shook, so she set it back down on the table. Marco Vasquez reached across the table and laid a hand on hers. He waited until she raised her eyes to meet his. "I will help you."

She dared not feel the hope that began to grow in her. "He will not be allowed to get away with this," he continued. "We will get your diamond back."

Jake couldn't help himself. "And your reputation?"

Marco muttered a mild curse. "You knew I would change my mind. That's why you encouraged her to tell me."

Rebecca couldn't sit still and let the male egos battle it out. "How will we do it?"

"Give me some time to work out a plan. We must have something to bargain with." He stroked the edges of his moustache as he thought. "We need some leverage."

"What should Jake and I do?" Rebecca asked.

"Go back to Tampa. I will call you when I have arranged it."

* * * * *

The drive back to the motel was silent. The events of the day had taken an emotional toll on both of them. Rebecca didn't think she had ever in her life felt so tired, so completely wrung out. It was all she could do to get through the ritual of washing her face and brushing her teeth before she went to bed.

Jake folded his clothes while she was in the bathroom, thinking. He didn't quite know what to make of Marco Vasquez. For certain, he didn't trust him. Maybe he was going to help Rebecca get the diamond, maybe he wasn't. He knew one thing, he would never allow Rebecca to be alone with him. In her eagerness to get her hands on the diamond, she may have allowed her memory to airbrush the events of the morning. For whatever justification he may have thought he had, this man had kidnapped her. That wasn't something Jake would forgive. Ever.

She came out of the bathroom yawning. She wore the same little shorts and tee shirt from last night. He watched her pull back the covers on the king-size bed. No arguments tonight. She just matter-of-factly prepared for bed. No protest. After the things that had happened to her today, what was sleeping with a strange man?

When she bent to fluff her pillow, the shorts rode up her thigh, exposing the ugliest bruise he'd ever seen. "What's that?"

She looked up at him, blue eyes dull with fatigue. "What?"

He walked around the bed to stand before her. Slowly he put his fingertips on the bottom of her shorts and pulled them up. She made no move to protest, but her eyes still held the question.

Without speaking he eased her down onto the bed where she had pulled back the covers. When she reclined against the pillows, he lifted the shorts further. The bruise on her upper thigh was not alone. There was another one on her hipbone. Lifting her shirt exposed two across her belly and another high on her ribs. His fingers skimmed lightly over the damaged flesh. Words could not describe the anger that seethed within him.

She read his eyes and laid a hand on his arm. "It's okay. It doesn't hurt."

Sitting down beside her, he took her hand in his and turned it over. The delicate skin on the inside of her wrist was bright red where the bonds had chafed. He dared not speak. He couldn't trust himself not to say words that would upset her. Instead he slowly lowered his head to place the lightest of kisses on her wrist. He felt her pulse leap against his lips. Her fingers curved against his jaw.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, dark as sapphires in the dim light of the motel lamps. He felt as if he stood on the edge of a cliff about to plunge into the ocean.

They had been building toward this moment from the day they'd met. Every time they were together, the sexuality hummed between them like high-tension wires swaying in a thunderstorm.

Now here she lay nearly naked in a bed they had already shared once. If he were any kind of hero, he would respect the trauma she'd been through today and drop her hand gently onto the bed. But that trauma was the very reason he could not.

When he'd watched the black BMW disappear in traffic, when he'd seen the gun pressed against her ribs, when he'd heard the desperation in her voice, all of the feelings of two years ago were right there on his surface, waiting to explode. But this time it was different. He didn't yet want to name the emotion she stirred in him, but he knew there would come a day when he faced it. For now, he wanted only to worship her body, to celebrate that they were both alive. And to erase all the ugly things that had happened to her today.

A stronger man would leave her alone. He was not that man.

He turned his face into her hand and kissed her palm as lightly and sweetly as he'd brushed her wrist with his lips. Then he lifted his head and looked at her.

Luminous yet dark. Her eyes were filled with what he knew to be desire. She wanted him, if only to reaffirm her own life to herself. He didn't care. He more than wanted her. Touching her, kissing her, having her were as important to him as his next breath. He lowered his head to kiss the bruise on her ribs.

Rebecca sighed and arched against his lips, offering her body to him. She knew there was no turning back now, no denying the attraction. She wanted him, pure and simple. She'd wanted him since the first moment she'd laid eyes on him, all scruffy-haired and rough around the edges. The uptight, prissy woman she'd been would never have admitted it to herself or to him. The one who'd thought her life was ending this morning knew better.

A delicious tingle ran across her skin and banished any thoughts. She only knew that he wanted her and she wanted him. Nothing else mattered.

He tugged the tee shirt higher and exposed her breasts. The sharp intake of his breath told her all she needed to know. If there were consequences, they could sort them out in the morning. She put her hands in his hair and clasped him to her as he teased first one nipple then the other with his tongue.

She squirmed against the sheets with the exquisite pleasure of his mouth on the tight buds. Desire drove through her from the tips of her breasts, down through her taut tummy to the apex of her thighs. Moisture gathered, preparing her body to receive him. But not yet.

Not yet. This had been a long time coming. She wanted it to last for a long time, too. Her fingers played through his thick hair, pulling him to her, lifting his head to join their lips together. He paused, looking down at her. For a second, she thought he was going to speak, but he lowered his mouth to hers.

Sweet heavens, this man could kiss. His lips were both firm and soft at the same time, as they melded with hers. His tongue slipped inside and she opened for him. He tasted dark and delicious, like exotic chocolate or expensive wine. Still kissing, he stretched out beside her, one hand on her waist, the other around her head. His fingers, so strong, stroked lightly, stoking the fire within her. She had never felt so cherished. He touched her as if she were fragile, yet kissed her as if he knew her inner strength.

Suddenly it was imperative that she feel his skin against hers. Her hands found the bottom of his shirt and tugged it over his head. Just as urgently, he followed her lead and then they were skin to skin.

The sensation of the wiry hair on his chest against her aching and swollen nipples was almost more than she could endure. She tugged at the snap on his jeans. He knew what she wanted and made quick work of shedding the rest of his clothes while she did the same.

Naked now, she slipped one leg between his thighs and met the full force of his manhood, rigid and hot. He moaned when the smooth skin of her leg stroked him. She took the moan into her mouth and mimicked the sensation with her tongue.

And then she was ready. She knew it. She wanted him inside her more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. Had she ever felt this way before? This wild, this wanton, this eager to engage in raw animal sex? It had always been candlelight and roses for her. No lumpy bed in a cheap motel. But this man on this day in this bed was all her mind could hold. Earlier he had been her hero, now he would be her lover.

She shifted, pulling him on top of her. He came eagerly, his hand stroking where his manhood would follow. He rose above her. She felt the wetness on the tip of his shaft as he probed gently in her dewy folds. Arching her back, she spread her legs wider to allow him access. He was almost there and she could not wait another second to sheath him within her body, to feel his hardness against her softness, to finish the journey he had begun when he kissed her flesh.

But he didn't move. She looked up at him and saw the storm brewing in his whiskey colored eyes as he hovered over her, not touching now, not even chest to chest. "Jake, what is it?"

He moved off of her, fell to his side next to her and gathered her into his arms. "I'll hurt you."

"No." She smoothed the hair that fell over his forehead. "You won't hurt me."

"You're covered in bruises."

"But they don't hurt and..." She buried her face against his chest.

He put a hand beneath her chin and brought her eyes back to his. "And what?"

She took a deep breath. She had never in her life been so shameless. "I want to feel you inside me."

"Oh and I want to be in there."

"I promise." She enticed him with her leg against his swollen manhood. "I'll tell you if it hurts."

A slow smile spread across his face and he gently rolled her to her back. She felt his strong thigh come between her two slender ones and opened for him again. This time when she felt his tip on the entrance to her body, it was only for a second. He kissed her like he sipped a fine wine, then slid into her.

There were so many sensations she couldn't register all of them at once. She closed her eyes and threw back her head, letting him take control. She lay with her hands on the pillow above her head. He put his hands on hers and tangled their fingers together as he stroked inside her.

Faster and faster, he gained speed as she rose up to meet him. They found the perfect rhythm as her body responded to his. Like the gradual ascent of a roller coaster, the pleasure built inside her and spread throughout her body. At every point where her skin met his, she tingled. Nerve endings burned like wildfire. And then the dive from the top. Her body began to quiver as intense passion washed over her from the top of her head to her toes. She arched with it, rode the crest and felt him plunge into her for a final time. They both cried out with the exquisite release.

Rebecca shuddered as if from aftershocks. He raised his head. "Did I hurt you?"

She felt the smile that eased across her lips without opening her eyes. "If you did, I didn't notice."

He chuckled and rolled to his side as he had before, cradling her next to his heart. Stretching, he wrestled the sheet up from the bottom of the bed and covered both of them, tucking it around her bare shoulder. "Now," he whispered, "you will sleep."

Never, she thought. She would never sleep with him holding her like this. Her entire body would stay in a continuous state of arousal with him this close to her. But he smoothed her hair away from her face and ran strong fingers over the tension in her shoulders in a soothing, circular pattern. It was so relaxing, she felt her body giving way.

Jake knew the moment she succumbed to sleep when the soft sigh of her breath became deep and regular. He held her close and toyed with the emotions that were vying for attention within him. This had been quite a day, from waking up with her in his arms to finding her in the abandoned building to meeting with Vasquez and beginning a plan to get the diamond back. And now here he was with Rebecca in his arms again. But this time, this time it was different. While this morning he'd held a woman who made him lust for her body, now he held a woman who he cared for deeply. One day had done that? No, one day hadn't made him feel that way. Rather, the events of the day had made him acknowledge it, if only to himself. If he were honest, he'd admit that his feelings for her were the reason he'd come on this trip in the first place.

From the moment she'd burst into his life, he'd ached to find the fire beneath that Ice Princess veneer. And here she was, naked and warm in his arms. For most men, that

might be enough. Not for him. Not this woman. What happened when they got back to Tampa? Was this just a road trip for her? She'd had a bad day and he was convenient? He couldn't believe she gave herself that easily, that carelessly. But he doubted that there was room in her life for someone like him. On that troubling thought, he slept.

* * * * *

Rebecca studied Jake's sleeping face, the rugged planes of his jaw, the tiny scar on his chin, the impossibly long dark lashes. He was a very good-looking man, no doubt about that. She was a little overwhelmed at what had happened last night. She didn't for a second regret it, she just wasn't sure what to do with it.

Even before she lost her mother, fitting a man into her life had not been a priority. In the few years since her divorce, she'd dated little, not really eager to get entangled again after that disappointment. She supposed the old phrase, "once bitten, twice shy", applied. Now fate had handed this one to her. What was she going to do about it?

That was a question for another time. Right now she had to think about getting back to Tampa. She eased out of the covers, intent on getting up. She did, after all, still have a business to run. To keep from waking him, she pushed the covers back gently.

Jake had another idea. Without even opening his eyes, he shot out one hand from under the covers to encircle her wrist. "Going somewhere?"

She hadn't even seen it coming. "How did you do that?"

"I'm a detective." He still hadn't opened his eyes as he pulled her to him. "Finely tuned senses." He kissed her on the lips and then looked into her blue eyes. "Good morning, Becky."

She felt the heat rise into her cheeks. "I wondered when I'd get that."

He sat up and plumped pillows to lean against, then pulled her to rest against his heart. Exactly like yesterday morning, except that today, they both enjoyed it. "You don't like it?"

"I liked it when I was five and my dad used it."

"No one else called you Becky?"

"Oh, no." She flipped her long hair over her shoulder, out of the way. "With Mother it was always Rebecca. She thought it was elegant. Dad was the only one who she let get away with Becky."

He saw the dreamy look in her eyes and the slight upturn of her lips. "You adored him."

When she turned her eyes to his, they shone. "I did. He was a lot of fun. The Irish charmer. Mother adored him too. We were a happy family, despite the oddness of his career. When he died, my mother didn't laugh anymore. Until —"

"Until?"

A cold chill ran through her, filling her with a sharp pain, one she'd become accustomed to since her mother's death. "Emerson."

"You knew he was using her."

"Marco wasn't the only one to point it out. Emerson is a wealthy man who travels in exotic circles. Why did he want someone my mother's age?"

He stroked his hand against her cheek, soothing. "He knew about the diamond?"

"Somehow."

The silence grew between them until he spoke gently. "It isn't your fault."

"On some level, I know that. On another, I think I should have been more cautious. I should have tried to keep her away from him." Her next words were in a small voice. "If I'd told her what I thought he was up to, it would've hurt her feelings."

She pushed away from him and sat up on the edge of the bed. Last night had been a beautiful diversion, but she couldn't forget about her reason for being in Miami. She had to get the diamond back, no matter what it cost her. Jake had seduced her into forgetting about it for a time.

Turning her head, she looked at him over her shoulder. "It's Monday. I need to get back to Tampa."

"Okay." He looked at her, fidgeting nervously with the sheet. Something had just happened inside her that had made her very uncomfortable. He didn't know what to do about it. "What's wrong, doll?"

"Nothing." She stood up, wrapping the sheet around her as she headed to the bathroom. "I just have to go, that's all. I have a business to run."

And you don't? Was that the unspoken part of her sentence? Was she already regretting the intimacy with him? Jake didn't want to believe that, but she certainly had pushed him away in a hurry, as if the morning light made her see that she was doing something wrong.

Maybe it was just the helplessness she felt when she remembered her parents. That was an emotion he well understood. If he'd done more, if he'd been more cautious. He'd had two years to dwell on it and he couldn't get past it. She'd only had two weeks.

But her mood didn't improve as they got their things together and headed back across Alligator Alley to the other side of the state. Rebecca stared out the window as they skimmed the edge of the Everglades. She wanted to think that Jake was a good man, that he cared about her for who she was and not what she represented to him. But experience had taught her otherwise.

Greg had loved her, but not enough to stand up to his family. Even her father, who had loved both her and her mother, had not cared enough about them to stay out of trouble. She had been loved, but not enough. Never enough.

She shifted in her seat to look at him. His hands were light on the steering wheel. She studied the long fingers, the veins running across the back. She remembered the

feel of those fingers skimming across her skin and shuddered. Quickly, she turned her head to watch the lazy alligators along the banks of the canal.

Jake knew she'd watched him. From the corner of his eye, he'd seen her expression soften, then harden again in the space of mere seconds. She was fighting her feelings. And right now, she was winning. He didn't know what to do to bring back the woman who'd moved so sensuously against his body just hours before. Maybe he shouldn't even try. For now anyway, he had to let her set the pace. He turned the music up louder and coaxed more speed out of the car.

Finally they reached Tampa. Rebecca thought she'd go crazy if she didn't get out of the small car soon. It wasn't that she didn't like Jake. It was that she liked him far more than she should. And yet, she knew better than to let herself rely on him. Hadn't her life lessons taught her that she could only count on herself?

Jake drove to her loft in the converted building and helped her carry her bag up the stairs to her door, waiting while she worked the locks and disarmed the alarm. She tossed her keys on the entryway table and turned to face him. "Thank you."

He watched her eyes flitting nervously from focal point to focal point, unwilling to light on his. He gave some thought to pressing the issue and making her tell him what she was thinking, what had closed her up inside this cage she'd made for herself, but he decided to give her some space. For now.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he nodded. "You're welcome."

Another couple of awkward seconds passed while they stared at each other across the small space. Jake decided to put them both out of their misery. "I'll call you soon as I hear from Vasquez."

Rebecca nodded and rested a hand on the edge of the door. "That would be great."

"Let me know if you need anything," he said and without waiting for a reply, he turned and bounded down the stairs, before his hands betrayed him by touching her, before his arms worked against his will to draw her close to him.

Back in his car, he almost headed toward a bar on the corner, but he knew that wouldn't help. He wanted clarity, not confusion.

As desperately as he wanted to know what changed her, he suspected it was nothing more complicated than a dose of reality. She was determined to find her lost treasure and he was hired to help her. There was nothing more between them.

The upscale buildings of her neighborhood gave way to the rundown saddened houses of his, a brutal reminder of the differences between them. He wasn't good enough for her social circle and worse, not good enough at his profession to help her.

He'd failed her just like he'd failed the boys. She'd been kidnapped on his watch. Even though he'd been lucky enough to find her, he hadn't saved her. It was her own family history that had set them both free.

Useless. He turned the car into his narrow driveway and sat for a moment before getting out. He knew that when he closed his eyes tonight, he'd see her body before

him. He knew he'd see the bruises. And he would know the marks on her body were just as much his fault as if his hands had made them.

He didn't like this feeling, this helplessness that had been with him since Andy's death. He wasn't going to let it happen again. Whatever roadblocks she threw up, he would skirt. Whatever objections she voiced, he would wear down. As he got out of the car and started up the stairs, he realized that it was more than keeping her safe that was on his mind. It was keeping her in his life.

Chapter Eight

By Saturday, Rebecca had buried herself in her work, spending long hours to catch up all that she'd let slide since her mother's death and trying to bar from her mind any thoughts of Jake.

Most of the time it worked, but more than once a day, she'd be sitting at her desk or eating breakfast or washing her hair and something would trigger a memory. Without warning she'd remember the feel of his hands encircling her wrists above her head while he stroked her. Or her nipples would tighten at the thought of his tongue playing across that sensitive skin.

With effort, she would force it out of her mind. She had important business to take care of, not the least of which was dealing with her mother's home.

She knew that she should sell the modest little house she'd grown up in despite all the common advice not to act quickly after the death of a loved one. The house was of no use to anyone now. There was no reason to burden herself with its upkeep.

But first she had to go through all of her mother's clothing, papers, memorabilia and dispose of it somehow. She did not look forward to that chore. When Ruth Ann offered to help, she welcomed the company. Ruth Ann's boyfriend had a pickup truck, which would be very handy in the late afternoon to haul away all the trash.

By midmorning they'd succeeded in making a mess. It was Rebecca's intention to divide everything into three piles—things she would keep, things she would give to charity and things she would throw away.

Sounded easy in theory. The reality was more complicated.

Ruth Ann set an empty box on the living room floor in front of a built-in shelf. "What about the cats?"

Rebecca looked up from the paperback novels she'd been packing for charity. "The cats."

Ruth Ann took a step backward, tucking a stray dark hair into her ponytail. "There must be a hundred of them."

Rebecca walked to the shelf and picked up a sleek white Siamese cat in shiny ceramic with blue rhinestones for eyes. "She collected them."

"No kidding."

"Most of them were gifts my dad brought her on his various travels." Her voice was wistful as she remembered a time that would never come again.

Gently, Ruth Ann took the cat from her and placed it back on the shelf. "We'll just leave the cats for now. I'm off to the linen closet. Towels for charity?"

"Yes." Rebecca snapped out of the memories surrounding the cats and went back to the books. "All the towels can go."

So it went throughout the day. Cool efficiency occasionally interrupted by poignant remembrance. Rebecca realized that she was avoiding her mother's bedroom, but in the afternoon, she knew she had to move forward and slay that particular dragon because it wasn't going away on its own. Ruth Ann brought boxes and they started with the closet.

"Do you want to keep any of these clothes for yourself?"

Rebecca touched the sleeve of a silk blouse. "No. She was much shorter than me. I couldn't bring myself to wear any of them anyway." She took the blouse from its hanger and started filling a box. "All for charity."

While Rebecca emptied the hangers, Ruth Ann cleared the shelves. It was routine until Ruth Ann came to a hatbox that didn't contain a hat. "Oh, look!"

Rebecca glanced over and saw Ruth Ann holding letters. She smiled, remembering the joy on her mother's face every time the mailman delivered a letter from her father. In the days before email, before cell phones, when long distance calls were a premium, these letters were the only way they knew her father was all right.

The two women sat down on the carpet and looked through the memory box. A dried rose with a ribbon tied around the stem. Photographs showing a much younger Margaret holding a small bouquet standing next to Frank in a suit. Their wedding. And wrapped inside a lacy handkerchief, Frank's wedding ring.

Rebecca slipped it on her finger. "She kept it."

"Of course she did. Hers is probably in here too."

Clutching a handful of pictures, Rebecca felt tears welling in her eyes. "They loved each other so much."

Ruth Ann leaned over and studied the photographs. "They did. Look how he looks at her."

Rebecca knew. She'd seen that look on both their faces hundreds of times. "It didn't matter to her that he wasn't the man her family expected her to choose. He was the one she loved."

She'd felt that way too. Or at least she'd thought she had when she married Greg. All those feelings died when he told her she wasn't a proper wife for a future politician. If the feelings could leave her that quickly, could they ever have been real?

Her cheeks were wet. A good cry had been lurking just beneath her surface all day, but indulging it now would not help her get this task completed. She wiped her tears on her sleeve and gathered up the pictures and letters. "I'll take these home with me," she told Ruth Ann as she replaced the lid on the box. She took the gold wedding band off her finger and slipped it into the pocket of her jeans.

She went back to work on the clothing in the dresser. In a few minutes Ruth Ann left and came back with cold bottles of water for both of them. They sat on the floor side by side, leaning against the bed. "You're a good friend, Ruth Ann."

Ruth Ann stretched her short legs out in front of her. "Yep."

She noted the difference between the diminutive Ruth Ann's legs and her own stretched out on the carpet before them. She thought of the afternoon when Ruth Ann had attempted to block Jake from her office and started giggling.

Ruth Ann set down her water bottle. "What's so funny?"

"I was thinking about you coming after Jake with a stapler last week. He must be two heads taller than you."

"That was before I knew he was a good guy."

Rebecca smiled, then stopped with her water bottle halfway to her lips. "What makes you think he's a good guy?"

"Isn't he?"

An unexpected tremble ran through her at the thought. The way he'd handled himself in the nightclub, the look in his eyes when he'd found her handcuffed, the tenderness in his touch when they drifted off to sleep together. "Yeah." Her voice softened with the memory. "He's a good guy."

And she missed him, had been missing him all week, but she hadn't allowed herself that particular indulgence. Right now, her life was about her mother and the diamond and revenge. Not a sexily disheveled detective with whiskey eyes. She didn't have time for that right now.

The women were interrupted by the arrival of Ruth Ann's boyfriend, Bobby. The afternoon shadows grew long. Rebecca knew she'd used enough of this young couple's weekend. The three of them made quick work of loading the trash into the back of the pickup truck. Then she sent them on their way.

Alone in the house, she surveyed their progress. Still much to be done, but at least they'd made a really good start. She picked up the hatbox containing her mother's treasures and held it tight while she secured the house for the night.

Finally at home, she took a hot shower to wash off the dust and soak the stiff muscles. Dressed in comfortable cotton knit lounging pajamas, she pulled her hair out of the way into a ponytail and secured it with a blue ribbon. She picked up one of her favorite classical CDs and loaded it into the player. While milk heated for hot chocolate, she brought the hatbox to the kitchen and pulled a barstool up to the island.

One by one she removed the items from the box and placed them into neat piles—all the letters here, photographs there, until the entire granite countertop was covered with faded pictures, crushed flowers, crinkled stationery.

She poured the warm milk into a heavy mug and stirred the cocoa. Bringing the mug to her mouth, she blew on it gently, looking over the top at the remnants of her parents' lives.

It didn't seem right that the lives of two warm and vibrant people could be reduced to the scraps that covered one kitchen workspace. But there it was. She picked up a handkerchief and breathed the lingering scent of Chanel, always Margaret's favorite when they had enough money and they often did.

The photo on the top of the pile showed Frank with one of his cars. The polyester clothing of the seventies fit his trim frame as if he were the star at the local disco. And perhaps he was. She knew he loved to dance. In the picture he leaned against the fender of a yellow muscle car, ankles crossed, arms folded, an arrogant smile showing dimples.

She pushed that one aside and picked up the next one. She and her mother sat on rocks beside a rushing stream. She remembered it with a vivid intensity. She was seven years old. They were on vacation in the Smoky Mountains and quite typically they ran out of cash. Frank wanted to go room to room in their hotel. Margaret thought it was too dangerous. It was Rebecca's first awareness that her father was a thief.

She put a hand against her stomach as the same sick feeling she'd had twenty years ago swept through her now. Frank must have won the argument because the next day he'd bought her a large stuffed bear.

She took a long sip of hot chocolate and set the mug down. She'd never really liked that bear.

Quickly she sifted through the rest of the photographs, then pushed them to the side. The letters were drawing her to them. She had seen these photographs all her life, but the letters were an unknown. Even as they pulled her to them, she was a little bit afraid of what she might find there. Would there be disappointments as sharp as that experienced by the seven year old?

Probably not, she decided. What could be left that she didn't already know? Her father was killed trying to escape from a mansion he was attempting to rob. She'd been eighteen, in the spring of her first year in college when that happened. Her mother hid none of the facts from her.

Gingerly, she picked up the first folded letter and began to read. Tears filled her eyes as she finished that one and picked up the next, then the next. These letters were a testament to a man's love for his wife and child. He wrote about missing them, sometimes with a snippet of a poem, a song lyric.

The postmarks were Rome, London, New York, Monte Carlo—wherever rich people played and lived, wherever they kept their jewels. The tears coursed down her cheeks and she allowed the built-up sobs to escape.

Her grief was a thick woolen blanket draped across her shoulders, tucked around her heart. She laid her head on her crossed arms on the counter and cried. She cried for her mother, so recently lost, but she also cried for the happy little family they had been, the husband lost so early, the devoted wife and the little girl who lost her innocence far too early.

She must have sat that way for quite a while because when the music ended, she became aware of insistent pounding on her front door. The staccato rhythm made her think it had been going on for some time.

Puzzled, she headed to the foyer to see who could be so eager to reach her. Just a few steps from the doorway, the pounding stopped and she heard him call out her name.

Two more hard bangs on the door, then, "Rebecca!" in a voice that frightened her with its intensity.

Quickly she turned the locks and slid the chain. Barely had she pulled open the door when he was inside with his hands on her arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Jake." She took a cautious step backward. "What's wrong?"

He gulped in a couple of breaths to calm himself. "I thought—" He touched her cheeks. "You were crying and you wouldn't come to the door. I thought—"

"But you can see there's nothing wrong with me." She gave him a reassuring pat on the arm. "I was crying. Come in. I'll show you why."

She led him to the kitchen and turned on the flame beneath the milk. "You need some hot chocolate."

"I need a shot of whiskey," he muttered as his gaze swept over the hatbox, the photos, the stack of letters. His comprehension of the situation was a relief. Standing in the hallway, able to hear her sobs, unable to get her to the door, any number of scenarios had played through his mind, each one more horrible than the last. He'd been just about to break in when she opened the door.

He wasn't prone to panicking or jumping to conclusions, but having seen her once with her hands bound and a gun against her heart had made him more than a little bit edgy where her safety was concerned. He was quite sure if he held his hands out in front of him, they would both see them tremble. He shoved them into his pockets.

"I guess I held everything inside too long." She opened a cupboard and took out a mug that matched hers. "You know how your mind works to protect you sometimes? I'd put my grief on hold while I took care of the business of death. But today—" She faltered just a bit. "Well, I found these things at her house today."

"And now you feel better?"

"I do." She looked up at him and smiled. "I really do."

He almost didn't want to tell her what he'd come to say. She had found some measure of peace. His news would throw her back into turmoil.

She started gathering the things on the countertop. "So I can put these away for now."

He picked up the photograph from the top of the stack. "This is your mother, isn't it? I thought at first it was you."

She leaned in to look. "I look like her, don't I?"

He took her chin in his hand and turned her head to the same angle as in the picture. "Exactly."

"I— " She stopped abruptly and turned to busy herself with stuffing the memorabilia back into the box. She'd almost told him that she'd missed him this week. While it was true that she had, what kind of thing was that to tell a man she'd hired?

Then it dawned on her. There was a reason for his being here. This was not a friendly social call. The adrenaline started to speed through her veins. She dropped the box and whirled around. "You've heard from Marco, haven't you?"

He picked up the lid and fitted it onto the box for her. "Yes."

"Well? What did he say?"

Jake wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her senseless, to erase every bit of this dangerous diamond chase out of her mind, but he couldn't do that. He'd spent a great part of the last six days convincing himself that a physical relationship with her was a bad idea. Trying to, anyway. Now, with her sparkling eyes just inches away, with the fresh spring scent of her filling his mind, with the obvious truth that there was no bra beneath the soft knit she wore, he wondered why he'd even tried.

"Jake?"

Speechless. When had a woman left him speechless? He pushed the hatbox across the countertop toward her. "He's arranged a meeting with Emerson."

Elation sparked through her. This was exactly the news she'd hoped for. All week long she'd worried about the diamond—whether they would ever hear from Marco at all, whether Emerson might have sold it already. Now the fears could be put away. "We have to go back to Miami?"

"Not exactly."

"Where then? Where is my diamond?"

"Marisol."

"Marisol?"

Swiftly Jake reached past her to remove the pan of milk, which was seconds away from bubbling over onto the stove. Startled, Rebecca gave a little cry and jumped back.

"Emerson has a house on Marisol. He's staying there for a while. He will meet Marco and his buyer there or not at all."

Rebecca poured milk into Jake's mug and stirred in the cocoa, thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I could find it on a map."

"Down near Costa Rica."

"It doesn't matter," Rebecca interrupted as she handed him the steaming mug. "How do we get there?"

Jake took his time raising the mug to his lips, contemplating that "we", as he blew on the scalding milk. He'd spent the past two hours debating ways to convince her that

she shouldn't go alone. She'd made the assumption that he was going too without a smidgen of hesitation. He doubted she even realized it.

He drank from the mug, then set it down. "Marco is sending a plane for us."

She knew that her eyes widened. "Sending a plane? Who sends planes for people?"

Jake shrugged. "Fences and drug lords? These are not the circles you usually spin with, doll."

"I'll say." She leaned against the counter clasping the hot cocoa to her chest, but she was more warmed by his use of the word "doll". She didn't want to admit, even to herself, how she'd grown used to that, nor how she'd missed it. She smiled despite herself.

"When do we go?"

"Tomorrow night. He was very specific about that."

"Okay." All business now, her mind went into planning mode. Cancel Tuesday's appointments, find her passport, pack a bag. Maybe not. Maybe they wouldn't stay that long. "Are we taking anything with us?"

"I don't think so. We want to travel very light. Just bring your passport and some cash. We want to look like tourists." Wear shoes you can run in, he wanted to add, but he didn't want to scare her. No matter. He'd check that out when he picked her up to go to the airport tomorrow night.

"Jake." She put a hand on his arm and looked up into the whiskey colored eyes. "Bring your gun."

* * * * *

Rebecca looked at herself in the mirror. The lightweight skirt was a floral print in blues and greens. The cotton blouse was a vibrant turquoise. She stuck out her tongue at the tourist in the reflection. "I look like a Monet painting," she muttered.

Pacing to the living room, she checked her purse for the umpteenth time. She'd chosen the small straw bag for its shoulder strap. Inside she had tucked her passport, cell phone, a tiny first-aid kit—just in case, she told herself—and a wad of ten dollar bills. Ten dollars could buy loyalty for an hour or two. Perhaps that was all they would need.

Jake arrived at precisely seven o'clock as planned. He wore casual khaki slacks and a black shirt that looked like silk. She touched the sleeve to be sure and looked up at him. "So we're wealthy tourists."

"Of course." He stepped back. "Let me see your feet."

She stuck out one leg to show him a flat canvas shoe. "I have strappy little sandals that match the outfit, but I figured these were more practical."

Pleased, he gave her a smile. "That's my girl. Let's go."

Marco had arranged to have his jet pick them up at a small private airport. The pilot was waiting for them when they arrived. Rebecca had flown numerous times, but never on a plane so small.

Any trepidation, however, was dispelled the moment she stepped inside. "It looks like an expensive hotel suite!"

"It does." Jake lowered his head and stepped in behind her. Plush leather seats were arranged as if in a living room. Crystal decanters gleamed on a mahogany bar next to a flat screen television. The pilot stuck his head around the curtain from the cockpit. "Wheels up in seven minutes. Make yourselves comfortable."

They sat down side by side and buckled themselves in. Rebecca leaned her head back against the soft leather and closed her eyes.

"Uneasy with flying?"

The deep timbre of Jake's voice against her ear was soothing. "Not at all. Just anxious about this whole adventure."

The engines revved with a high-pitched whine. Jake laid a hand on her arm. She opened her eyes enough to see his deeply tanned fingers skimming the ivory skin at her wrist. Someone else might touch her just that way and soothe her. With Jake it was nerves aflame at just the suggestion of touching her. She forced herself not to squirm. He couldn't know that she'd slept precious little since last week, reliving in her mind the exquisite lovemaking every time she laid her head against the pillow.

The plane began a slow taxi. Almost as if he didn't realize it, Jake's thumb stroked featherlight against her pulse. Surely he felt it leap at his touch.

She crossed her legs and smoothed her skirt. Let him think flying made her nervous. It was better than his knowing what the touch of his fingers did to her.

The little plane gained speed and flung itself into the sky. Rebecca leaned away from Jake to look out at the city below them, beginning to sparkle in the rosy dusk.

As they climbed to cruising altitude, Rebecca pulled her belt tight and settled comfortably in the seat. "When are we meeting with Emerson?"

He'd had all day to think about this. She wasn't going to like it. He didn't care. "We are not meeting Emerson, I am."

She turned in her seat to face him. "What do you mean?" she demanded. "Of course I am. You won't do this without me!"

"Relax, doll. Let's think about this. In any number of scenarios that might play out, can you possibly imagine one in which Emerson says, 'Oh, I'm sorry. Here's your diamond. My bad.'"

A sharp retort sprang to her lips, but she choked it off. He was right, of course. She turned back to the window, her arms folded across her chest. "You're right."

"I'm sorry?" Jake leaned over, all but pinning her against the window. "What did you say? I'm not sure I heard that."

He made her smile. She didn't want to, but she did. "I said you're an arrogant know-it-all." She turned away from the window and her mouth was inches from his, so close that she could feel his breath against her face. His eyes dropped to her lips and she thought he was going to kiss her. But even as she expected it, he pulled back.

"That I am," he said as he turned to face forward. "And I'm also right. You can't be present at this meeting."

"Then why am I here at all?"

"An excellent question. I was sure you could stay in Tampa while I go to Marisol with Marco, but..." He looked at the determined way she was swinging her foot. As if she wouldn't mind "accidentally" kicking him. "I figured you would object to that."

"You figured right."

"Ah. That's two."

She turned back to the window. "Don't get used to it."

He chuckled and stretched his long frame, sticking his legs far out in front of them. Rebecca looked out the window. It had grown too dark to make out the orange groves, lakes and swamps they flew over, but she wouldn't have seen them anyway.

Ten days ago, she would have argued with him and charged full speed ahead into a confrontation with Emerson. Amazing how cold steel against your body could teach you a great measure of caution. Tossing and turning last night, she'd realized it would probably be a bad idea to attend the meeting. Even if Emerson didn't bother to remember the one time they'd been face to face, she did—as Jake pointed out—look exactly like her mother.

No, she leaned her head back against the plush leather, closed her eyes and sighed. Jake was right and she didn't mind admitting it. The men needed to handle this and not because of gender. But because they knew far more than she about the way this particular world operates.

Very soon they felt the change in pressure as the jet began to descend toward Miami. In moments they were on the ground at a small private airport. The pilot instructed them to remain seated while they waited for Marco to board.

In a few minutes, the metal stairs rattled signaling his arrival. Marco entered first followed by his two henchmen. Fernando and Demetrio glared at Jake, probably still nursing headaches from the blows that rendered them unconscious a week ago. They ignored him and took seats as far away as possible.

Marco came straight to Rebecca and took her hand. "My dear, you look lovely. I do hope this trip helps you find what you seek."

"Thank you," she murmured as he sat down across from them. His choice of words made her ponder. What did she hope to go home with? The diamond? Some sense of satisfaction? Peace? It didn't matter. The pilot revved the engines and she let the thoughts go. For whatever outcome, they were on their way.

Marco looked at Jake. "Have you explained the procedure to her?"

"No. I was waiting for you."

"Please." Marco steepled his fingers together and nodded. "Proceed."

Jake leaned toward Rebecca. "Emerson thinks Marco is bringing him a buyer for the diamond. Once we verify that it's real, we'll make our move."

"How will you know?" Rebecca asked.

Marco snapped his fingers at Demetrio, who passed him a briefcase. He laid it flat on his lap and worked the clasps. He pulled out a sheaf of papers and handed them across to her. She studied the colored pages from the internet telling the history of the Kendicott diamond, including several pictures of the seventy-two carat jewel set in a pendant on its diamond-encrusted chain, as it had been the last time she'd seen it. Rebecca shuffled through the pages skimming the text, then looked up at Marco. "Stolen diamonds dot com?"

He smiled. "One can find anything on the web these days." He reached into an inside pocket of his linen jacket and pulled out a jeweler's loupe. "And of course, I never travel without this."

"Of course." She leaned back in her seat and looked at Jake. "So you establish that it's my diamond, then what?"

"Then we convince him to return it to the family where it belongs."

"How are you going to do that?"

Marco ran his hand over the smooth leather of the briefcase, caressing. "We have a plan."

She looked from Marco to Jake and back again. "What is it?"

Marco gave Jake a very slight shake of his head. Rebecca laid a hand on Jake's sleeve. "What?"

Jake nodded in reply to Marco, then covered Rebecca's hand with his own. "Trust me, doll." His voice was almost a whisper. "Some things you should not know."

She looked up at him into whiskey eyes. His face was completely devoid of expression, but she felt his fingers very lightly stroking the back of her hand. "Jake?"

He moved his head to put his lips beside her ear. "Do you trust me?"

She searched his eyes for something, anything, but he betrayed no emotion. "I have to, don't I?"

Then he did something she'd wanted since he walked into her loft last night. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

She leaned back against the seat and squeezed her eyes shut. How much turmoil could she take? By the time she identified one emotion, she was bombarded by the next. Grief, anger, frustration. And then there was the chaos this very large man threw her into every time she was with him. Good Heavens, sometimes she only had to think of him to go weak.

He continued to hold the hand he'd kissed, lacing her fingers through his. Despite how badly she wanted a part in this mission, she realized they would all be better off if she sat it out. Her emotions were far too raw to allow her to act rationally. She could possibly endanger all of them.

"Jake?" There was one more emotion to deal with. The one that had been keeping her awake at night. Still, she hesitated, not knowing exactly what to say.

"What is it?"

She searched his eyes again and this time saw them soften for her. "I shut you out last week and I'm sorry. When this is over—" She looked away, biting her lip, struggling for the right words.

He put a hand under her chin and turned her face back to his. And there she saw it. He knew. She didn't need the words. Very lightly, very softly, he kissed her on the lips. "Count on it, doll."

The shadow of a smile turned her lips and she sat back in her seat. Jake did the same, still holding her hand. They sat that way until they began the descent into Marisol.

Once on the ground, the men scrambled into a flurry of action. The pilot had instructions to stand ready. There could be a need for a hasty exit. Cell phones popped open while they made contact, verifying the location of the meeting.

A prearranged minivan stood by the edge of the tarmac for their trip through the little town. With Fernando barking orders in Spanish on his phone, they all piled into the vehicle with Demetrio at the wheel.

Even though they had changed time zones, it was full dark on the island. Rebecca could only guess at the beauty of this little paradise, recently gaining popularity as a vacation spot. Like Emerson, wealthy people were building homes in the mountainous area along the northern shore of the sea.

In the bright moonlight, she could make out a sprinkling of sailboats dotting the inlet. A marina sat adjacent to the airport. As they sped away from the water, Rebecca wondered how they had managed to avoid any formality of Customs or security, but she'd learned not to ask.

The men were tensed, ready for action, their eyes moving, searching. Fernando and Demetrio spoke to each other in staccato bursts of Spanish. Fernando pointed while Demetrio drove. Out her window Rebecca saw the safety of five-star hotels glide by as the narrow road wound away from the coast and into the hills.

There was an abrupt and dramatic shift from flashy tourist area to the dirtier and darker buildings of the locals. In a few minutes, the little van took a corner and rumbled to a stop by a cantina. Marco turned around and looked at Rebecca, a man in charge now, no trace of pleasantry left. With a shiver running through her, Rebecca saw again the captor she had faced in the abandoned warehouse. "You will wait inside with Fernando," he told her. "Our meeting is in the next building. Upstairs."

He looked at Fernando. "Do not drink. Do not talk to the locals. Be prepared to put her back in the van on my order. Do you understand?"

Fernando met his boss's glaring eyes and grunted his response. Marco spoke to him again, this time in Spanish. The man nodded.

If revenge had fueled her bravado before now, a tiny measure of it faltered as she recognized the danger they could all face this night. Jake read her mind and squeezed her hand as he passed her to Demetrio already outside the van. "You'll be fine," he whispered. "Stay with Fernando every second. Don't even go to the bathroom."

"I won't," she promised. Impulsively, she threw her arms around him. "Be careful, Jake."

He took her hands into his and kissed them quickly. "Go."

Reluctantly she turned to Fernando and let him walk her into the cantina. Bare bulbs strung around the interior illuminated white-washed walls. A bar ran the length of one side, while small wooden tables were scattered about the rest. To the back, a half-open doorway allowed the shouts and cheers of some unseen sport to burst through. A fight, perhaps? Gambling? She couldn't guess.

Fernando took her upper arm and steered her to a table closest to the door. Conversations stopped as every eye in the room raked over the unlikely pair. Fernando glanced over to the bartender. "*Dos agua.*"

The man nodded and walked over with two bottles of water. Fernando pulled out an American bill and laid it on the table. The bartender picked it up, looked at it, held it up to the light. Then he folded it in half and slipped it into his pocket, giving Fernando a gap-toothed grin. Rebecca understood. He had just bought the bartender's cooperation. For a few minutes anyway.

Fernando said a few more words in Spanish. Smiling, the bartender went back to his post. He spoke briefly to the curious men at the bar and everyone went back to whatever they'd been doing before the Americans walked in.

Tension hummed through Rebecca. She picked up the bottle of water, opened it, set it back down without drinking. How long since Jake and Marco walked up the stairs to the meeting with Emerson? Long enough to see the diamond yet? What was their plan?

She drummed her fingertips on the tabletop, crossed one leg over the other. Almost every man in the room had a cigarette or cigar. The smoke hung thick, barely moved by an ancient black ceiling fan that squeaked with each revolution of the blades.

She looked at Fernando, at first glance a man at ease, relaxed. But as she studied him, she saw the muscles flexing and unflexing beneath the fabric of his suit. He was watching, waiting, a cat prepared to pounce.

Sighing, she ran a hand through her hair. "How long will this take?"

She asked the question to no one in particular, but Fernando answered her in accented English. "It will take as long as it takes."

She knew that, of course. Trying to calm her nerves, she sat absently fingering the label on the water bottle, but any number of ugly outcomes to this night played through her mind. She hadn't been scared all evening, she wasn't scared now, but she was immensely eager to have this night over with, Jake and the diamond in the airplane on the way home.

Nerve endings refused to calm. She turned to speak to her escort when the murmuring in the cantina was shattered by a loud popping sound. In the second that she realized it was gunfire, Fernando was on his feet, his large body between Rebecca and the door. Demetrio stuck his head inside the cantina and shouted.

She didn't need a translation to spur her to action. Fernando all but carried her outside. Demetrio was already in the van, its engine roaring to life. She stumbled, looking around. Where was Jake? Fernando opened the door of the van and shoved her inside. She turned and looked back. There were more shots. Then she saw the two figures in the alley. Marco and Jake. Running.

With the door still open, Demetrio raced the van closer to the alley between the two buildings. Barely had the two men cleared the doorway when the van was off at a high rate of speed. Fernando yelled into his cell phone, instructing the pilot.

Everything happened so quickly, Rebecca didn't have time to think. Now with all of them safely inside, she turned to Jake with the intention of asking him about the diamond. But what she saw froze the words on her lips.

His face was white. His eyes were closed as his head fell back against the seat like a rag doll. His right hand clutched his left shoulder. Between his fingers seeped dark red blood.

"Jake!" She turned frantic eyes to Marco. "He's been shot!"

"Yes. I know."

Chapter Nine

She could only stare at him, the orchestrator of this plan gone badly awry. Marco looked totally different. His hair was mussed, his impeccably pressed linen pants were wrinkled and smudged. But his eyes flashed with a fire she had not seen either. He ran unwavering hands through his tousled hair and with just that gesture restored himself to the cool demeanor he normally possessed. "It is not serious. He will be all right."

"Not serious!" She turned back to Jake and all but cried out at the look of him. Remembering the first-aid kit, she snatched her purse from the floor. The thing was pathetically inadequate for a gunshot wound, but at least she found a couple of antiseptic wipes. She ripped one open and used it to soothe his feverish brow.

Still holding his hand over the wound, he opened his eyes to narrow slits, just enough for her to see the brown of his eyes. "Jake," she whispered.

"S okay, doll. 'S okay. They following us?"

She looked at Marco. He shook his head and peered into the night. "Don't see them."

They raced anyway, just as if they were pursued. And they may well have been. Quickly, the lights of the large hotels rose up through the windshield view. Rebecca took Jake's free hand and squeezed. "Hang on. We're almost there."

"Uh-oh."

All heads snapped toward Demetrio.

"We got company, boss."

Three men uttered curses in Spanish. Marco looked out the back window then turned to the driver. "Lose them."

"Yes, boss."

Rebecca didn't see how. Traffic was congested in the tourist-laden hotel district. Just as she thought they were stuck, easy prey for the unknown thugs behind them, Demetrio whipped the wheel and ran the van up on the sidewalk.

She couldn't look. The rough ride made Jake moan at every jar. She put her head down close to his and whispered soothing words.

Then the ride smoothed out. She looked up to see the marina out one window. Just beyond were the blue lights of the airport. They were going to make it.

They zoomed through the gate and onto the tarmac. Demetrio drove right up to the jetway. Doors flew open before they'd completely stopped. Both of the big men reached inside to get Jake. Rebecca scrambled out of the way. She and Marco followed the others

up the short ramp and inside. The pilot slammed the door and took his seat. Immediately the plane began to move.

Through the window, Rebecca saw the car that had chased them stopped at the gate, the two men inside arguing frantically with the guard. Prearranged by Marco, she realized. She looked at him, nonchalantly buckling his seat belt. And this was his private plane. This man had far more influence than she'd realized. She didn't ever want to be on his bad side.

As the plane gained speed, she reached across Jake to strap him in. Then she barely had time to get her own seat belt fastened before she felt the wheels leave the runway. They climbed rapidly. Only when they began to level out did she breathe normally.

Cell phones flipped open and the men began speaking in Spanish. Marco closed his with a snap. "A doctor will meet us when we land in Miami."

Fernando opened a small cupboard by the bar and took out towels. He handed them to Rebecca then filled a pitcher with water. Demetrio fumbled beside the seat until he found the release, then gently reclined Jake's chair. Rebecca soaked a towel in water and used it to clean the area around the wound. She had absolutely no experience with anything remotely like this, but she knew enough to apply pressure against the wound. She took another towel and slipped it under Jake's bloody hand, pressed against his shoulder. He moaned every time she touched him. It tore at her heart to hurt him even as she helped him.

Marco went to the bar and brought Rebecca a glass of scotch. "See if you can make him drink."

With one hand beneath his head, she coaxed him to take a few sips.

"He will sleep," Marco said. "Drink some yourself."

She started to protest, then brought the glass to her lips and took a long swig. The fire burned all the way down to her belly, but then a comforting warmth began to spread throughout her. Mercifully, Jake was out. She didn't think it was sleep. More likely he was passed out from the pain and loss of blood. She watched his chest rise and fall with strong regular breaths. She leaned her head back against her own chair and exhaled a long-held breath.

Marco smiled. "You are strong."

"No, I'm not." She glanced at Jake to reassure herself, then looked back at Marco. "What happened?"

With his elbows on the armrests, he steeped his fingers together. "The plan. It did not work."

"No shit!"

He arched a brow and gave her a look that would have made a duchess squirm. She matched his glare, unwavering. Finally, he smiled. "My great skill is negotiation. I believed I had something worth bartering with him, but when he realized that we were representing you, Emerson became angry. He insulted you, he insulted your mother

with words no man should ever call a woman." He turned his hands palms up and gave a little shrug. "Jake hit him."

A little spark ignited inside her, the first thing all night that had felt good. "Really?"

Marco matched her grin. "Oh, quite nicely, too. He will be sporting the evidence for some time."

In spite of the dire circumstances, Rebecca smiled. When had a man ever defended her honor? Never! Her own husband had let others besmirch her reputation if not her very worth without protest. But that was a thought to tuck away and treasure some other time. Right now Jake was hurt and in pain.

She fussed over the wound but saw there was nothing else she could do. The flow of blood seemed to have slowed if not stopped altogether. With any luck it was a superficial wound, no major damage to arteries or bone. She could only hope he rested well until they reached Miami and the safety of a doctor.

She looked back at Marco who was sitting casually, relaxed. He nodded to her. "He will be all right, Rebecca. Don't be scared."

Scared was hardly the word for the layers of apprehension visiting upon her right now. But there was no question of indulging any emotions. Better to focus on something less threatening. "You saw it? My diamond?"

"I did. And it is a remarkable stone. I'm surprised he wants to sell it."

"You're sure it's the right diamond?"

"Quite sure."

Rebecca leaned back in the seat. To be so close to holding the cherished heirloom in her hand only to have it snatched away was almost more than she could bear. "What will he do with it now?"

Marco shrugged. "Sell it to someone else. Which would not be a problem if your father were still living."

"Because he'd just go get it?"

"Precisely."

She mulled that over for a while. The only reason her mother had the diamond to begin with was her father's valuable if not unsavory skills. Her brows drew together in concentration.

"Stop that!"

Marco's sharp tone startled her. "Stop what?"

"I can see where your mind is going. You are not your father's daughter in that respect."

"Of course I am." Indignation sparked her anger. "I've already been inside Emerson's home."

Marco rolled his eyes and muttered in Spanish. "And lucky you were not caught. Or killed."

Her mouth opened to argue, but the jet hit a pocket of turbulence, causing Jake to move uncomfortably in his seat. Rebecca leaned over and whispered to him, soothing. "Hang on, Jake. We'll be there soon. A doctor's waiting for you."

When he opened his eyes, she saw a cloud across them, as if he didn't really see her. But he reached for her with his free hand. She laced her fingers through his and held on. She didn't know how much blood he'd lost, but she knew it was a lot. The ragged wound was probably throbbing. It was most likely better for him to slip back into unconsciousness.

Fernando came forward from his seat behind them. He took the glass from the tray near Rebecca's seat and refilled it with scotch, then handed it to her.

No longer angry for last week's events, the two henchmen had gained respect for Jake. Maybe it was the way he stood up to Emerson. Maybe it was their boss's obvious approval of him. Maybe it was his taking a bullet. Whatever the reason, the two men were kinder now, willing to help. She thanked him and held the glass to Jake's lips.

He drank only a few sips before turning his head away and closing his eyes. Rebecca wasn't sure that he knew she was beside him, but she held his hand as they flew through the night.

Finally she heard the change in the roar of the engine that signaled their approach to the airport. Marco went to the cockpit and returned in just a moment. "We'll land soon," he told her. "The doctor is already there, waiting for us."

Rebecca's relief was overwhelming. Jake needed medical attention and soon. She reached across to tighten his seat belt, then tugged at her own. His jaw was set in a tense grip, as if determination alone could ward off the pain of the injury.

Exhaustion caught up with her. She sat back and closed her eyes, letting the motion of the jet rock her. But she did not surrender. Jake's fingers laced through hers were a tangible reminder of the danger this night still held.

Before long, they touched down at the small airport. Rebecca looked out the window as they taxied. She didn't know what she expected to see—no flashing red lights of an ambulance—but she would have liked some assurance that the doctor was there.

Finally they rolled to a stop. She wanted to rush forward and call for the doctor, but a sharp look from Marco pinned her to her seat. He was in charge, the look seemed to say. She must not forget that.

Anything, as long as someone came to help Jake. Soon the door opened and a man stepped aboard. Her mind had pictured an older man in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck. Instead it was a young man wearing jeans and a polo shirt. To her relief, he carried a black medical bag.

He glanced at Jake, then turned to confer with Marco in whispers. The older man stood up. "We wait outside."

"No!" Rebecca couldn't stand the thought of leaving Jake alone with this stranger. How did she know he was really a doctor? What if he wasn't? What if Jake died? "Please."

Marco took her arm to raise her from her seat. "Come with me, child."

She looked into his eyes and saw again that unquestioned authority in his expression. With a final glance at Jake, she let him lead her from the plane. The young doctor was already bent over, probing the wound. She heard Jake cry out, but she forced herself to keep walking down the steps.

A small building sat alone on the edge of the tarmac. It would be the office and lounge area for the airport, but stood nearly empty at four in the morning. The little group headed in that direction anyway. Rebecca recognized the black BMW parked next to the building.

Inside the waiting area several rows of plastic chairs lined the walls. Rebecca and Marco took seats. The other two men paced just outside the doorway, smoking.

On one trip past, Demetrio saw that Rebecca shivered in the pre-dawn chill. He took off his dark suit jacket and draped it around her shoulders. She looked up at him and whispered, "Thank you."

A week ago, they had been adversaries, chasing each other through the streets of Miami. Now they were united in their common adventure. United because Marco Vasquez held a huge amount of respect for her father.

Rebecca pulled the jacket tight around her shoulders and tried to get comfortable in the chair. She couldn't help a slight smile. This was the first time in her life that her father's reputation had helped instead of hurting her.

But this was nothing to get used to. It was probably going to be the only time.

"You live together?"

Marco's voice startled her out of her thoughts. It took her a moment to realize he meant Jake. He thought she and Jake were a couple. "No. We're just... No."

His brows arched as if he didn't believe her. "He will probably need someone to care for him. For a day or two, perhaps."

"Oh! Of course. I can do that. He can stay with me." It was the least she could do. If it weren't for her, he'd be safe in his little cottage right now, probably enjoying some woman he'd met at that place on the corner of his street. Instead, he was oozing blood, with a young man who may or may not be a doctor surreptitiously working on him in the middle of the night. Of course she would take care of him. For as long as he needed her.

With those thoughts swirling in her mind, she sat, draped in Demetrio's jacket. Marco crossed his thin legs and clasped his long fingers together. Demetrio and Fernando paced. No sound came from the airplane, no voices. Rebecca was helpless but for trusting an unknown entity.

Finally the door to the plane opened and the doctor appeared at the top of the stairs. Rebecca sprang to her feet and headed back outside across the tarmac, Marco and the guys close on her heels. The doctor came down the stairs to meet the anxious group.

"He's very lucky."

Rebecca had never heard such beautiful words.

"Nothing major was damaged," he went on. "There will be some discomfort for a few days. Give him these." He held out a small bottle of pills. "No more than one every four hours. He just had his first."

Rebecca clutched the vial in her fist and looked up at the doctor. "Thank you."

"No problem." He turned to Marco. "Glad to help."

They spoke briefly in Spanish, then the young man walked off toward the parking lot.

"Now you go home," Marco said to her. "We did not come back with your diamond. Perhaps it is best to leave it be."

Rebecca was far from ready to give up, but she certainly had no other options right now. Nodding, she offered her hand to Marco, but he pulled her into a warm hug. "Your treasure lies inside the plane," he murmured in her ear.

She pulled back and shrugged out of the large jacket. With a quick word of thanks, she turned and hurried up the short stairs to the jet.

Jake still lay reclined, but his shirt was completely removed. His left shoulder was swathed in white gauze that wrapped around his chest. He opened his eyes when she sat down and strapped in beside him. "You okay?"

Nodding, he reached for her hand. "Hurts."

"Your painkiller will kick in by the time we're airborne."

The pilot leaned into the cabin. "Ready?"

She squeezed Jake's hand. "Yes."

For the fourth time in eight hours, the small jet carried them into the sky. Rebecca leaned back against the plush leather and closed her eyes. Exhaustion seeped into every particle of her being. She had that lightheaded feeling she'd experienced in college when she'd stayed up late cramming for exams.

Except no one had shot at her in the library.

She put her fingers on the pulse at Jake's wrist and felt the life beating there, the warmth of his hand so much larger than hers. She knew what Marco meant. She held the treasure in her hand right now. Jake's life was worth more than any diamond. No question.

But Marco implied much more than that. She looked over to see that the pain medication had brought him the blessed relief of sleep. Her stomach flipped when she thought about the difference an inch or two could have made.

And it was for her.

They hadn't even discussed a fee. She'd just assumed he would go and he'd been willing. To protect her. To keep her safe while he did the dirty work.

It didn't get much dirtier than a bullet through the flesh.

She rolled her shoulders and tried to shake off the emotions of the night. Sure, she cared about him. But she knew not to confuse the tension and relief of the evening with anything more substantial than a comrades-in-arms scenario. She knew not to forget that she'd hired him.

Truth was, she admitted to herself, they had most likely crossed the line beyond fees and payment when they'd shared a bed in Miami. Really shared it. Not just for sleeping.

Jake mumbled something and moved. She leaned over and stroked the hair that fell across his forehead and he settled back into sleep. Something she should try to do as well, she realized. The next few days were going to be very busy with caring for him. She should try to sleep until they landed at home.

Barely had she closed her eyes, it seemed, when the tires screeched as they touched down in Tampa. Now she was faced with a whole new set of challenges, getting Jake from the jet to her apartment.

Apparently Marco had left instructions for that as well. The man who rolled the stairs to the jet came aboard and helped the pilot get Jake to his feet. They eased him into a clean shirt and draped a jacket around his shoulders. Rebecca fished in his pockets until she found the car keys. They managed to keep him upright until they got him to the car despite the powerful medication.

It wasn't until she stopped at the first traffic light that Rebecca allowed herself to ponder the enormity of the situation. She'd been moving on automatic pilot since they'd taken off the first time. Now as she looked at Jake lolling in the passenger seat, a wave of panic washed over her. How could she take care of him? What if something happened to him? What if his wound was more serious than the doctor said?

She took a deep breath and shook those thoughts from her mind. The light changed. Move on. She'd never been one to dwell on possible worries. No need to start now.

The sky was beginning to show faint traces of pink as they pulled into the parking lot of the converted lofts where Rebecca lived. She parked in the closest space she could find.

Jake didn't move. She went around to the passenger side and opened the door. He was just alert enough to help her. He managed to get out of the car and with Rebecca under his good arm, they stumbled their way to the top of the stairs. He leaned against the wall while she dealt with the locks and finally they were inside.

She steered him into her bedroom and yanked the covers off the bed before he tumbled onto the soft mattress. Still hazy from the drug, his eyes barely focused on her as he mumbled, "I took a bullet for you, doll."

Rebecca smiled, slipping the jacket off of him. "You sure did, tough guy."

She eased him onto the pillows and swung his legs up onto the bed. He wore high black boots. An odd choice, she thought as she unzipped one and tugged it off. When she unzipped the second one and a small gun fell out, she understood.

So there lay a gun against her pristine white sheets. She approached it and picked it up as if it were a snake. Holding it away from her body, she took it to the dresser and laid it down.

Now she had him down to socks, shirt and pants. That was as far as she was going. Despite what history they had and what had transpired this night, she was not taking his pants off for him. He looked comfortable enough. Besides, he was barely conscious.

She opened a drawer of the dresser and pulled out her cotton knit pajamas. In the bathroom, she changed quickly, washed the grime of Marisol off her face and brushed her teeth. Then she went back to take one last look at Jake.

His breathing was regular. She lifted his hand and felt a steady pulse at his wrist. There was nothing else she could do. She watched him sleep for a moment, eternally thankful that he was all right, then turned to tiptoe out of the room.

But his hand shot out to grab her arm. "Where you going?"

Had she thought he was drugged? Apparently not enough to slow his reactions. "To the living room couch. To sleep for a while."

"Here." He tugged on her arm then opened his eyes. "Sleep here. With me."

Rebecca slipped her arm from his hand and contemplated. He had, after all, taken a bullet for her. She walked around to the other side of the bed and lay down. It was queen-sized, not as wide as the king in the Miami motel. She hugged the edge to keep from touching him, from hurting him.

But he reached for her, drew her close. She snuggled against him on the uninjured side of his body. He wanted her close to him and she was happy to oblige.

His fingers ran lazily up and down her arm. "If I'd known this was all it took to get back in bed with you," he murmured, "I would've gotten myself shot last week."

Rebecca smiled against his chest. "Go to sleep." But she wasn't awake long enough to know whether he did.

* * * * *

The first thing Jake thought was that someone was standing on his shoulder. He couldn't move his left arm without fireworks exploding in the joint. The second thing he thought was that something smelled really good, like a garden or that shop in the mall that had all the different pretty soaps. You couldn't help smelling it when you just walked by on your way to the athletic shoe store. It was a really pleasant smell. It reminded him of Rebecca.

Then he remembered. He opened his eyes and got his first look at Rebecca's bedroom. Blinds were drawn at a large window, but sunlight seeped around the edges. The whole thing was framed in a frothy white fabric that looked like clouds. All of the

furniture was white, he noted. Thick white wooden pieces with brass accents. And the white foamy clouds of the windows were repeated in some contraption that hung from the ceiling and draped to either side of the headboard.

A boudoir, he told himself. Not a bedroom. Beside one window sat a small round table holding a vase with real flowers in shades of rose and pink. That must be what smelled so good. That and the spot in the bed where Rebecca had slept.

An empty spot. Where was she? He sat up, or almost did. The fireworks in his shoulder protested that action. He gritted his teeth and tried again, this time managing to make it to a sitting position, but not without the punctuation of his favorite curse words. And even a few that were not so favorite.

The bedroom door opened and there she was. She wore jeans and a pale blue sweater and her hair was pulled tight into a ponytail again and tied with a blue ribbon. It made her look like a teenager.

"Did I hear a bunch of sailors in here?"

Her tone was light, but her eyes were deeply shadowed, her brow furrowed. She was worried about him. That was a nice feeling. How long since someone had cared that much about him? He smiled at her. "I think I've been shot."

"Yeah, but you should see the other guy." She nudged the shirt aside and lifted a corner of gauze to peek at the wound, although she didn't have a clue what she was looking for. At least there was no indication that he'd lost any more blood. "Ready for a pain pill?"

"Oh, yeah. That would be great." He tried moving the shoulder and decided that wasn't a good idea. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon. Hungry?"

"You cook?"

"No, you aren't that lucky. But I can do something with eggs and cheese if you're interested."

"Sounds good." He glanced at the closed door beside the dresser. "Bathroom?"

"Right there." She fussed with straightening the covers on the bed. "Can you make it by yourself?"

"We'll find out," he muttered, but he did manage to walk just fine now that he'd slept off the pain medicine. Not that he wasn't looking forward to taking another one real soon, but first things first.

He remembered this bathroom, he thought as he looked around the wide space. He very well remembered finding her in the deep garden tub the day he'd broken in. Oh, sure, he'd let her think she'd forgotten to lock the door because he didn't want to freak her out. The truth was, though, he was much better at getting into places than she was. Probably because he'd spent more of his life being desperate than she had.

He'd done it to impress her, to regain some credibility after he'd failed at opening the safe. But when he'd found her wearing nothing but bubbles, he'd done well to remember his name, much less what point he'd planned to make.

He looked around from the garden tub to the huge shower stall to the feminine dressing table. He could set his entire bedroom down in this bathroom and still have enough room leftover for a Roman orgy in that bathtub. This room was frilly, too. Just like her bedroom. And it smelled good.

She'd laid out some things for him. A bath towel and a washcloth that actually matched. A clean bar of soap. A brand-new toothbrush still in the package. Who kept new toothbrushes in their medicine cabinets? Women like Rebecca. That's who.

He picked up the soap and sniffed it, pleased to find the old familiar scent of Ivory. He'd been almost afraid that it would be whatever she used to make her smell so good. Not that it would be a bad thing, necessarily. It was just a sure bet that it wouldn't smell nearly as good on him as it did on her.

Rebecca flitted about the kitchen. She really wasn't much of a cook, but she wanted him to like the eggs, or at least to like that she'd tried to do something for him. And she wanted to do things for him. Every time she thought about that bullet ripping through his flesh, a large fist grabbed her stomach and squeezed. Electrical impulses raced through her bloodstream and quickened her pulse. What if he'd died?

She had to stop thinking about that. She scooped the eggs onto a plate and set them on a tray. He was alive, the wound was not life-threatening. Everything would be all right. Eventually.

The sound of the bathroom door let her know he was finished cleaning up. Probably ready for something to eat. And a pain pill. She put orange juice and ice water on the tray and carried it to the bedroom.

He was sitting on the side of the bed, his face pale, as if that was as far as he could get before he ran out of steam.

"Guess I'm a little weak," he said apologetically.

"Gee, you act like you've never been shot before." She hoped a little levity would ease some of the tension.

That earned her a smile, or at least a bit of a grimace. She waited while he settled against the pillows in the bed, then handed him the tray. "Do you need anything else?"

He put most of a piece of toast in his mouth all at once, like a starving man, which he probably was. "Keep me company."

He gestured with the toast and she sat down on the end of the bed, careful not to jostle his food or his shoulder.

"You aren't eating?"

She wiped her palms along the denim of her jeans. She might think about eating when the fist quit squeezing her stomach. "I'm fine. Let's just concentrate on getting your strength back."

It pleased her to watch him eat the food she had prepared for him. He looked a little better since he'd cleaned up. His day's growth of beard added a roguish touch to his hard-planed face. His eyes held a bit less of the glassy look that had scared her last night.

He finished every crumb and drained every drop of the orange juice. A good sign, she guessed. She reached for the bottle of pills and handed him one.

"No," he said. "I better wait 'til I drive home."

"Home?" There was the fist again. "No, you must stay here. I mean..." She forced a calmness to her voice. "You probably should stay at least today. To be sure you're all right."

Aside from a sore shoulder and some weakness, Jake was pretty sure he was all right. But he liked this concern she was showing. And he liked watching her try to conceal it. "You don't have to go to your office?"

"I've talked to Ruth Ann. She'll call if she needs me."

"Okay." He popped the pill into his mouth and drank the rest of the water. "Then I'll stay for a while."

"Good." She went to a small CD player in the corner of the room. "I'll put some relaxing music on and you can rest."

"Will you sit with me?"

"Sure."

The soft violins of chamber music wafted around the pretty room. Jake closed his eyes and tried not to think about the throbbing in his shoulder while he waited for the drug to deaden his feelings. Rebecca sat on the edge, just like she had while he ate. "Come closer," he said without opening his eyes.

She smiled at the way he always knew where she was without looking. She edged forward, mindful of his injury, trying not to jar him. But that wasn't good enough. He wanted her closer, touching him. He moved over to give her space on his good side.

Rebecca didn't take much encouragement. She hadn't slept enough to make up for the all-night flight. The events were still too fresh on her mind. Probably would be for days. She stretched out beside him and nestled her head in the crook of his arm.

He felt the warmth of her all down his side. He knew he was taking advantage of the situation. He didn't care. He wanted her the way she had been in Miami. Warm and willing. Before whatever senses had shut her down.

The music was pretty. The woman was soft. The fire in his shoulder was receding a little. This pain medication was powerful. It was about to knock him out again. He fought against it, wanting to savor the feelings a little bit longer. She moved a bit and sighed against him. He felt the sorrow that was still in her. "I'm sorry I didn't get your diamond, doll."

"It's okay. We'll think of another way."

That bothered him. After everything they'd been through in the last twenty-four hours, she still wanted to chase the diamond? Wasn't the hole in his shoulder enough to show her the danger? He wanted to tell her, but the drug was pulling him.

Rebecca knew the instant he sank into the narcotic sleep. She lay beside him for a few minutes listening to his breath in and out. Regular. Steady.

Already his body was beginning to heal. He gained strength with every breath. The next time he woke up, she knew, he would leave her. Back to his job that he did so well, to people who would pay him to get in the way of a bullet.

She lay there a little longer, her hand upon his heart. It would have been nice to sleep the afternoon away in his arms, but he'd mentioned the diamond. Now her mind was spinning again, restless. After all they'd done, all the miles they'd traveled, all the risks they'd taken, they still did not have the diamond.

She eased out of the bed without disturbing him and carried the tray to the kitchen.

Chapter Ten

The next time Jake woke up, it was completely dark. The music had stopped. And Rebecca was in the bed with him, asleep. Without causing himself too much pain, he shifted around until he could see the clock on the bedside table. 3:12.

Well, that was kind of a good news/bad news thing, wasn't it? He figured it was good that he'd slept more than ten hours. His body had surely needed it. But that made him wide awake at—he leaned to see the clock again—3:13

Trying not to disturb Rebecca, he eased out of bed and groped through the darkness to the bathroom. He closed the door with a faint click, then turned on the light. After washing up, he leaned close to the mirror and pulled at the gauze to inspect the wound. Not too bad, he decided. He'd seen much worse in his years on the force. At least the bullet hadn't hit anything important. He'd be fine in another day or two.

He went quietly back to the bedroom and lay down again, but he was sure he wouldn't be sleeping. He didn't want to take another pain pill. The injury had settled into a persistent but dull ache. Nothing he couldn't live with. And he didn't like the way the drug took him out so completely. He had to be in control.

So now what? He looked over at Rebecca. The little bit of moonlight through the blinds was just enough for him to see her in shadows. This was the most peaceful he'd seen her. Ever. She lay on her side, turned toward him. Her elegant hands tucked under her cheek. She'd kicked one leg out of the covers and that foot was pointed in a perfect arch, like a dancer.

It was more than he could stand. He'd spent all of the week struggling to understand what had pulled her away from him in Miami. Now he'd been shot trying to help her and she was an absolute angel in taking care of him. What was it she'd said on the plane? "When this is over..." Well, it was over. The diamond chase was done, whether they wanted it to be or not.

He slid closer and propped himself on pillows. With a fingertip, he traced the line of her cheekbone down to her chin. She gave a little sigh and moved her head. Leaning closer, he brushed a light kiss beneath her ear.

Her lashes fluttered. It took her a few seconds to fully wake up. He enjoyed watching the awareness steal across her face.

She sat up. "Are you all right? Does it hurt? Do you want another pill?"

He shook his head. Laying a hand against her cheek, he pulled her toward him. He saw surprise in her expression, then he saw understanding. She closed her eyes and tilted her chin to accept his kiss.

It began with a simple sweetness. He was glad to be alive. He was glad to be with her. But in seconds, the kiss fueled itself and he took them deeper with a more insistent slide of his lips against hers. The tip of his tongue moved leisurely across her rosebud lips until she opened for him with a sweet sigh.

Now the simple sweetness gave way to a greater need. His fingers curled around the back of her neck and drew her nearer. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and tasted the dark sweetness of her mouth.

More. More. More. This woman. This night. It was all he wanted, all he'd thought about in the past week and he'd been nearly mad with the desire to touch her every time they were together. Now he was taking everything she offered. Quickly. Before she changed her mind and drew inward as he knew she could do.

His shoulder protested the move, but he had to feel her next to his skin. He pulled her closer, even as his arms moved to encircle her slender frame. His hands splayed against her back, between her shoulders, along her spine. And still he held her mouth captive with his.

Rebecca couldn't breathe. This kiss had taken her off guard, unprepared. And yet she wouldn't stop it if she wanted to. And she didn't want to.

Caught in a whirlwind, she could feel the need coursing through him, igniting her. Their first time had been gentle. This one was raw. She put a hand against his chest, seeking skin, the bunched muscles that she knew to be powerful, firm.

He took control of her with his seeking mouth. His heart pounded against her palm. Steady. Strong.

Her fingers skimmed the edges of the bandage, a tactile reminder of the danger they'd barely escaped. For her. He'd walked into the fire for her. His heart beat hard against her fingers. For her. She felt tears well in her eyes, but she let them fall to the side as an unbelievable concept unfolded inside her. He loved her? This broken, battered man, her hero, her champion. He loved her?

Why else would he face the danger? Why else would he let it matter as much to him as it did to her?

Maybe she had it wrong. It needed thought, careful study. But not now. Because now his hands were spanning her waist while his tongue still teased. She could not think. She could only feel.

At last he broke the kiss. She opened her eyes as she tried to catch her breath. When he looked at her, she did not recognize the expression. His eyes were dark and filled with something, a seeking, a question. He raised his hands to frame her face and brushed at the tear on her cheek.

She understood. He thought he'd hurt her, that something was wrong. Oh, no. For once in her life, something was very right. With a trembling smile, she threaded her fingers through the thick hair at the back of his neck and pulled his mouth back to hers.

Tongues tangled and danced. She felt it to the soles of her feet. Little flash fires swept through her like lightning across a summer sky. Whatever had come before, this was her now.

His hands slid down to caress her neck, her shoulders. Deftly he found the hem of her cotton shirt and pulled it over her head. And then he found her breasts. With one in each hand, he held her as gently as if she were made of delicate china. And then he flicked his thumbs across the nipples. Hard, erect, the touch had her all but squirming against his hands.

She buried her head in the juncture of his neck and shoulder, gasping. And still he caressed her. It was almost more sensation than she could stand. He took such infinite care. It was as if a silken thread ran from the tip of her nipple to the center of her most sensitive core. By rubbing one, he ignited the other.

And when she thought just hands could drive her to orgasm, he lowered his head and took one throbbing bud into his mouth. She gasped and dug her hands into his hair, holding him against her.

She would explode, she was sure, if this didn't end now, if she didn't reach the superb release. She wanted him inside her, needed him there. She fell back against the pillows, bringing him with her. She wiggled out of her pants and kicked them aside, then reached for him. He was thick and ready, pulsing for her, straining to be sheathed.

She opened her thighs, barely able to wait, but he hesitated. She opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said in ragged breaths. "I can't."

"Can't?" She knew from past experience that he really could and quite nicely, too.

Then it dawned on her. His shoulder. He couldn't let his arms take his weight. It would hurt his shoulder, maybe rip open the wound. She couldn't allow that.

"No problem," she whispered as she gently pushed him back to lie flat on his back. On her knees, she bent to kiss him lightly on his very tight abs. His skin was tanned there, down to a line just below his belly button, from the summer just ended. The hair on his chest was sun-bleached to a golden bronze.

She trailed her lips down the middle of his belly and felt him shudder in response. This was different for her, this being in charge. She liked it. Lifting her head, she found him watching her, his eyes dark. It was as if he couldn't wait to see what she would do next.

She ended the suspense for both of them, straddling his hips with her knees. She took his shaft into her hand and smoothly guided him into her depths. Now to begin the ride.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she began to move her hips to stroke him. She watched his eyes as he watched her. A slight smile formed on her lips at the power she felt. That she could bring this much pleasure to him and that she could watch him enjoy it. This was a new feeling, but one she intended to repeat very soon. With him.

She saw his smile in response to hers, a deep sexy smile that made her quiver almost as much as the slide of his flesh against hers. She loved being able to control the rhythm, the stroke, the friction on her body. But just as she settled on a leisurely pace, Jake placed his hands on her hips.

With gentle pressure, he urged her to go faster, faster, challenging her. His fingers stroked lightly on her delicate skin as he gripped her.

There were more sensations than she could name. His rigid shaft stroked through her feminine depths with velvet heat. His hands on her hips pulled her outer folds against his skin, sliding in the wetness of their two bodies. She found the spot, the exact spot that gave them both the greatest pleasure and rode him as his hands urged her on. And still their gazes locked, each enjoying the sight of the other in ultimate pleasure.

She felt it first in the very depths of her womanhood, the light ripples that radiated outward. Jake felt it too and gripped her hips tighter, pulling her faster. Then the ripples deepened and widened and swelled across her entire body. From her toes to her nipples to her fingertips, every part of her body convulsed and crested, riding the wave.

She threw back her head and cried out, never having been rocked so hard by any orgasm. Jake's seed shot into her, hot and thick, as he too quivered and shook with release. When she thought she couldn't stand another second, he put his arms around her shoulders and drew her down against his chest.

Careful not to touch the injured shoulder, she collapsed on him, like a balloon losing all its air.

Jake stroked her hair, moving it out of her face. He was still inside her, though he doubted he'd be able to avoid slipping out much longer. He wanted to stay in there forever, to never move from this position. Now he had her back, finally had her back to the warm and passionate woman he knew she could be. What to do to keep her that way?

One hand rubbed lazy circles on the rigid spot where all her tension gathered between her shoulders. He felt the knot there and gently massaged it. She sighed against his chest.

There was so much conflict going on inside her and he didn't know how to make it go away for her. The grief over losing her mother would lessen with time, but the anger was harder to deal with. She was so mad at Emerson that she could think of nothing other than revenge. He wished he could make her see that it wouldn't bring her mother back.

Even lying here naked sprawled across his body, minutes after orgasm, she wasn't relaxed. True, she was closer to relaxed than she usually was, but there was still a tremendous amount of tension in her body. And he was quite sure her mind still hummed with the events of the night gone by.

He had to speak to her, to say something that would solidify the intimacy they'd just shared. He needed her to stay with him, to keep the bond alive. But even as he rubbed her shoulder, he felt the tension sliding back into place. She would start to

retreat now. The passion slaked, she would pull the protective coolness around her like a shawl.

Just as he thought it, she slid off of him and rolled to lie flat on the pillow, not nestled against his chest like she had slept before. But she laced her fingers through his. "I was too afraid I'd hurt you," she said.

"No. You didn't."

"Should I get you a pain pill?"

"No." He couldn't afford to be so out of it again. There was too much to do, too much to think about. "It's just a soreness, really. Not too bad."

"That's good." She turned to her side and propped her head on an upturned palm. "Tell me about it, Jake. I want to know what happened."

He knew exactly what she meant. The damn diamond. It was all she could think about. "There isn't much to tell. It was over pretty quickly."

"But you saw it? Did you touch it?"

"Yea and yes, but really, I'd rather not remember all of it, if you don't mind."

"Oh! Of course. I'm sorry."

He'd managed to quiet her but it did nothing to quiet the turmoil inside him right now. Good thing she believed talking about the shooting upset him. He was definitely upset. There was a feeling growing inside him, one he didn't like. Had she kept him here, stayed with him, slept beside him only to find out more about the diamond?

The very thought of it made him feel sick. Surely she wasn't that shallow, that superficial. He hadn't thought so. How could he be so attracted to her if she were that kind of person? No, it wasn't that. He knew her to be deeply caring and intensely passionate. This diamond chase was a symbol to her. The chase kept her active, kept her doing something connected to her mother's death. Somehow he had to make her realize that.

But he didn't know how. All he was really sure of was that she had to stay in his life. The best way to do that, he decided, was to make himself indispensable.

* * * * *

Jake's shoulder continued to heal every day. By Saturday, he was in good enough shape to help as they resumed the unpleasant chore of cleaning out Margaret's house. Rebecca was happy to have him there. She had made arrangements to take most of the big furniture to a shelter for abused women. It would be good to have another man help Bobby load the heavier pieces into the pickup truck.

That wasn't the main reason. If she were honest with herself—and she knew she should be—it was more because she really enjoyed being with him. After they'd both recovered from the grueling trip to Marisol, they'd settled into a comfortable togetherness that she was still getting used to.

Every day she went to her office, coddled her clients, paid her bills. At the end of the day, he always showed up with takeout salads or a bag of groceries. And on Friday, he'd surprised her with tickets to the orchestra. It hadn't taken an ace detective to discover her love of classical music. She played it in her car, her office, her home. But to actually put on a suit and take her to the performance—and stay awake through it! It was almost more than she could wish for in a man.

Not that she wished for anything in a man at all. On her hands and knees, she reached into the far corner of the cabinet under the sink to snag the few pots that were hidden there. No, she wasn't looking for a man. But if she were...

She paused, listening to the sound of his voice as he and Bobby arranged chairs in the back of the truck. If she were looking, he would be a good one to find.

Ruth Ann came in from outside. "That is one fine-looking man you've got yourself there, Rebecca."

Rebecca sat back on her heels and peeled off the rubber gloves she'd been wearing while she cleaned. "He is."

"How'd you get him to take you to the orchestra last night?"

"That was his idea."

Ruth Ann's eyes grew round. "Oh, wow."

She smiled. "Indeed."

"And yet you aren't fully engaged."

Just the word was enough to scare her. "Engaged?"

Ruth Ann took her time pulling a bottle of water out of the refrigerator, thoughtfully unscrewing the top, taking a long drink. "I don't want to get myself in trouble here."

Rebecca had a pretty good idea that she was the one who was going to be in trouble from the direction of this conversation. But she'd never been one to run away from things. "Please. Continue."

"Well, it's just that he seems to be a near perfect man if ever there was one. But it's like you're holding back, trying to keep your distance."

Rebecca got up from the kitchen floor and washed her hands in the sink. "I am keeping my distance."

"But why?"

"Ruth Ann, my mother just died. Here we are cleaning out her house. I can't concern myself with getting attached to someone else right now."

"Seems to me to be exactly the right time to get attached to someone. Didn't you just lose someone you love? You want to ignore a chance to love someone else? Someone who obviously loves you."

"Jake doesn't love me!"

They both stood for a second letting those words echo around the almost empty kitchen. Finally Ruth Ann spoke softly. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you said he took you to the orchestra last night."

Rebecca stood with her mouth open while Ruth Ann marched back outside to help the guys. Jake in love with her? Jake? One trip to the orchestra wasn't a declaration of love. Was it?

That Jake might be in love with her wasn't the most surprising thing. What was harder to comprehend was how much that possibility pleased her.

* * * * *

Jake sat on the redwood bench and watched her tapping her feet to the music of the Southern rock band while she nursed a Corona. Unbelievable. Last night at the Performing Arts Center, she'd introduced him to members of the Orchestra Guild. Tonight, after a long day of loading furniture and boxes, she'd suggested Riverside for a place to eat.

Not that Riverside didn't have great grouper sandwiches. He'd enjoyed plenty of them. He just wouldn't have thought of Rebecca as the pub grub type of woman.

He considered that initially he'd judged her on appearance alone. From the first time he'd seen her, he'd pegged her as elegant, sophisticated. And she was all that. But he knew her now, knew how hard she'd fought to attain it. He'd seen her naked and he'd seen her vulnerable. It shouldn't surprise him that she looked just as comfortable in jeans and tee shirt as she did in designer dresses.

The song ended. She clapped for the band and turned to find him watching her. She gave him an easy smile. "What?"

"Nothing." He tilted his bottle for a long drink. "Just watching you have fun."

It was easier to hold a conversation with the band on break. Rebecca pushed aside the remains of her sandwich and met Jake's gaze. "Thanks for helping today."

"My pleasure."

"It was easier today, but it still bothers me to go through her things like that."

"You handled it well."

"I had to, didn't I?"

She bit her bottom lip and looked away. The emotions she'd kept at bay all during the day were starting to well up inside and she didn't want them to spill. Jake leaned across and turned her face back to his with the touch of his fingertips.

"It's okay," he said. "You're allowed to grieve."

"It's not that." She gripped the bottle with both hands, rolling the cool smooth glass against her palms. "I miss my mother, no doubt of that. But I'm angry, too. It's just so unfair."

"Which part?"

"All of it! Emerson broke her heart. He pushed her to suicide. And if that weren't bad enough, he has the diamond!"

The diamond again. Always the diamond. As if that diamond represented her mother's life. Get the diamond back, get Mom back. Did she really not see how she'd placed too much importance on the diamond? Jake was no psychiatrist, but he recognized the truth when he saw it.

Maybe he was taking a big chance here, but he thought he had to try. She couldn't begin to heal until she saw what she was doing. "Rebecca, I think you're giving Emerson too much credit."

Her elegant brows drew together in a tight frown. "What do you mean?"

Their server interrupted. Jake leaned back while she cleared dishes. They both declined her offer of another drink.

"Lots of women get dumped," he continued when they were alone again. "They don't all go home and swallow sleeping pills."

"What are you saying?"

The ice in her tone chilled his blood. Be careful. "Just that people have choices. Some women get hurt and choose to move on. You're the perfect example. Your husband hurt you, but you didn't let that ruin your life. You were strong, got past it."

"My mother had a choice? Is that what you're saying? It wasn't Emerson's fault?"

"I'm not saying that Emerson was a hero. Just that she had control of how she reacted to him."

She sat in absolute silence, staring at him for so long that it almost made him squirm. He was just about to reach across the table for her when she spoke. Her voice was soft and slow.

"The young men you worked for—what were their names? Andy and Jared? They had choices too."

He nodded his head slowly, following her logic.

"They didn't have to throw their lives away just because Emerson made drugs available to them. The Fortune 500 is full of people who didn't die of drug overdoses. You don't think cocaine was available to those people, too?"

They sat at that wooden picnic table, cool October wind off the river stirring the air around them, the sounds of laughter, the smells of fried fish and cold beer. They sat and stared as the world carried on around them. Jake knew his own world had just tilted dramatically. He only hoped Rebecca's had too.

Rebecca watched him pay the bill, wondered vaguely if he was still using the twenty thousand dollars she'd given him. It didn't seem important just now. The only thing she could think about was the words they'd said to each other.

On one level, she knew he made sense. Emerson hadn't killed her mother directly. Everyone had choices to make in life. Even her slug of an ex-husband could have

chosen her over the demands of his family. She just couldn't compete with the trust fund.

She let Jake hold her hand as they walked back to his car. He wouldn't give her up for money. She knew that as surely as she knew his blood pumped through his veins. She let her thumb slide across his wrist, feeling the pulse there. Something was happening inside her. She wasn't sure what name to give it. She needed time and space to think about it.

Still silent, she got in the car and stared out the window on the drive home. He made sense. She knew he made sense. She just wasn't ready yet to let go of her Emerson fixation. She knew it wasn't logical, but it felt good to have someone to blame.

And she still wanted her diamond! Her father had risked everything to get it back into the family. Emerson didn't deserve it. No matter what she learned about herself and her emotions, she still wanted that diamond.

* * * * *

Jake's shoulder screamed, but he climbed the tree anyway. Dan Vogler's client was sure her husband would be with his girlfriend tonight. It was a beautiful evening, the weather was perfect. The woman had her lights on and her windows open. The trouble was that her bedroom was on the second floor.

Thank goodness for this sturdy oak. High enough for him to get a clear shot at the bedroom, far enough away that the lovers wouldn't notice him. He settled into a fork of the branches, got his camera ready and waited.

He'd hated leaving Rebecca when they both had such raw emotions. But he needed this gig. And he had plenty to think about while he waited for the shot.

How ironic that trying to help Rebecca had given him the answer to his own turmoil. Why was it so much easier to see clearly for other people than for yourself? She had stunned him when she mentioned Andy and Jared. Of course they had choices. And they had made bad ones. It wasn't his fault.

Jake shifted in the branches, tried to make his shoulder more comfortable. He had really done everything possible to keep the boys out of trouble, far more than most people would have, but he'd felt so protective of them.

It had started out as a typical employee-employer relationship, but soon he felt more like an older brother to them, if not a father. They were so naïve, brilliant beyond his comprehension, but so vulnerable.

He'd made sure the buildings were secure. He'd set up sophisticated background checks on employees. He'd incorporated monitors on the flow of people as well as ideas and information. Together the three of them had created top-notch systems.

But he couldn't protect them from themselves.

A car pulled into the driveway. Without making a sound, Jake lifted the camera and followed the figure that got out. He snapped quickly, capturing the man in digital

memory as he entered his girlfriend's house. Now he just had to wait until he could get them together in the bedroom.

Minutes ticked by. His muscles cramped from sitting so long. Methodically, he stretched and flexed each arm, each leg. He wanted to call Rebecca, to see if she was having the same thoughts he was, but he couldn't risk making that much noise. His cell phone was turned off. It had to stay that way.

He couldn't help wondering if she understood. Did she agree that Emerson wasn't responsible for her mother's death?

What a freeing thought that was. Emerson wasn't responsible. He was still a crook, a tyrant, a reprehensible bad guy. But he held no magical powers, no Dark Force. Andy and Jared, Margaret, even Rebecca and himself. All had made choices.

If he were brutally honest—and that was easier than he'd suspected—Emerson wasn't responsible for the end of his career. He'd let that happen. In too much anguish over the fate of the boys to fight back.

But not now.

As he sat in the tree, he made a promise to himself that this would be his last mission chasing wayward husbands. He needed to get back to what he did best. The longer he sat in the tree, the more ideas he had to pull his life back together.

And it was all because of Rebecca. For the first time in over two years, he'd allowed himself to heed his emotions. The more he examined it, the more he knew that he was right.

Helping her, protecting her, loving her had given him back a life he'd thought gone forever. Now he had to convince her that she could have a life too. With him.

He almost fell out of the tree on that last thought. He shifted again, trying to find a better position. But now his restlessness had more to do with his feelings than the rough and pointy bark of the tree.

He wanted her in his life. Completely. Permanently. He loved her.

Now there was a scary thought.

He reached for his phone, then thought better of it. He had to see her, had to be face to face when he told her. He wanted to see her eyes. And he wanted to touch her.

Finally the couple in the house made it up the stairs to the bedroom. Jake snapped shot after shot, preserving their adultery for the lawyers, but his mind was elsewhere.

He couldn't stop thinking about Rebecca. And himself. Two people hurt and scared, afraid of the same man, blaming the same man. It had taken the two of them to show each other, to make them whole, to heal.

He only hoped Rebecca saw it the same way he did. He couldn't wait to find out. He shot until the disk was full, then quietly climbed down from the tree. Back in his car, he looked at his watch. After midnight. It was too late. She'd be asleep. He would wait until the morning when, bright and fresh, he could talk to her about their future. Together.

Chapter Eleven

Rebecca hummed a happy tune as she transferred clothing from the washer to the dryer. She hadn't felt this good in weeks. She couldn't wait to tell Jake.

Looking out the window, she saw a cloudless blue sky, absolutely stunning in its brilliance. Maybe she'd go out today, walk somewhere and enjoy the sunshine and the mild temperature.

Before she'd even had time to formulate a plan, the doorbell rang. Sure that it was Jake, she hurried to answer. And it was. Delighted, she pulled open the door and tugged him inside. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged.

She all but knocked him on his butt. Jake put up his hands to catch her, but they quickly formed an embrace. She was kissing him and he kissed her right back.

How delicious the taste of this man! She wanted to go on kissing him until she couldn't think straight, until every ugly thing in her life was banished from her mind. But they had to talk.

She pulled away and led him into the kitchen. "I have fresh coffee."

Jake smiled. "You always do."

"Were you very late last night chasing the bad guy?"

"After midnight. But I got him." She handed him a steaming cup of coffee. He blew on it and took a sip. "You're very cheerful this morning."

"It's a gorgeous day, isn't it?" She had so much to tell him she couldn't think where to start. "Let's sit on the balcony."

She poured a cup for herself and carried it outside. There was a small table with two comfortable chairs on either side. Large pots held flowers in a variety of colors and growth stages. The space wasn't big, but it held a certain charm for her. And if she stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck around the trees, she could spot a glimpse of the bay.

Jake seemed to be bursting with some emotion that he needed to share. Even sitting in the patio chair, his body wasn't still. Foot tapping, fingers drumming. He was humming with energy. And his eyes. They were more alive than she'd ever seen them. That very first day, when she'd met him at his office, they had seemed so vacant, so dead. Today they all but danced with sparkles.

He leaned back and let his face absorb the sun for a moment. Then he opened his eyes and looked at her. "Rebecca, I have to thank you for what you said to me last night at Riverside. I was so intent on easing your worries that I didn't even notice the lesson applied to me as well."

She started to speak, but he held up a hand. "No, wait. Let me finish. Last night when I was on the job, I had nothing to do but think. And I did plenty of it. I've wallowed in grief and self-pity for two years. And now..."

He leaned forward and touched her hand. "Now I have a chance to put my life back together. Only better. Because now, I have you."

"Jake, I—"

He shook his head. He lifted his hand and laid it against her cheek. She felt the warmth of his palm against her skin and sighed as he gently stroked. When had he been given the power to make her melt at just this simple touch?

"You saved me, doll."

Her heart did a curious little flip. Her breath caught and held. Her stomach quivered. "No, Jake. You did it all by yourself. I may have given you the reason, but you had it in you all along."

"I never would have seen it." He leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

It was only a gentle slide of lips on lips, but the simplicity of it was achingly beautiful. Rebecca felt it all the way to her toes. He had kissed her roughly. He had kissed her passionately. This tenderness was startling, almost more than she could take in.

When he pulled away, she felt naked for the loss of him. "Now tell me," he said. "What were your thoughts last night?"

She ran a hand through her hair, brushing it away from her face. So many thoughts. Where to start? "I thought about my mother. She must have been really..." Rebecca cast about in her mind for the right word to use. "Fragile. Too fragile to deal with the situation. But now that I think about it, she was always that way. My dad took care of everything. He took care of her. She didn't do well when he was out of town."

She looked away, at the beautiful blue of the sky, gathering her thoughts. "Edward Emerson is an evil man." She looked Jake straight in the eye. "But he did not kill my mother. I can't blame that on him."

"Big words, doll. Important words." Jake took her hand and tugged until she came to him. He cradled her in his lap, his strong arms wrapped around her. Safe. Protected. She laid her cheek against his chest and felt the beat of his heart.

She would have sat that way for hours on end, but his cell phone rang. She almost urged him to ignore it, but it could be important. He dug it out of his pocket and looked at the name on the caller ID. "It's Vasquez," he said.

She got up from his lap to make it easier for him, but she couldn't help listening. What could he want? Jake was explaining that his shoulder was nearly healed. Surely the man hadn't called just to inquire as to Jake's health.

Then his tone changed. His eyes narrowed. "Really?" he said into the phone. "You're sure?"

Rebecca sat perfectly still, listening, but she couldn't hear the other man speaking. Jake's brows were drawn tight together. He looked at her, then looked away. "Okay, thanks," he said, then snapped the phone shut.

"What is it?"

Jake sat, turning the phone over and over in his big hands.

"Jake?" She leaned forward and stopped the movement. "What did Marco want to tell you?"

He set the phone down carefully on the frosted glass top of the table. "Emerson is coming back to Tampa. He has a buyer here."

Her heart started pumping hard. "He's bringing the diamond?"

"It would seem so."

"Jake, that's great news!" She leaned forward and put both hands on his arms. "We can get it!"

"Rebecca—"

"It will be easy. We already know how to get in. We know the combination to the safe. We know he plays poker on Wednesday night. It will be a walk in the park."

His eyes were dark, serious. Why didn't he share her enthusiasm? He looked at her like she disgusted him. "Jake, what's wrong? Don't you see how easy it will be to get the diamond now?"

Slowly, he removed her hands from his arms and stood up. She stood, too, wishing she could draw herself up to match his height. "Didn't you learn anything last night?" he asked. "Didn't we talk about this not five minutes ago?"

"We talked about my mother. This is different. This is about the diamond."

He drove his hands through his hair as if he would pull it out by the roots. "Rebecca, we damn near got caught last time."

"But we won't—"

"You were kidnapped, I was shot. Don't you think we've risked enough for the damn diamond?"

Her heart was still beating. She was sure it was still beating. But her blood was thick, barely moving through her veins. She had to gasp to draw a breath. When she finally spoke, her words were clipped, even. "I will take the risk."

He stared at her with hardened eyes. Gone was the sparkle she'd welcomed earlier. Gone was the light that shone just for her. Gone was the tenderness that had shivered through her just a moment ago. Something in his look scared her, but she stood her ground, chin thrust forward in defiance.

"Well, I won't," he said at last. "And neither should you. I can't do this anymore."

He started for the door. She followed after him, knowing that she shouldn't let him walk out, unable to make herself stop him. Halfway across the living room, she called, "Jake."

He turned around. For a moment she thought he would walk back to her, but he just shook his head. "I've had enough." He put his hand on the doorknob, pulled the door open, looked at her. "If you finish this diamond chase, call me."

She didn't move. Not a single muscle in her body even twitched for a moment. What had just happened? One second everything was fine, he was kissing her like she was the only woman in the world, she'd been all but positive he was about to declare his love for her and then —

Then he was gone.

Gone. Jake was gone. And was he coming back? No. Not as long as she thought the diamond was important enough to chase. There was a pain, a physical pain, inside her. She wrapped her arms across her chest and bent over, almost unable to catch her breath.

Oh, this was familiar. Too familiar. She'd felt this same swift kick in the guts when her father died, when Greg left her, when she'd found her mother lying dead on her bed.

She straightened up and laid a shaking hand against the wall. She should be used to this by now. She should understand that she was meant to be alone, that no one would ever stay. Drawing in deep even breaths, she clenched her hand into a fist. Fine. If this is the way it was going to be, then she'd deal with it.

She forced herself to walk out to the balcony, to pick up the cups and take them to the kitchen sink. There was absolutely no reason why it should hurt this badly. Four weeks ago, she hadn't even known him.

But good heavens! What they had packed into that short time. Trips to Miami, to Marisol. And this past week when she'd taken care of him while his shoulder healed.

She stood at the sink, the water running, but she barely noticed. This man was different. This was a good guy, a strong-willed hero who would always be her champion. Then why was he walking away from her now, when the diamond was just within her grasp?

A very tiny part of her knew that he had a point. This chase for the diamond was consuming her life. But if she didn't do something now, while she had the chance, she might never see it again. She wasn't her father. She couldn't fly to Monte Carlo, Paris, or Rio and sneak into a hotel. She couldn't climb across rooftops and scale walls. Even if she could do it, she wouldn't.

It was kismet, Emerson's coming back to Tampa with the diamond. It was meant to be. This was her opportunity and she could not let it pass her by. If it alienated Jake, so be it. Later, when it was over, when she held the diamond in her hand, she could show him. She could make him see why it meant so much to her. It was all she had left of her family.

* * * * *

It was Wednesday before Dan Vogler had time to see Jake and trade cash for the photographs. They met at a bistro on Harbor Island. Jake got there first. He walked through the restaurant to the patio bar and ordered Jack Daniel's on the rocks.

As tempting as it had been to curl up with his buddy Jack the past few days, he'd managed to resist that temptation. While it might deaden the ache for a few hours, when he woke up he'd have a hangover and still be missing Rebecca.

A hundred times in the past three days, he'd started to head to her office to talk to her about going after the diamond. In his imagination his talk with her had run the gamut from helping her break into Emerson's house again to talking her out of the ridiculous notion. A hundred times, he'd turned around and sat down behind his desk.

Taking a sip of the mind-numbing alcohol, he walked over to the railing and gazed across the water at the sparkling lights of downtown Tampa. It was after eight o'clock, full dark. It occurred to him that Rebecca could be right now hiding in the bushes at Emerson's house, waiting for him to drive away to his poker game.

No matter how hard he tried to push that image away, it nagged at him. One hand tightened on the rocks glass while the other gripped the balcony's rail. When Dan Vogler walked up behind him, he jumped, almost spilling the alcohol down the front of his shirt.

"Sorry about that," Dan apologized. "You jumpy?"

"No, it's okay." They sat down at one of the tables on the crowded deck. "I was just lost in thought."

"Yeah?" He grinned. "What's her name?"

The cocktail waitress kept Jake from answering that question. After she left, Dan took a long look at his friend. "You've cleaned up your act, buddy. Haircut, clean clothes. Hell, I don't know when I last saw you wearing a jacket."

"I thought it was time to stop wallowing and have some sort of a life."

"I've been telling you that."

"Some things you need to find out for yourself."

Jake heard those words come out of his mouth. He sucked on an ice cube, thinking. Was that it? Was it necessary for Rebecca to learn her own lesson? Hell, he hadn't let anyone tell him, had he? But she couldn't risk her life in the lesson. Maybe he should go by Emerson's house. Just check. Maybe she wasn't even there tonight. Maybe she'd given up on the chase. Then why hadn't she called him?

Because he'd hurt her feelings if not outright pissed her off. She wasn't going to call. She would never call. He'd been so disappointed with her eagerness to keep up this insane search for the diamond that he'd lashed out at her. What woman would call a man after the way he'd walked out on her?

"Jake? Hello, Jake?"

He set his glass down on the table. "Sorry. Lost in thought again. What did you say?"

"I asked you where you went with the Kendicott heiress."

Good God, had Dan read his mind? "The Kendicott heiress?"

"Yeah. Scotty Millstone said he saw you with her at the airport. Looked like you were hurt."

Scotty Millstone. Another private dick Jake knew that did work around town. His clients weren't quite as respectable as divorce lawyers, if you could get worse than that. What was Millstone doing at the airport that night? "First of all, she's not an heiress."

Dan raised a brow. "Kendicott Beach at Kendicott State Park. The Kendicott Hotel?"

"They lost all their money in the Depression, so there's nothing to inherit. I don't think she qualifies as an heiress without some huge trust fund in probate."

"Aha!" Dan leaned forward, elbows on the table. "So where did you go with her?"

"It's a job."

"Is it?" His voice was thick with skepticism.

Jake stared at his friend, took a long drink of Jack Daniel's. Finally he answered. "Yeah."

Dan seemed to accept that, or maybe he just read the signals that he shouldn't push. Whichever, Jake was grateful. But the whole thing was puzzling. "Where did you see Scotty?"

"At Lucky's. Friday night. Flashing a wad of cash."

Jake shook his head. "He was never very bright."

Dan laughed. "No, not especially."

But what was he doing at the airport and where did he get the cash? Who knew they were coming in? Could he be there for someone else? No. In his business, one learned to question coincidences. There was always a reason.

"Dan, I'm sorry." Jake put down his glass, started to stand up. "I think I have to leave."

"Wait a minute!" Dan put out a hand, as if to stop him. "What's wrong?"

Nothing. God, he hoped nothing was wrong. But he couldn't take the chance. It might mean Rebecca's life. "I'm not sure, but I have to go."

"Do you need help?"

"No." Yes. Maybe. He hoped he didn't need help. In fact, he hoped this gut feeling was wrong. "Wait a minute. Yes. Give me your shirt."

"What?"

Dan looked at him like he was crazy and maybe he was, but he had to know for sure. Dan had on a black shirt. Jake's was white. He needed the cover of darkness. "Just take off your shirt and wear mine. I'll explain later. Hurry!"

Jake had already shed his light-colored jacket and was hurrying to unbutton his shirt. Dan must have understood the urgency in his expression, or trusted him enough

to go along. They both stood up and shed their shirts faster than strippers. Then just as hurriedly switched clothing and dressed again.

Dan gave a sharp intake of his breath when he saw the healing wound on Jake's shoulder. "What happened to you?"

Jake threw a twenty dollar bill at Dan and picked up the jacket he'd shed. "I'll explain later. Pay the bill, would ya?"

And he was off, glad that he hadn't used the valet to park his car. The wait would have killed him. He likely would have jogged across the bridge before his car could be brought up. He jogged through the garage instead.

It seemed to take forever to pay the attendant at the booth. Why did the world seem to move in slow motion when so much was at stake? Finally, he exited the garage and headed back across the small bridge to downtown Tampa. Emerson's home wasn't too far away, but traffic would slow him.

It was times like these when he missed the siren and flashing lights of police work. He pushed the car as fast as he dared. Getting pulled over for speeding now could cost valuable time. It might mean Rebecca's life.

He cruised through a yellow light and pushed on. A trap. It was clearly a trap. Emerson would have hired Scotty to spy on them at the airport. Then he told Vasquez he was meeting a buyer in Tampa because he knew Marco would tell him. And Rebecca.

By now Emerson would have figured out that it was Rebecca his man had grabbed at the house a couple of weeks ago. All he had to do was make her believe the diamond was there again, then sit back and wait for her to try to get it.

He slammed his fists against the steering wheel in frustration when a red light cost him valuable time. The worst part of it, the thing that he almost couldn't bring himself to think, was the same old stupid self-blame. He should have realized. He should have seen it coming. He'd been too caught up in his own emotions to clearly assess the situation.

If he hadn't been so disappointed at her reaction, he would have given it more thought, seen it for the trap it was before she fell into it.

He dug out his cell phone and tried her number. Maybe she wasn't there yet. Maybe he could stop her, or at least slow her down until he got there. But instead of a ring, he got voice mail. Damn it! He slung the phone across the car in frustration.

Cursing himself for an idiot, he stretched as far as he could, nearly running off the road, to get the phone back. Rebecca didn't answer, but Rick Stevens would. And this could be exactly the piece of information they'd been waiting for. Emerson didn't come all the way to Tampa just to lure Rebecca into a trap.

While he talked to Rick, he wound through the narrow streets of Emerson's neighborhood. This time when he finished his call, he put the phone back in his pocket. When this was over, he promised himself, when he got her out of this, he would never

again do work for someone he cared about. He couldn't afford the distraction of emotions. Her life might be depending on it right now.

As he neared the house, he slowed, looking for an out-of-the-way place to hide his car. The rest of the trek would have to be on foot. If he were going to have any shot at saving her, he needed the element of surprise on his side.

He came to the little curve in the street that jogged around the tree, the same spot where he and Rebecca had left his car the other time. The panic that he'd been fighting back rose up and grabbed him when he saw the gleam of the bumper reflected in his headlights. It was Rebecca's car.

There wasn't enough room for him to pull in behind her. Besides, since he knew she was there, he wanted his car closer to Emerson's house for a faster escape if need be. There was no need to be secretive. Either this was a trap and there was no hiding at all, or Emerson really was out for his weekly poker game.

He pulled over to the curb next to the gate that he and Rebecca had scaled last time and got out.

Chapter Twelve

Dressed in black from stocking cap to canvas shoes, she stalked shadow to shadow. This time she had no fear. She had learned the routine. She could get in, she could open the safe and she could get out. And this time, she would have the diamond when she left.

Still, she knew better than to be foolish. Never make assumptions. Quietly, she picked the lock at the kitchen door. The delicate click signaled her success, just as it had the other two times. She opened the door in complete darkness and hurried around the island to the alarm controls. Nothing had changed. She knew exactly how to disarm the system.

That done, she let out a breath she hadn't even realized she held. She stood completely still, letting her eyes adjust. Something was different. She cocked her head, listening, but there was no sound. Nerves? She didn't think so. Adrenaline, maybe.

She walked quietly to the hallway and put a foot on the staircase. There she paused again to listen. It was as if the house breathed, as if it resented her intrusion. Ridiculous! she chided herself. She'd watched from the bushes while the men got into the car and drove away. She knew there was nothing to fear.

Still, she was aware now that the enemies she faced were far more dangerous than she'd first thought. These were the people who had put a bullet through Jake.

Jake. She still couldn't think of him without hurting. But now was not the time to examine those feelings. She could go to him later, after she had the diamond. He would be proud of her for getting it back. Wouldn't he?

Never mind. She couldn't allow that distraction right now. She put a gloved hand on the banister and started up the stairs into the darkness.

Halfway up she paused again, certain she had heard a sound, a shuffle, as if someone were trying not to make noise with a footstep. She held her breath and listened. This had not happened the other two times. She'd been very sure of herself and her surroundings, even the first time she'd come inside. Why now?

After straining to hear, she dismissed it. She was just on edge because Jake wasn't with her, because she knew how dangerous this could be, because it was her only hope at recovering the diamond. Too many emotions. Her father had always said he couldn't do his job well if he allowed himself to think. The same was true now. Emotions clouded the mind, altered reactions, confused the facts.

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her spine and continued up the stairs. As she moved down the hallway, there was less and less light. Didn't matter. She knew where she was going.

Outside the door of the master bedroom, she paused, listening. There was not a sound, but still something wasn't quite right. She couldn't say what, but she knew something was different.

Shake it off, she told herself. Be calm. It's just the heightened emotions, the anticipation of really getting the diamond this time.

She walked into the bedroom, putting a hand against the wall to help her get through the darkness. She could just make out the outline of the picture that hid the safe. She pulled a slim flashlight from her pocket and aimed the beam at the wall.

Suppressing the urge to glance over her shoulder, she swung the picture away from the wall. The slender column of light followed the dial as she spun to the numbers that had been burned into her memory. She was rewarded with the sound and feel of the lock disengaging. She blew out a deep breath and turned the handle to the wall safe.

Now she allowed the quiver in her stomach, the tremble in her hand. She was seconds away from holding the diamond, from the vindication for her mother's death, from beating Emerson at his own game.

Rebecca tugged at the safe's door and turned her light into the cavern. Empty! It was empty! She couldn't help cursing.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

She screamed and spun around at the same time that the room was flooded with light. Emerson sat in a chair in the corner of the room beside the light switch. In his left hand, the Kendicott Diamond dangled from its chain. In his right he held a gun.

Her heart pounded fiercely against her chest, but she would not let this man see her fear. Squaring her shoulders, she drew in a long breath. As she let it out, she summoned a calmness from the very depths of her being. "Yes, thank you. If you'll just hand it over, I'll be out of your way."

"I don't think so." He stood, keeping the gun trained on her. "Where's your boyfriend tonight?"

Rebecca kept her eyes on Emerson, but in her mind she was gauging the distance to the exits. The balcony was the better choice, she thought, but those doors were not open. That would cost too much time. Keep him talking. "If you're referring to the man you shot, we are no longer seeing each other. I don't know where he is."

She was torn between being glad Jake wasn't there so he wouldn't be in harm's way and wishing he were there so he could help her overpower Emerson. There didn't seem to be any of his men still in the house. Emerson had done this alone. In the time it took her to wonder why, she realized the answer. No witnesses.

Her stomach plunged to her toes. He intended to kill her. He'd told Vasquez he would be in town expressly to lure her to his house. And it had worked, the swine! Oh, what a foolish chance she'd taken. In the midst of her grief she'd lost her grasp on reason. She saw clearly now how she'd let the diamond chase consume her. No wonder Jake had walked out. She'd ceased to think logically.

"Pity. I had hoped to take care of both of you tonight, but I'll deal with it."

As he spoke, he walked to the balcony doors, keeping the gun trained on her. He looked out, scanning the yard for any activity. Apparently he saw nothing.

Rebecca heard the lapping of the bay against the seawall. The rhythm of her heartbeat increased, pounding against her chest. Jake wasn't safe. Walking out on her hadn't made him safe from Emerson's greed and anger. "You don't need to hurt Jake. This is my own mission. I want my mother's diamond."

"Oh, that's charming. It really is." He circled back to a spot near the bedroom door, never taking the gun off her. "Protecting him. I notice he isn't protecting you."

He was just about eye level with Rebecca. Not a tall man, just a brazen one. He thought he could hold her off with a gun and no backup? Well, maybe he could, but not without a fight.

She squared her chin and willed herself not to tremble. Bravado was all she had right now. She needed to use it. "I don't need protection." She made her voice drip with arrogance. "Give me my diamond."

"Sure." With just that word, he tossed it across the room to her. Rebecca caught it and clasped it to her chest. She didn't even have time to wonder why before he continued. "You'll be holding it when the police arrive."

He braced one hand against the chair, casually leaning. "When I returned home, I heard a noise. It disturbed me, so I picked up the gun I keep in my desk downstairs. When I entered the room, you threatened me, so I had to shoot. I didn't want to, but it couldn't be helped."

A chill swept over her. He really did intend to kill her. She had been a fool to try this alone. Maybe to try it at all. If Jake had come with her, he'd be in danger now, too.

She squeezed her fingers around the diamond in her hand and felt tears sting her eyes. As fervent as her desire to hold this gem had been, it was secondary now. Now, all she cared about was Jake. How stupid she was! This diamond was nothing compared to how much she cared about Jake. And she would never see him again. She didn't even want to think about how he would feel when he found out she'd been killed. This would send him back into his shell. Another time he didn't come through. How could she let him know that it wasn't his fault? How could she make sure he was all right?

She blinked furiously, forcing the tears away. She hadn't come this far in life to lose it all now. She'd beaten every obstacle thrown before her over the years. This was just one more. Emerson would not do this to her. She looked up at him, defiant, but she spoke calmly. "You won't get away with it."

He lifted a brow. "Get away with shooting an intruder in my home? One who is holding my precious jewel in her hand?"

"Plenty of people know the diamond is mine. No one will believe you."

"People like Marco? And your Jake?" He smiled. "I'm not worried about anyone believing their stories."

"How about Detective Rick Stevens of the Police Department?" Jake walked into the room, gun pointed at Emerson's head. "Do you think anyone will believe him?"

"Jake!" Rebecca had never felt such a wash of relief in her life. Jake was here! He was safe and he was going to make everything all right.

"Stay still, doll." He took another step and pressed the barrel of his gun against Emerson's temple. He towered over the crook by a good foot. Even in a fist fight, Rebecca didn't think Jake would have any trouble.

Emerson kept his cool. "I don't see any detective in the room with us."

"That's because he's outside at your dock, removing the cocaine from your boat." Jake waited a beat to let that sink in. "Put down the gun."

Rebecca held her breath as Emerson stood strong. Then very slowly, he lowered the gun to the chair before him. He lifted his hands, surrendering. But Jake knew better than to relax. Still keeping his aim on Emerson's head, he picked up the other gun.

Without losing eye contact, he stuffed Emerson's gun into the waistband of his pants. He stood with his legs braced apart, both hands wrapped around the weapon trained on the enemy. Rebecca could see the tension in the bunched muscles beneath his shirt, in his thighs, in the sure grip of his hands. He was in control and he would remain that way. As she watched, Jake faced down his demon and he won.

Good for him. Her particular demon was gripped tightly in her fist. She stuffed the diamond into her pocket just as two undercover police officers swept into the room, their badges flashing on lanyards around their necks.

One of them cuffed Emerson and patted him down while the other talked to Jake. "You were right. The boat was full of coke. I sure am glad we decided to play your hunch."

The two cops escorted Emerson out of the room and down the stairs. "I'll be right there," Jake said to them. "Give me a minute."

Rebecca's entire body trembled. The adrenaline had yet to recede. She put a hand against her chest as if to calm her heart and waited for Jake to speak. He stared at her, his brown eyes dark and flashing with emotion. "A few seconds later..." His voice died. He couldn't finish that thought.

Rebecca shook her head and took the three steps across the room. She all but threw herself into his arms and he clasped her tightly to his chest. "Jake, I'm so sorry. I had no idea what I was getting into and I should have listened to you."

Jake held her, standing perfectly still because he thought if he tried to move, he'd shatter into a million pieces. If he hadn't talked to Rick about his theories, if he hadn't figured out the trap, if he hadn't arrived in time, she would be dead. His mind flashed on an image of Andy Wynn lying on the deep carpet of his high-tech office. It could have been the same with Rebecca. He could have arrived too late.

But he didn't. She was alive and warm and moving in his arms. Her shoulders shook. Her breath heaved. He pushed back to look at her face. "We made it, doll. We got through it and we're both alive. Emerson will be away for a long, long time."

"I don't know what to say." She wanted him to hold her like this forever. She felt as if her world had been slightly off-axis for the past few weeks, but now it was right again. She had everything she could possibly want in her life.

And the diamond! She'd forgotten. She put a hand into her pocket and pulled out the pendant. "I got it, Jake. He used it to lure me here, but I got it."

Jake took a step back and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Take a good look at it, doll. See whether it's real."

"Of course it's real." Wasn't it? Why wouldn't it be? Her brows drew together into a frown as she raised the bauble closer and took a good look. Her heart pounded. No. It couldn't be. This was not her diamond. She'd need Uncle Benny to confirm for her, but she didn't think this was anything more than cheap glass. It wasn't on the diamond-encrusted chain that she'd seen before. It wasn't even the right cut.

She looked to Jake, puzzled. "Why?"

He shrugged. "It just made sense to me. If it was a trap, why did he need to bring the real diamond? That's too risky. And if he didn't really have a buyer here, then why make the trip at all? Just to trick you? No." He shook his head. "He had another reason for coming. You were just a sidebar for him."

"So you figured out that he was really coming to bring the cocaine?"

He laid his hands on her shoulders and ran them down to her hands. "Rick helped."

"And he's the one who found me for you when Marco had me in Miami."

"Right. He has access to equipment that I don't. And he's been after Emerson for a couple of years, so he was happy to listen to my theories. They fit with what he believed, too."

The high-intensity lights of police cars swept around the room as the backup units arrived. "I have to go talk to Rick. I'll walk you to your car."

They headed out the bedroom door to the stairs. She had more to think about than she could process all at once. She had the diamond, but the diamond wasn't real. And strangely, it didn't even matter to her.

What mattered right now and probably for the rest of her life, was the man walking beside her. On the short distance to her car, she couldn't think of the words to say, the question to ask. But she had to know.

He opened her car door. She turned and looked up at him. "When you finish with the police, you'll come?"

A small smile turned his lips and he bent to kiss her lightly. "Count on it, doll."

* * * * *

At home, Rebecca showered to get the charcoal smudges off her face and the general feeling of Emerson's home off her entire body. Freshly scrubbed, she put on tailored slacks and a lacy top. She laid the fake diamond on her dresser and went to the kitchen to make coffee. She needed the mundane chore to find some normalcy. There were too many things to think about.

The diamond. She had made it the focus of her life from the moment she found her mother lying on the bed in the faded nightgown. She'd made it a symbol of her mother's life, as if returning the diamond to the family could bring her mother back to her.

She knew it now. She understood why Jake had been so frustrated with her. Nothing could return her to her childhood. The happy little family they had been would never exist again. She had to forge her own way in the world. Now she knew she could do that.

Emerson. Her diamond was probably long gone, sold for a mere pittance compared to what it was worth, but she had some satisfaction in knowing that Emerson would never get to enjoy that money. The drug charges were serious. If Jake's buddies were as good as he, then they'd have plenty of other things to pin on Emerson as well.

She went through the motions of grinding the beans, measuring the water, but her mind was elsewhere. Her entire body hummed with the anticipation of Jake's arrival. She had to tell him. He had to know that he'd helped her through the mess in her mind to the happiest she'd been, not just since her mother died, but ever.

She had to tell him that she loved him.

A frightening thought because of the risk and responsibility, but it was truth. She loved him and she wanted him. Always.

At last there came the knock on the door. She hurried to let him in, but once the door was opened, she was overcome with an unnatural shyness. Nerves, she told herself as she stepped back to let him enter.

Jake shoved his hands into his pockets because if he touched her, even slightly, he would lose the control he'd gathered while he stood in the hallway waiting. Nothing in his life had been as important as the next ten minutes.

He followed her into the kitchen, but he couldn't let it happen in there. It was too ordinary, holding too many reminders of the various conversations they'd held at that counter. No. This had to be special.

He went to the balcony and opened the doors, certain that she would follow. He put both hands on the railing and looked at the night. Insects chirped accent to the occasional cars passing on the quiet street. The crisp air carried the perfume of the flowers she kept in pots around the perimeter of the deck. It was a pretty night. They would want to remember it.

He turned and started to speak, but the sight of her took his breath away. She wore her hair loose and falling around her shoulders. The lacy top she wore lay gently against her smooth skin. Her eyes sparkled like the diamond she'd chased.

He'd almost lost her tonight. That thought was more than he could stand. He wanted to tell her. He wanted it to be easy between them, but it never had been. It never would.

She stood, twisting the fingers of one hand in the other. She bit her bottom lip, looked at the stars, looked back at him. "Jake, I don't know how to say this. I know I was selfish and careless and I put you in harm's way tonight. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up when you did."

She took the few steps that separated them and looked up into his eyes. "Even with his gun on me, even when I thought he would kill me, all I could think of was how it would hurt you if it happened." She spoke more quickly now, her words all but tumbling out of her. "It would be just the same as before, when Emerson was responsible for the—"

"Shhhh." He raised a hand and touched her lips just lightly, just enough to make her stop. "It didn't happen."

"I know, but it almost did and I was really scared because—"

"Shhhh." Again, he silenced her. Taking her hand, he led her to the patio chairs.

They sat facing each other. Jake felt a calmness that had been missing his entire life. Sometimes, the right things just made themselves obvious. He held her hand and smiled as he met the inquisitive look in her eyes. "Rebecca, you know what a broken man I was the day you walked into my life."

He watched the shine return to her eyes as she nodded. "I had let myself reach the very bottom and I blamed it on someone else when that really wasn't the case."

The wind blew a strand of hair into her face. He brushed it away. "You helped me to see that I had made my life the mess it was, not anyone else. I have a chance at making something of my life now because of you and for that I'm grateful."

She didn't speak, just sat looking at him. "I really wanted to get the diamond back for you, just because it would have pleased you. I'm sorry I couldn't do that." He put a hand into his pants pocket. "But I can give you this one."

He pulled out a ring with a thin gold band and a tiny speck of a diamond that winked in the dim light. "It was my grandmother's."

Rebecca gasped as her heart pounded against her chest. She looked at the precious ring, then up at Jake. She had never seen such a serious look on his face, not even when he'd been shot. "Jake," she whispered.

"I need you in my life, Rebecca. Always." He pushed the ring onto her finger. "Please marry me so I can stop worrying about whose house you're breaking into when I'm not with you."

Now emotions welled up in her and brought tears to hover on her lashes. She could do nothing to stop them. She held her hand up and looked at the ring on her hand. It was more beautiful than any diamond a hundred times, a thousand times larger. "I will marry you if you promise not to stand in front of a bullet again."

"I'm sorry we lost your diamond, doll."

"Oh, but look what I have now." She put a hand behind his head and pulled her to him. The kiss was long and deep as it sealed the promise. Forever.

About the Author

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