

## CHRISTOPHER



### *Chapter 1*

Tansy Deverell was missing again. In fact, she'd been missing for a week. It disturbed Christopher Deverell when he couldn't find his mother, who was in her seventies. More particularly, it disturbed him when the famous Lassiter Detective Agency of Houston, Texas, couldn't find her. Chris had come home from a trip to Spain to find the family in an uproar over the matriarch's disappearance. Tansy was known for her madcap life-style, and she tended to cause scandals wherever she went. Chris's older brother Logan lived in Hous-

ton with his wife, Kit, and their new son, Bryce. Since Logan's marriage, Tansy had become even wilder than usual. She was a diabetic who was on insulin and had to watch her diet very carefully, and Chris worried that she might indulge too much in her travels. Her last escapade had almost landed her in a harem in the Middle East. For a woman in her early seventies, Tansy was adventurous indeed. Old age, she often said, would have to run very fast in order to catch up with her. She wasn't kidding.

On a whim, Chris had traveled to Jacobsville, Texas, to see his cousin Emmett Deverell. In the past, nobody visited Emmett unless they were nuts, but now that Emmett had married Melody and they'd settled down nicely with his three children from his first marriage, Emmett had mellowed. He managed a ranch for Ted Regan, in which he now had a partnership. Things were looking prosperous there, and Tansy might have detoured to visit them. But she hadn't. Chris met with disappointment. Emmett hadn't seen nor heard from Tansy in months.

Chris drove into town and had lunch at the local high-class restaurant, sitting alone at a corner table with his steak and salad while he brooded about his mother. Logan hadn't been overly concerned. It was amusing how the brothers had changed over the years. In the past, Logan was the straitlaced, worrying one. Now, he was more relaxed and less anxious, especially since his marriage. On the other hand, Chris had been almost as madcap as their mother when he was younger, and women had passed through his life like butterflies. He was thirty-three, and a devastating automobile accident had left him with a different view of the world. His once-handsome face was now less pleasing to the eye, two long furrows having been carved into one lean cheek by shattered glass. He'd lost the sight in one eye, although plastic surgery had spared him deformity. But nothing seemed to erase the scars completely, and he was too weary of hospitals and skin grafts to pursue them further.

He wasn't repulsive by any stretch of the imagination. His smooth olive complexion was enhanced by liquid black eyes with thick black lashes and eyebrows, and a chiseled mouth that

was more sardonic than amused most of the time. He had a lean face and a tall, lean, muscular body that was more attractive than ever since his weeks of sailing near the coast of Spain with an old friend. He enjoyed the challenge of the sea, where he could pit his muscle against the waves and wind. A man with as much money as he'd inherited from his father could do whatever pleased him. Unlike Logan, who enjoyed working at the family investment firm, Chris had invested his inheritance in multinational corporations and tripled it in less than ten years. He could live comfortably off the interest, and he'd never found an adequate reason to work a routine job. He dabbled in designing yachts with the friend with whom he'd been sailing in Spain. His ideas were innovative, and one of his designs had taken its owner into the finals of the America's Cup race. He was paid for that idea, and for several others that had sold well.

He watched his investments like a hawk. But increasing his means no longer satisfied him. The carefree bachelor's existence that was such fun in his early twenties was distasteful to him now. He no longer sized up women as potential conquests or enjoyed the attention of pretty fortune-hunters. He felt jaded and life was suddenly empty.

He fingered his coffee cup absently, the motion bringing the waitress with a refill.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked pleasantly, sizing up his expensive suit and shoes with practiced expertise.

He shook his head. "Thanks. I'm fine."

He didn't encourage her to stay and chat. She was young and pretty, but so were dozens of other women. He envied Logan his family life. Maybe marriage wasn't so bad a thing. Certainly that baby was a delightful little bundle. Chris had never been around children much, but he adored his new nephew and spent a lot of time shopping for educational toys to bring him. That had amused Tansy, who'd suggested that Chris get married and have children of his own.

He'd only shrugged it off with a smile. He'd never had a serious relationship with a woman. His romantic encounters over the years had been light and pleasant and brief. Now he felt as if he'd missed something. Except for his friend who built yachts, he had no one who was close to him. Most of his old girlfriends

were married. He traveled alone, ate alone, slept alone. He felt ancient, especially since the wreck.

"Excuse me, but aren't you Christopher Deverell?"

The voice was quiet, unhurried, with a pleasant huskiness. He turned his head to find the face that went with it. Not bad, he thought. Pale gray eyes, pretty complexion, rounded chin, bow mouth, short blond hair with a wave over the pencil-thin eyebrow.

She looked like something out of the thirties, he mused.

"How would you know who I am?" he asked indifferently.

"It's my job." She produced a pad and pen. "I work for the Weatherby News Service. We're not as big as the Associated Press, but we're working hard to catch up," she added with a faint smile. The smile faded quickly. "We're trying to locate your mother, as it happens."

He lifted his hot coffee to his mouth. "Join the club."

"She's gone into hiding," she continued.

"Not that I blame her, under the circumstances, but..."

"Sit down," he said curtly. "You're on my blind side."

"Your... what?"

He turned his head and looked fully at her, so that she could see the extent of the damage the accident had done to his once-handsome face. The black eye in the socket above the two deep scars and just below a smaller one stared straight ahead, but without sight. The nerve damage had been extensive.

She caught her breath audibly and sat down, visibly flustered. "I'm sorry!" she said. "I didn't realize..."

"Most people don't, until they look at me for a while," he added with a mocking smile. He leaned back in the chair, pulling his jacket away from the thin white shirt that covered his broad, hair-roughened chest. In the position, the muscles were visible, and the woman quickly averted her eyes, as if looking at him that way embarrassed her.

"About your mother," she continued.

"First things first. Who are you?"

She hesitated. "I'm Delia Larson."

He nodded. "Do you have some idea where my mother might be?"

"Of course." She turned back a few pages in the small flip notebook. "When last seen, she was in a little town just outside London, called Back Wallop." She glanced at him. "That's a village."

"And what would she be doing there?"

"That's where *he* lives," she replied, surprised.

"He, who?" he asked with a broad scowl.

"Look here, she's your mother," she returned. "Don't you know that she was involved with an MP?"

"A Member of Parliament?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, Lord Cecil Harvey. He belonged to the House of Lords and was a relative of the Windsors." She shook her head. "I can't believe you don't know this!"

"I've been on holiday in Spain," he said.

"It's been all over the tabloids," she continued.

His face hardened. "I don't read the scandal sheets," he said tersely.

"Considering how many times you're featured in them, I guess not," she agreed pleasantly. "You had the front page of most of them for two weeks when that Italian countess accused you of fathering her child—"

"We were discussing my mother," he interrupted curtly.

She grimaced. "Sorry. I guess that hit a nerve. Anyway, Mrs. Deverell was photographed coming out of a London hotel with Lord Harvey. There were rumors that he was going to divorce his wife and marry her."

He put the coffee cup down audibly. "My mother?"

"Your mother." She studied him curiously. "You don't look at all like her," she commented. "She has blue eyes and a very fair complexion, almost girlishly pretty."

"My brother and I take after our father. He was Spanish."

"Spanish?" She frowned and flipped quickly through the notebook. "That's not what I was told. They said your father was French, a member of the nobility."

"Our stepfather was French," he returned, and refused to even think of the man, despite the many years it had been since he'd seen him. "Our father died when I was pretty

young. Tansy remarried. Several times," he added drolly and picked up his coffee cup again.

"Oh, I see." She was watching him closely. "Why isn't your father mentioned?"

He chuckled. "He was a minor businessman until he bought a few cheap shares of stock and put them away in a safe-deposit box. Long after his death, the box was discovered and opened, and Logan and I inherited a small fortune."

"What was the stock?" she asked suspiciously.

He lifted the coffee cup to his chiseled mouth. "Standard Oil."

She grinned at him. "Amazing foresight."

He shook his head. "Sheer damned luck. He didn't know beans about investments."

"They say your brother does. And so do you."

He chuckled. "I dabble. Not much." His dark eyes narrowed. "Why are you trying to track down Tansy?"

"Why do you call her Tansy instead of 'Mother'?"

"She isn't old enough emotionally to be anyone's mother," he said simply. "Logan and I grew up trying to keep her out of trouble, with occasional and brief assistance from her five husbands."

"Five?" She glanced at her notes. "I only found four."

"You haven't answered my question."

She fingered the notebook and stared at it instead of him. "I blew a story, a really big one. I'm going to get fired unless I can make amends somehow. I can't lose my job. I have...responsibilities." She lifted her pale eyes to his. "I want to find your mother before the rest of the media can. I want an exclusive interview."

"Ask her for one."

"I can't find her. She's left Back Wallop and nobody knows where she went"

He finished his coffee. "Don't look at me. I can't find her, either, not even with the help of the best detective agency in the state."

She gnawed her lower lip worriedly. "I guess it's understandable that she wouldn't want to be found."

"Thank you for noticing," he said in a tone that dripped sarcasm. "A woman being ac-

**cused of breaking up a marriage wouldn't rush to find the media."**

**Her eyebrows went up. They were pencil thin, very dark despite her blond hair, and quite interesting. "That's not why she's running, of course."**

**"It isn't?"**

**She sighed heavily. "Mr. Deverell, I already know the truth. There's no sense in pretending you don't know what's going on."**

**"I'm not pretending."**

**"Have it your own way." She put the pad into her large purse and stood up, slinging it over her shoulder.**

**"Giving up so soon?" he taunted.**

**"I've got to get to England before somebody beats me to the story. It will make my career if I can get it before the others do."**

**He stared at her with something like contempt. "By all means, ruin a life. You and your colleagues put a high price on your own careers, don't you? Nobody else's pain or suffering is too much to ask."**

**She flushed. "You make us sound perverted."**

**"I don't, actually." His eyes darkened. "You are perverted. All of you."**

**She stiffened. "We don't make the news."**

**"No, you just spread it around, with as many embellishments and enhancements as your editors see fit." He got to his feet, too, and looked down at her. She barely came to his chin. She noticed the discrepancy in their heights and stepped back a few inches.**

**"Frightened?" he chided, his black eyes glittering as he smiled down at her. "I'm not much of a threat these days."**

**"You'd be a threat if you were missing both legs," she muttered uncomfortably. The proximity was making her legs wobble. She backed up again. "I'm not responsible for what a few renegade reporters do."**

**"I know several families, including one royal one, who could give a chilling response to that remark."**

**Her fingers clutched the strap of her shoulder bag tightly. He noticed her nails, short and rounded and unpolished. The suit she was wearing was of the chain-store variety, and not new. Her shoes were scuffed, vinyl instead of leather, like her purse. He stared at her with**

new interest. She wasn't a successful professional, judging by her looks.

"As unfair as it seems, we are judged by the company we keep," he said quietly. "Some of your colleagues have no scruples and no conscience."

"I'm not like that."

"Yes, you are," he said simply. "Other-wise, why would you be chasing my mother over an indiscretion?"

"That's a rawer weak thing to call it," she pointed out.

"What, a would-be affair?"

Her lips parted. "Mr. Deverell, Lord Harvey's body was found just this morning floating naked in the Thames. Your mother is Scotland Yard's number one suspect."

He caught his breath. The shock and terror he felt were in his stiff expression, his clenched jaw.

"You really didn't know, did you?" she asked worriedly. "I'm most dreadfully sorry. I thought..."

He caught her by the upper arm long enough to look at his check and lay a five-dollar bill down with it before he propelled her out the door.

"A cup of coffee doesn't cost five dollars," she murmured as he took her out through the doorway.

"I know how little waiters and waitresses get paid. What business is it of yours?" he asked curtly.

"Could you let me go?"

"Not on your life. You're not making my mother front page news. I've got you and I'm keeping you until I get to the bottom of this."

"You can't! It's kidnapping. It's against the law!"

"Big deal," he muttered. "Come on."

He put her into his big Lincoln on the driver's side and got right in beside her, quickly pressing the master lock switch on his door so that she couldn't open hers. She fumed and pushed, but she was trapped.

"Put on your seat belt," he said.

She did, only because when he put the car into gear and took off, she didn't want to go into the back seat the hard way.

"You drive like a maniac!" she exclaimed.

"So I've been told."

"Listen here, I'm not going anywhere with you. Let me out!"

"When we get to the airport," he assured her.

Her eyebrows lifted. "The airport?"

"We're going to London. You're resourceful and you have contacts that I lack." He glanced at her formidably. "You're going to help me find Tansy."

"Oh, am I, now?" she returned haughtily. "And what am I going to get out of it?"

"A front page scoop when we clear her name."

"You're nuts!"

He nodded. "Apparently."

"But I can't leave the country. Not like this. I told you, I have responsibilities."

"So have I. They'll wait until you get back."

"But I must stay," she persisted.

He lifted the cell phone from its cradle in the floorboard and handed it to her. "Call somebody and make arrangements."

She hesitated, but only for a minute. She couldn't afford to miss the opportunity of a lifetime, which this certainly was. Once she got the story, she'd file it no matter what he tried to do. If she didn't go with him, he might find some way to block her, to keep her from finding his mother. That wouldn't do at all.

She punched in the number and then the button that would send the call along the airways. It rang once, twice, three times.

"Hello?"

She smiled at the pepper in that sweet old voice. "Hi. It's me. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to be out of town for a day or two. You let Mrs. Harris come over and cook for you. I'll make it right when I get home."

"Chasing after that mad old lady, are you?" A deep chuckle came from the other end of the line. "Just like me, when I was younger."

"Not just like you," she replied, smiling. "You used to hang out in bars with the Lafayette Escadrille and the SAS. I just walk in your shadow."

"Flatterer!"

"Don't forget to put the chain latch on at night," she added worriedly. "And if you need me..."

Chris already had the picture, from the brief snatches of conversation he overheard. "Give

him this number," he told her without taking his eyes from the road—a good thing, at the speed they were going. He recited the cell phone number, and then added one with a foreign exchange. "That's in London. He can call anytime if he needs you. I'll make sure the call is forwarded immediately."

She relayed the information.

"Sounds young," the old man cackled. "Is he?"

"Sort of," she replied warily. "Stay warm, too. Don't worry about turning up the heat. Okay?"

"Okay. Now stop worrying about me and get the job done. Don't shame us."

"I wouldn't dare!" she chuckled. "I'll see you when I get back, Grandad."

"You take care, too. You're the only family I got left."

"Same here." She smiled as she put the receiver down. She glanced at the taciturn man

beside her warily. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "You'll do better sleuthing if you're not worried. Your grandfather sounds like a character."

"He was, and still is. He was a reporter during the gang wars in Chicago, during Prohibition, and after that he was a war correspondent." She laughed. "He can tell some stories. I followed in his footsteps, but not very well. I'm not sure I'm cut out for investigative reporting after all."

"What did you do before?"

"I did political news and features." She grimaced. "I was good at it, too, but Grandad said I was wilting on the vine and wasting away. He wanted me to do something exciting and risky while I was still young enough."

"Don't you have any other family?"

She shook her head. "My parents died overseas. They were touring the Middle East when the plane they were in was shot down accidentally. Grandad took me in when I was just ten and raised me."

"Tough luck," he said. "No brothers, sisters, uncles or aunts?"

"An aunt," she replied. "She lives in California and never writes." She glanced at him. "At least you have a brother."

"A brother and a mother," he replied.

"What's she like?"

"She's a hell-raiser," he returned amusedly.

"I've never known her when she wasn't in trouble. But she doesn't kill people," he added firmly.

"I hope you're right," she replied.

"I know I am." But there was the faintest doubt in his voice. He turned the car onto the highway that led to the Jacobsville airport, new lines in his worried face.

## ***Chapter 2***

Heathrow Airport was busy, especially for the time of year. Summer was high season for most tourists, and as Chris passed along the crowded path to the customs line, he heard accents from countries all over the world. He glanced at Delia, surprised by the look on her face. She seemed overly affected by her surroundings, by the people around her. Some were wearing exotic dress, and she seemed to find those fascinating.

He had a sudden thought. "You have your passport, but you've never been out of the States before, have you?" he asked.

She glanced at him with a shy smile. "Actually, I haven't. I always wanted to travel like my grandfather did, so I applied for my passport, but I couldn't afford to go anywhere until I landed this latest job. Now that I can, I've been too afraid to leave him on his own. He's diabetic, you see, and he won't leave sweets alone. He's been in a coma twice in the past three years, because he's too stubborn to admit there's anything wrong with him."

"That sounds familiar," Chris murmured under his breath. He glanced at the line beside them, which had thinned considerably. He took Delia's arm and steered her and her wheeled suitcase to the shorter line.

"You know how to do this, don't you?" she asked, impressed.

"I spend a lot of time overseas," he commented. "Got your ticket?"

"Right here." She held it up.

They passed through customs and baggage control with a minimum of fuss, and Chris went right to the rental car agency to hire a vehicle. Minutes later, they were on the way to their hotel, to check in. He seemed to find driving on the left-hand side of the road very

easy. It made Delia nervous, but after the first few minutes, she relaxed and began to pay attention to the sights.

"We'll leave the luggage, get a bite to eat, and head out for Back Wallop," he said.

"I'm glad to see you aren't planning to let jet lag hold you back," she commented dryly.

He lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "What do you know about jet lag?"

"I've read lots of travel books. Besides, my grandfather is an authority. As I mentioned before, he was a war correspondent."

"In which war?"

"World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and several other little wars in Hispanic countries."

"I'm impressed."

"He can tell some stories," she mused. "It's killing him that he can't do it anymore. He's seventy-three, and he's got arthritis as well as diabetes. It's like he's given up on life because he's been slowed down."

"Tansy has the same problem," he confided. "She thinks like a sixteen-year-old, but her body can't do what her mind wants it to."

"She must be a fascinating person."

"I've always thought so," he said. "My

earliest memories of my mother are flamboyant, colorful images. She was always going somewhere, hosting parties, dragging us to cultural events like opera and the theater." He shook his head. "She used to be just a little less reckless." His face sobered. "I can't believe she'd get herself mixed up in a murder. It's not like her."

"Anyone can get in a circumstance where violence becomes the only answer," she said, glancing out the window at the crowded streets. "Are we downtown?"

"Yes. And here's our hotel." He pulled off the road into an elegant courtyard, where a man dressed like something out of medieval times was opening and closing car doors for guests.

"It's very elegant," she commented.

"When I travel, I always go first-class," he said carelessly. "I find it's less wearing to be pampered, especially if you've been to more than one or two countries on business."

"I thought you didn't work," she said.



He gave her an incredulous glance. "I inherited money, but I have to work at keeping it," he said. "I own interests in businesses all over the world, in several multinational corporations. I like to know where my money's going, and how it's being spent"

"So that's how it's done," she murmured.

He chuckled. "Stick with me, kid. I'll make an entrepreneur of you in no time."

"That would be nice," she said. "I think I'd like making a fortune." She shrugged. "Well, I'd like the challenge of making it," she added thoughtfully. "Money's not really very important to me, except that I'd like to spoil Grandad a little while I've still got him. He sacrificed a lot to bring me up."

The uniformed man opened the door for Delia and helped her out, while he signaled for a porter to take the luggage from the boot, which Christopher had already opened automatically from the driver's side.

Chris escorted Delia to the front desk and registered them, in separate double rooms. He handed her the encoded card key and led the way into the elevator.

"You look embarrassed," he commented.

She was. The clerk had asked if they were sharing a room. She felt uncomfortable. "Sorry," she murmured. "I'm not used to sophisticated circles. I guess they get a lot of unmarried couples here and nobody thinks anything about it. I'm a little out of step with the rest of the world."

He was gaping at her. She was an anachronism, all right. It probably came from being raised by a man from a different generation.

"No love life?" he teased.

She didn't rise to the bait. "Not now," she replied.

He paused while they got off on the fifth floor. He showed her how to work the card key.

"The bellhop will bring the luggage up shortly," he promised. "Meanwhile, I'll freshen up and drop by to pick you up on the way out of the hotel." He hesitated. "Ever eaten fish and chips?"

"Not real English ones," she said.

He grinned. "You've got a treat in store."

They stopped at a roadside stand and gobbled down fish and chips and strong tea to the foreign sound of proper English being spoken all around them. Delia was delighted with the new experience.

"Later, we'll have a proper, sit-down meal," he promised. "But there isn't time **bow**. I want to find Tansy,"

"Oh, this is lovely," she protested. "I'm enjoying it!"

He chuckled. "So I see."

She was standing on his right side, so that he could see her and vice versa. He looked very worried, and she wondered how she'd feel if it was her grandfather the police and the press were chasing.

She put down her cup of tea, frowning.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I was thinking how I'd feel, in your place," she said, looking up at him with darkened gray eyes. "Grandad is my whole life."

He searched her face and nodded slowly. 'Tansy and Logan are the only close family I have. I didn't worry so much about them several years ago. Since I've had the wreck, my perspective has changed.' He looked grim.

"Life is short, and you hadn't realized how short before," she speculated.

His eyebrows jerked. "That's it, exactly. I had a concussion, internal and external injuries, as well as the damage to my left eye. It

took months for me to get back on my feet, and I'll never regain the sight in my eye. It woke me up."

"I remember reading about you in the tabloids, when you were younger," she recalled. "You were like your mother, forever in and out of scrapes and scandals."

"Not anymore," he said. "It isn't worth the risk."

"What is?" she asked solemnly.

He turned and looked down at her pensively. "Leaving the world a little better than we found it," he said simply.

She smiled. "I like that."

He touched his finger to the tip of her small nose and smiled. "I like you," he said genuinely, and chuckled when she flushed prettily.

"Are you sure? I thought I was at the top of your enemies list."

He shook his head. "You don't fit the image of a hardened newshound," he said simply. He frowned slightly. "In fact, I don't think you have what it takes to do the job properly. You've got too much heart. Eventually, you'll be wrung out like a damp cloth."

She stiffened. "I've been a reporter for several years and I can do this job," she asserted stubbornly. "Grandad says I just have to put aside my hang-ups and concentrate on the process of gathering information."

"Your grandad can probably eat lunch while he watches war footage," he replied. "I expect he's grown such a hard shell over the years that nothing much affects him."

He was right. She hated admitting it "He said he was sensitive when he started out, too."

"Bull. He'd have gotten over that the first day in the field." His eyes narrowed. "Can you really see yourself printing everything you find out about peoples' intimate lives behind the social masks they wear? Can you destroy a marriage by turning in stories on unfaithful spouses or headline-making news about their private sexual perversions? That sort of news destroys lives, Delia. Are you really hard enough to hurt people deliberately for the sake of making headlines?"

He was asking the same questions she'd asked herself. He made her uncertain, unsure of herself. He made her ashamed. She didn't answer him. Instead, she wiped her mouth on the napkin and put it on her plate.

He glanced at his watch. "Are you finished? We need to get started."

"Yes. I'm through." She finished her last swallow of tea and didn't look at him as she got up from the counter and left him to pay the bill. She started down the road toward the thick of the commercial district, thinking how ancient this country was and how many empires had embraced it. The history of Great Britain had always fascinated her, and now here she was in London itself, and she was too sick at heart to pay much attention to sights she'd always dreamed of seeing.

She felt Chris's hard fingers close around her elbow as he escorted her back to the car and put her in what would be, in the United States, the driver's side of the car. The

steering wheel was on the right side, here.

"Curious feeling, isn't it?" he asked with a smile.

"Very."

He got in and cranked the engine. "Tell me everything you know about the murder," he asked.

"Well, honestly, I don't know a lot," she **had** to confess. "I was told that the late member of parliament was found floating in the river with a blunt-force injury to the right temple. The official cause of death was drowning, though."

"The right temple? You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

He looked a little relieved, oddly, but he pulled out into traffic again and the moment for questions passed.

Delia was enchanted with the English countryside. She was full of questions, to which Chris seemed to know most of the answers. . She was surprised to find him something of an authority on Tudor history.

"I'll bet you watch every British drama special on Henry VIII that comes on television," she said with a chuckle.

"I do. And pick holes in most of them," he added. "History isn't exciting enough for visual displays, because it happens over such a long period of time. In order for it to be palatable for the masses, it has to be compressed, and that distorts it. But I take fiction for what

it is, simply entertainment, and I enjoy it just the same."

"I like Native American history," she said. "The Indians got a raw deal."

"Everybody got a raw deal," he countered. "What about the Irish who starved by the thousands during the great potato famine and received no outside help? How about the political prisoners who died in concentration camps in Nazi Germany, or the Russian people that Stalin purged? In fact, what about the French Huguenots who had to flee Europe or be slaughtered?"

"Good grief," she exclaimed.

"That's not a fraction of the whole," he continued. "Civilizations long gone had their own vicious persecutions and slavery. Our own ancestors were probably among that number. Otherwise why would they have come to America in the first place? They were looking for something they didn't have in their own countries."

She smiled at him. "You're very interesting to talk to," she said unexpectedly.

He burst out laughing. "That's new," he murmured. He didn't glance toward her; she was on his blind side, and it would have been dangerous to turn his head far enough to see her face. But she was already becoming a vivid portrait deep in his mind.

"I don't understand."

He gave a turn signal and pulled out onto a long highway. "In my younger days, I was what most people refer to as a rake," he commented. "And I only dated a certain type of woman, very sophisticated and modern, if you get my meaning."

She did. She cleared her throat. "I see."

He smiled reflectively. "How I've changed," he murmured.

The wry comment caught her attention. "Why have you changed?"

"Perhaps I'm not as confident as I was," he said thoughtfully. "The scars depress me sometimes, when I look in a mirror. They could probably get rid of the rest of them, but

I am so tired of hospitals and doctors."

She studied him covertly for a moment before she shifted her eyes back to the road ahead of them. "The scars look rakish, you know," she murmured.

"Do they?"

He didn't sound amused. "I know it must have been terribly painful," she added quickly.

"I'm not offended. I've gotten used to it, I guess. But I miss having the sight in both eyes."

"Of course you do. I only meant that you aren't disfigured."

"So I've been told." He stopped at a signpost that indicated the way to Back Wallop. "Well, something's gone right today," he said, indicating the sign. "From the map, I'd say we're about ten minutes away. I hope we can trace her," he added uneasily. "England's a big country."

"You've always found her before, haven't you?"

"Yes. But we had private detectives on the case," he corrected. "And I don't dare involve them again now, under the circumstances. Dane Lassiter, who does investigative work for our family, was a Texas Ranger. Regardless of his sympathies, he'd follow the law all the way and make no apologies for doing it"

"In other words, he'd turn your mother in," she decided. "Is he really that hard-nosed?"

"Less so since he married and had a family, but he's still a law-and-order man. I didn't want to put him on the spot." He smiled grimly. "I wish I'd paid more attention to those lectures on criminal justice in college."

"Did you graduate?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I was too busy drinking and carousing to pay much attention in class. I dropped out in my sophomore year. It's no great loss," he assured her. "I inherited more than most college graduates make in a lifetime."

"So you just have fun."

He shrugged. "Up until the wreck, I didn't know another way to live." He turned fully toward her, so that he could see her face. "Things are more complicated now. I'm rather sorry that I wasted so much of my life on trivial things." He searched her soft eyes and smiled warmly. "You're a pretty little thing," he murmured, liking the way she flushed. "I'd have had you for breakfast a few years ago. But you'd lie on my conscience like lead."

"You'd be lucky," she murmured coolly. "I don't think much of casual affairs or people who have them."

"I noticed."

She shifted uncomfortably. "Shouldn't we be going?"

"We should."

He turned the car toward Back Wallop. He was glad he'd insisted that Delia come along on this trip, although he wasn't quite sure why. She appealed to him as none of his casual conquests ever had; probably because she was a unique commodity in his carefree life. Logan would say he was losing his grip on reality, but Chris thought he was only just finding a handhold. He realized as he drove down the narrow road that he'd never really thought ahead very far. Delia made him think about houses in the country and flower gardens. He scowled, because they were unfamiliar feelings. He'd never felt them

with other women. Not that his sort of woman would waste her time planting flowers, he mused. He wondered how Delia would look in a blue silk gown, sprawled on black silk sheets...

The direction of his thoughts brought him crashing back to the present. He couldn't afford that sort of lapse, not with this woman.

**She** was the wedding ring sort. He'd better remember it, too.

They arrived in the small village of Back Wallop fifteen minutes later and parked beside a news agent's shop.

"Best place to ask questions, if we aren't too obvious," he pointed out, as he opened the door for her and helped her out of the small car.

"With our accents, we'll blend right in," she said, tongue-in-cheek.

He chuckled softly. "Never mind that Just follow my lead." He curled her fingers into his, tightening his grip when she pulled back, and walked her into the store.

"Mornin'," the proprietor greeted them with a speculative glance. "Need help, guv?"

"Just directions, thanks," Chris said with a warm smile. "The wife and I are over here to visit my cousins, the Duke of Marlboro and his wife, Lady Gail, but we just heard about Lord Harvey and thought we'd swing through Back Wallop on the way and pay our respects to Lady Harvey. Could you direct us?"

"Your cousin is the Duke of Marlboro, you say?" The man was impressed.

"Yes. Do you know Georgie?" He cleared his throat. No, he didn't, and even if he had he wouldn't presume to call his lordship the duke "Georgie."

"Lady Harvey lives just down the road in Carstairs Manor. It's to the left just across the bridge as you round the curve. Can't miss it. Sad about the old man."

"Yes, it is. Thank you," Chris said. "Ready to go, darling?" he added, pulling Delia close to his side and looking down at her with an expression on his face that made her knees wobble. She colored again and nodded, not trusting her voice.

"Newlyweds, aren't yer?" the shopkeeper said with a grin. "Anyone could see it. You're in luck, there, guv, she's a beauty."

"Don't I know it?" Chris murmured, with a wink in her direction. "Let's get going, old girl. Thanks for the help," he added over his shoulder.

"Sure thing." The shopkeeper chuckled to himself, watching them go. Chris had put his arm around Delia and pulled her close, so that she fit nicely under his arm. They looked good together, the tall dark man and the pretty little

blond woman. He sighed, remembering his own youthful marriage. He did miss his wife, he thought, and looking at the couple before him made the ache even deeper. How lucky they were, to have a whole lifetime together to look forward to. Chris, unaware of the shopkeeper's oughts, pulled Delia even closer as they paused at the passenger side of the automobile. He tilted her soft round chin up with his fingertips and searched her confused gray eyes. They were soft as summer rain, he thought, oblivious to everything around them. She had a heart the size of the whole world, and she felt so right in his arms. He looked down at her bow of a mouth, pink and pretty and just slightly parted. It would be stupid to do what he was thinking. He realized that, even as his head bent and his mouth fastened gently onto those lovely pink lips. They were every bit as soft as he'd imagined, and they were just faintly unsteady under the gentle pressure. He hesitated, lifting a breath away to see what she wanted. Her fingers were against his thin shirt, barely touching, and

then opening, pressing against his chest. The tiny movement was all

the encouragement he needed. He bent again, and this time the pressure was neither tender nor brief.

Delia felt her heart stop in her chest as his arm contracted and brought her much too close to his tall, fit body. His mouth was warm and hard and devastatingly expert. He did things to her lips that she'd never experienced with anyone else, arousing things that made her moan.

The sound brought him out of the trance he'd fallen into. He lifted his head, breathing a little roughly, and looked into her turbulent, shocked eyes.

"You don't know much about kissing for a woman your age," he said, with no expression whatsoever in his lean, handsome face.

She swallowed and tried to steady her breath. "I told you..."

"Kissing won't get you pregnant," he continued relentlessly. "Not even openmouthed kissing. You don't like it at all, do you?"

She felt all too much on the defensive, gauche and untried. She glared up at him from eyes that were still half shocked. "It's a public street!" she said on a nervous laugh.

"Yes, I know, and on a private one, you'd **have** fought me," he said flatly. He eased her **away**, inch by inch. He was scowling, quiet, almost grim. There was a look in her eyes, in **her** face, that disturbed him.

"Shouldn't we...go?" she asked breathlessly.

"Probably," he agreed. He opened the door and seated her before he went around the bonnet and got in beside her. His lean hand hesitated on the switch. "Someone forced you," he commented, staring at her. Her eyelids flinched. "Were you raped?"

She shivered. "Please..."

"Were you raped?"

She lowered her eyes to her lap. "Not... quite."

"Someone you knew?"

"My fiancé," she said dully. "When I broke the engagement two days before the wedding, because I caught him with one of my bridesmaids at the wedding rehearsal supper. He was missing during the toast. I stepped outside to look for him, and I found him, and her, in the back seat of his car." She sighed. It felt good, somehow, to tell someone the truth. She hadn't been able to talk about it with her

grandfather. 'He took me home. Grandad was out that evening, and when I told Bruce I wouldn't marry him, he was furious and tried to have his way with me. Luckily, he backed down. He said I wouldn't give out, so he found somebody who would, and it was just as well that I was breaking the engagement because he didn't want to spend his life trying to get me aroused."

The pain in her voice softened him. He stared at her quietly. After a minute, his fingers lifted to her short hair and touched it, lightly. "Sometimes people fall into relationships because they're lonely, or frightened. But marriage has to have a physical as well as an emotional foundation. Did you ever want him?" She shifted nervously. "Not...that way." 'Then it would have been a disaster if you'd married him. Surely you know that now?"

She turned her head and looked at him. She seemed unusually vulnerable. "All that...is wrong," she said. "Isn't it? I mean, after marriage you're supposed to, but outside marriage you..."

His hand stilled. "Don't tell me. You were raised by missionaries."

He was being facetious, but he didn't know **how** close to the truth he was.

"Yes, my parents were missionaries," she agreed, wide-eyed. "How did you know?"

## *Chapter 3*

**Chris smiled ruefully after the surprise wore off. "Well, well," he murmured. "So that's it."**

**"I guess you've forgotten more about love than I'll ever learn," she mused. She shrugged. "I told you I was a dead bust as a modem woman."**

**"No, you're not," he argued. "You've got potential," he added in a deep, sensuous tone. "All it needs is developing."**

**"Are you volunteering?" she asked with a wry smile.**

**He tugged on a lock of her hair. "Don't tempt me. We've got enough complications without adding that to them. Tansy, remember?"**

**She grimaced. "Sorry."**

**"No harm done," he said with a chuckle. He let go of her hair and cranked the car. "First we'll find Tansy and solve her problems. Then we'll have time to devote to our own."**

**"I don't have a problem."**

**He gave her a look of mild astonishment. "You don't like French kisses, and you don't think that's a problem?"**

**She glared at him. "It isn't!"**

**He smiled slowly. "See what I mean?"**

**She decided that it would be best if she ignored him, so she tried it for the five minutes it took to get to the manor house.**

**"This is where things get a little sticky," he said thoughtfully, as they sat at the closed gates where three carloads of reporters were camped out.**

**"Can't you use the phone over there and tell her we're lost and need directions?" she suggested.**

**"That wouldn't work. I'll guarantee every one of these newshounds has already tried that angle. I suppose the direct approach is always the best one." He got out of the car, smiled genially at the reporters as he worked his way past them, and picked up the telephone at the gate. He spoke softly so that the reporters couldn't hear him. After a minute he nodded, put the phone down, and got back in the car with Delia.**

**"She's sending a man down for us. I described the car I'm driving," Chris told her.**

**"What did you say that got her to open the gates?" she asked, astonished.**

"I said that I was a relation of the Duke of Marlboro and I needed to speak to her urgently about her late husband."

"And she believed you?"

He chuckled. "As it happens, we know each other," he admitted. "I didn't realize she'd married, which is why I didn't recognize her as Lady Harvey. I knew her as just plain Clot-hilde Elmore."

Delia was immediately jealous and uncomfortable. He didn't say that the woman was an old lover, but she probably was. She hated the thought of those other women, and that was dangerous. She had to remember that she was here on a job, and not to try to catch the eye of this reformed rake—if he was reformed, which she doubted.

"What are you going to tell her when we get to the house?" she persisted.

He stared at her amusedly. "You're the reporter. Hadn't you better start formulating some hard-nosed questions?"

"I guess I had," she agreed, and pulled out her pad.

He covered her hand with his before the other reporters got a look at it. "Not here," he said softly. "They can't know we're infiltrating."

"Oh. Sure." She put the pad up. "I'll just do it mentally."

He looked as if he had doubts about that, but he didn't say another word. In a few minutes, a small car with two passengers shot down the driveway. One man came to Chris's car and climbed in the back. The other man opened the gate. Chris shot through the opening before the reporters could push their way through. The gate closed to a chorus of jeers and catcalls from the frustrated onlookers.

"Neat, that," Chris mused as he followed the other car up the long driveway.

"Damned vultures," the man in the back seat muttered in a thick Cockney accent. "Poor Lord Harvey not even buried, and all this going on. The poor old man. He did so hate publicity."

"Something I share with the late lord," Chris muttered.

The man in the back seat took a good look at the driver in the rearview mirror. "I know you," he said suddenly. "You're that Deverell from America, the one who was caught in bed with..."

"Never mind," Chris said icily. "That's past history."

"Well, sure it is, guv, but you must know how her ladyship feels now," he added.

"Indeed I do," Chris replied.

"She'll be glad of company. Had to live like a hermit these past two days, what with the inquisition from the Yard and all." He shook his head. "Poor old man, poor old lord," he said sadly, "naked as a jaybird and floating in

the river, all those people taking pictures of him. He was so stately, such a gentleman.... Deverell," he repeated suddenly, staring at Chris harder. "You're her son! It was your mother killed the poor old man!"

"My mother won't kill a fly on her salad," Chris said with utter disgust. "She may be a licensed lunatic, but she's no murderess."

The man looked vaguely placated. "You sure of that?"

"I'd stake my life on it. If Lord Harvey was murdered, my mother didn't do it."

"Had to be murder, don't you see," came the heavy reply. "Had a bruise the size of my



fist on the side of his head. He drowned, but he was unconscious when he drowned they say."

"He was hit on the right side of his head, too, wasn't he?" Chris asked carelessly.

"Sure was. Right at the temple. The blow was so hard it broke the skull. Sorry, miss," he added when he saw Delia go white.

Chris glanced at her. "I told you that you were too soft for the sort of work you do, didn't I?" he asked bluntly.

"What sort of work does she do, then?" the passenger asked.

"She's trying to make it as a crime novelist," Chris lied with a straight face. "But she gets sick at her stomach when she has to read about real crimes. I think she should write political thrillers, myself."

"That's my sort of book," the passenger said smugly. "Politics is the most interesting thing I know about. Not that most of what you read in the papers is the truth. No, sir."

"I'll agree with that, having been a victim of the gutter press myself," Chris said.

"It's not all gutter press," Delia felt compelled to say.

"No, there are some good journalists," Chris agreed. "But then, they don't write for the tabloids!"

Which left Delia without a comeback. She stared at the gray stone manor house with real interest. It was the closest she'd ever been to affluence on this scale. The place was surrounded by landscaped lawns and gardens, even a fountain where the driveway circled the house. There was an elegant porch with flower

urns everywhere, and a huge garage and tennis court and swimming pool in the back.

"Nice gardens, aren't they?" the passenger said. "The late Lord Harvey was an avid gardener, always puttering out there, he was."

"My mother has the same passion," Chris said, "although she rarely stays home long enough to indulge it. She lived over here some years ago, when I was in boarding school."

"You have English ties, guv?"

"I'm a cousin to the Duke of Marlboro."

"Well, I'll be!"

"And a cousin to the ruling royal family as well," he added on a chuckle. "So you see, Great Britain isn't so foreign to me after all."

"I should say not, sir!"

They pulled up at the front door and the passenger got out quickly to help Delia from the small automobile, smiling at her shy thanks.

"I'll put the car around back for you, sir," the passenger said, taking the keys. "Just give us a ring when you're ready to leave. Right-o, then."

A butler answered the door and escorted Delia and Chris into the elegant, antique-furnished living room, where the mourning Lady Harvey lay sprawled across the sofa in a gauzy rainbow-colored lounge dress that would have probably financed the entire annual budget of a Third World army.

Chris introduced himself, naming Delia as his traveling companion with a finesse that made her blush. Lady Harvey extended her white arm and allowed Chris to kiss her knuckles with a continental air.

"So nice to meet you," the former Clothilde Elmore drawled in a cultured accent. "I'm in mourning, you know, but I look terrible in black. Do sit down."

"I'm sorry about your husband," Chris said.

She waved a hand. "He was in his early seventies, you know, and his health was failing," she said languidly. "Not that I won't miss him, of course, but he was so much older than I."

That was debatable, Delia thought. The woman had obviously had several face-lifts, but her throat and hands showed her true age, and she was no spring chicken.

"I'm looking for my mother," Chris contin-

ued. "I understand that she's implicated in the homicide."

"*Homicide?* What homicide?" Lady Harvey exclaimed, sitting straight up with a hand to her throat.

"But the tabloids..." Delia began.

Lady Harvey burst out laughing, although there was an odd flush in her face. "Good Lord, I had no idea they were spreading such drivel. Harvey was waterskiing in the lake day before yesterday. He came loose, hit his head on the stern of the boat your mother was driving, and drowned. That's all there is to it."

Chris almost fell over with relief. "Thank God!"

"I cannot imagine how anyone could construe this as anything other than a tragic accident," she continued curtly. "What motive would your mother have to murder him anyway? They were old friends through her late husband. The three of them were great pals, although they stopped corresponding when Cecil and I married, of course. I had nothing in common with such hijinks, quite honestly. Your mother was always in the middle of some outrageous circumstance."

"She doesn't know any other way to live," Chris agreed. He scowled. "But if there's no homicide, why is my mother being sought?"

Lady Harvey waved a hand. "I have no idea. The police questioned her, and myself, and went away. My attorney tells me that there is no evidence of foul play and no further investigation is warranted."

"Then I've made a trip for nothing," he said with a smile as he got to his feet. "I'm very grateful to you. But you say you have no idea where my mother might be?"

"None whatsoever, she left the country just after the police came, or so I heard. She didn't tell me where she was going." She thought for a minute. "Bainbridge might know. She and Cecil were friends with him as well. Yes. You might try Lord Bainbridge. He lives just down the road, anyone can direct you."

"Thank you. You've been most gracious, and at such a trying time," Chris said, bending to kiss her hand again.

"Oh, not to worry, I'm grateful for the company. Those dreadful reporters won't go away, God knows why."

"They'll tire eventually and worry someone else," Chris assured her. "Good day."

The car was brought around by the same man who'd accompanied them to the manor house. He waved them off, the gates were opened, and Chris and Delia drove through the massed press corps.

"Wait just a minute, please," Delia asked as he started to pull out into the main

road. She motioned to a woman journalist and rolled the window down.

"She says that there was no murder, and that Scotland Yard has determined that it was an accidental death," she told the brunette. "If that's so, why are you all still out here?"

"She said that?" the journalist asked. "It's news to us. We had word this morning that accidental death has been ruled out and murder charges are pending against a woman named..." She pulled out her pad and read, "Tansy Deverell, an American."

"She said that Lord Harvey was waterski-ing, fell and hit his head on the boat's stern and drowned," Delia persisted.

"He was knocked unconscious with a blunt object suspected to be a silver cane head," the

woman replied. "Mrs. Deverell was known to possess such a cane. The police have it now. And Lord Harvey was found in the river, not in a lake, stark naked."

"I don't understand any of this," Delia said heavily.

"Neither do we. But her ladyship up there stands to inherit ten million pounds, and even with inheritance tax, that's a bundle. Furthermore, she's mixed up with some bloke from a militant workers' party—" She stopped dead. "Who are you?"

"I'm an American journalist," Delia said honestly. "My paper sent me here to see what I could dig out. Well, you see, Mrs. Deverell *is* an American." She let the implication sink in.

"I see. Wouldn't know something about her, would you?" the woman asked cagily.

"Just that she has claimed to have been kidnapped by aliens once, and a sheikh tried to add her to his harem."

The woman journalist laughed delightedly. "Thanks! She doesn't sound like a murderess, does she? What a delightful old bird! I wish she was my mum."

"So do I," Delia said. "Thanks."

"You, too!"

Chris drove off while Delia was closing the window. "You didn't have to be so forthcoming!"

"Yes, I did. She gave me information, I gave her information. We're even." She glanced at him, saw the lines of strain. "I still don't think she did it, evidence or no evidence. I'd like to know more about this bloke from the worker's party."

"You looked relieved when they said the MP was hit on the right side of the head. Why?" she asked curiously.

He grinned. "Because Tansy is left-handed. Let's go see Bainbridge. Maybe he can clear some of the details up for us."

Lord Bainbridge could, and did. He was no friend of Lady Harvey, but he knew quite a bit about her.

He brushed back his thick white mustache and leaned his bulk back in his huge armchair by the fireplace. "Tramp, she is, begging your pardon, ma'am," he told Delia. "Nothing but a tramp. I warned Cecil about her, but he was so obsessed with her beauty that he wouldn't

rest until he'd married her. Face-lifts and tummy tucks and war paint and padding, that's all she was, with a mercenary eye. All of us could see it. Now she's killed him and she'll blame poor Tansy to save herself."

"Tansy isn't a killer," Chris said curtly.

"I know that. We all know that. But she's the prime suspect. It seems her ladyship has an ironclad alibi. She was giving a speech at a children's benefit at the time Cecil died."

"Nobody can be that precise about the time of death," Delia said flatly. "Especially if his body was in the water for any length of time. The water temperature could distort the time of death by at least two or three hours."

He shook his head. "He was wearing a wristwatch and apparently lifted his arm to ward off the blow. His watch face was cracked and stopped at what they presume was exactly the time of death."

"How convenient," Chris muttered.

"Not convenient. Planned," Delia countered. "And devilishly clever."

"If only Tansy hadn't run," Chris said heavily. "It's made her look guilty, even if she isn't."

"I don't think she ran," Lord Bainbridge confided. "I think she's been taken somewhere for safekeeping so she can't tell her side of the story. I think she saw the murder."

Two pairs of eyes widened. "By whom?"

"By her ladyship's boyfriend," the old man said. "Tony Cartwright. He's a young street tough with a loud mouth and a following. He heads one of the militant groups that wants to oust the ruling party. He's been tossing money around like corn flakes just lately, and he has no visible means of support. My guess is that Lady Harvey has been funding him and her husband found out and made the mistake of confronting her with it. Or maybe he even caught them together in a compromising situation. Cecil was never one to keep his mouth shut. He'd have gone in headfirst"

"And died for it," Chris supposed. His eyes narrowed. "What can we do?"

"My suggestion would be to hire a private detective and have Tony and her ladyship watched," came the immediate reply. "In fact, I have just the man for you. He was with Interpol for a while, and before that, rumor has

it, the SAS. He's costly, but he's worth every penny. I can put you in touch, if you like."

"What's his name?"

Lord Bainbridge smiled. "You can call him Seth."

"Does he have an office?"

Lord Bainbridge shook his head. "He does a lot of hush-hush government work, as a free agent. He takes the occasional private case, if it interests him. Frankly, he doesn't need the money anymore."

"You think he'll take this case?" Chris asked.

The old man nodded. "I think so. Let me have the name of your hotel and I'll ask him to contact you tonight."

Chris let out a long breath. "You've taken a load off my mind. My mother is a lunatic, but I love her."

"Many of us have, and lost her," the old man said wistfully. "Yes, even me. You have no idea what a beauty she was fifty years ago. I met her in Madrid one summer and never got over her. I'd do anything I could to help her."

"Does Lady Harvey know that?"

He shook his head and chuckled. "Doubt she'd have sent you to me if she had. She thinks I was best friends with her husband and might feel vengeful. I'm sure she thought I'd slam the door in your face. Tough luck for her," he added grimly.

Delia and Chris thanked the old soldier and went back to their London hotel.

Chris was dejected as he left Delia at her door. 'I'll phone you if Seth gets in touch with me,' he said. "Try to get some rest. I don't know where this will lead us, but I hope Lord Bainbridge was wrong about Tansy being held prisoner. This whole damned thing is crazy!"

"Most crimes are, but they make great sense to the perpetrators." She put a soft hand up to his lean cheek. "Try not to worry. It will be all right."

His teeth clenched. He caught her by the upper arms and pulled her to him. "I don't know how I'd have gotten through the day without you," he said huskily, and bent to her mouth.

The words softened her as much as the slow, sweet kiss he pressed on her open lips. She gasped and his own lips opened, pressing deeper. He made a sound under his breath and his hands let go of her arms to catch her hips and pull them deliberately into his.

She pulled away, breathless. "It's...public," she stammered.

He was having trouble getting his own breath. She was delightful, pretty and sweet and intelligent. He'd looked at women as acquisitions until the wreck. Now he saw what he'd been missing for most of his life—a woman with a heart. Perhaps he had to grow old enough to appreciate what was inside instead of outside.

He caught both her hands in his and lifted them to his lips. "You're a treasure," he said quietly. "Thank you for coming to England with me."

"Well, I didn't have a lot of choice, remember," she stammered, because the kiss had shaken her.

He chuckled. "So you didn't." The smile faded. "Going to stay? I'll send you back home if you really want to go."

"Oh, no, not yet," she said quickly. "We have to clear your mother first!"

He was tracing the simple silver-and-turquoise ring she wore on her right middle finger. "Did you mean what you said, about liking Tansy for a mother?"

She nodded. "I barely remember my mom. She was always away with dad somewhere. We never really knew each other. Not like I know Grandad, anyway. He's my best friend."

"I'd like to meet him when we go home," he said sincerely. "He must be one special guy."

"He is." She searched his eyes with her warm gray ones. "So are you," she added softly.

His eyes were smiling now, as well as his mouth. He looked up and down the hall and then bent and kissed her once more, briefly and tenderly. "I'll take you down to dinner when they open the restaurant," he said. "Wear something pretty."

She laughed uninhibitedly. "It'll have to be this," she indicated her beige pantsuit. "I didn't bring a dress."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Size ten?"

She gasped. "You roue!" she accused.

He shrugged. "What can I say? I spent a lot of years as a playboy. Guessing sizes is only one facet of my enormous store of knowledge." He gave her a wicked grin. "I'll have them send something over."

"Look here, you can't buy clothes for me," she said at once. "People will think I'm a kept woman!"

'Nobody, anywhere, could look at you and think that,' he said flatly. "You don't have the hard edges of anybody's mistress."

"What hard edges?"

"Sophistication," he said. "It's not as alluring as the glossy magazines make it out to be. It's artificial and cold." He searched her eyes. "You're a warm, welcoming fire on a cold and rainy night."

Her eyebrows went up.

"Too corny?" he asked with a flash of white teeth. "I'll work on my approach before dinner. Consider the dress a loan, a stage prop. We wouldn't want people to think we were trailing a murderer, now would we? After all, we have no credentials and no permission to interfere in the case."

"She's your mother," she said quietly. "You have every right."

He traced her small, straight nose. "Still going to smear her in the press?"

"Don't be silly," she replied. "I only want to tell the truth."

"Your editor won't like it."

"Some editor, somewhere, will," she said. "Integrity is and should be part of every journalist's makeup. I won't slander anyone for a story."

"No wonder I like you."

He kissed the tip of her nose and sauntered off down the hall.

She watched him go with mixed emotions. She knew he'd been a playboy, that he knew all too much about women. But he was attractive and sensitive and he had a wonderful sense of humor, even though he was worried about his mother. That concern was just as alluring as his smile and charm. He really cared about Tansy, and he was willing to take chances to save her. No wonder women fell over themselves to get to him. She was on the verge of it herself.

She unlocked her door with the card key and stepped inside. And just as she closed it back again, a shadowy figure rose from the sofa in the suite's sitting room and came toward her.

## *Chapter 4*

**"Who are you?" Delia asked at once, her hand still on the doorknob.**

The man came closer. He had dark hair and eyes and a faintly foreign look. He tilted his head to one side and studied her, from her short, wavy blond hair to her small feet. "I'll ask the questions," he said. "Why are you looking for Tansy Deverell?" She hesitated. "How did you know I was?" "You arrived this morning with Christopher Deverell. I know of him, and I know his angle in this—she's his mother. I don't know yours."

"I'm a journalist," she said. "I get an exclusive interview if I can help find her."

He studied her narrowly for several seconds. "I did some research on you and Deverell before I came over. Tansy Deverell's husband— and the father of her two sons—was in Mo-

rocco during World War II," he said. "He saved the life of a young Arab who was spying for the French resistance."

"That's very interesting, but what does it have to do with Tansy?" she asked.

He moved into the light, and she could see the foreign look of him. "That young Arab was my grandfather," he said. "Ordinarily I don't get mixed up in high-profile cases, and Deverell wouldn't have had enough money to buy my help. But I'll take the case because of Deverell's father. I owe the family a favor."

"Who are you?" she asked belatedly.

"Oh, you can call me Seth," he replied carelessly.

Her eyebrows went up. "Lord Bainbridge told us about you."

"Not much, I'll wager." He moved back to the phone and with economical, graceful ease, lifted the phone and called Chris. "I'm in Delia's room," he said when Chris answered. He hung up.

It didn't take Chris two minutes to sprint the distance from his room to hers. He was admitted at once, and he gave Seth a calculating scrutiny while he held on to Delia's small hand.

Seth noted the protective attitude and smiled. "She was perfectly safe," he assured Chris. "I never hurt women."

"Why did you come to her, and not to me?" Chris wanted to know.

"I don't know you personally. But I know of you," he replied with a faint smile. "And I know of your father," he replied. "He saved my father's life during World War II. Small world."

"Very," Chris agreed.

Seth moved back into the room and to a tray that was sitting on the table by the window. "I ordered high tea. Help yourselves."

They joined him at the table, warily.

He sat back with a scone in one hand and a cup of tea in the other, studying them while they sugared their own tea.

"That's bad for you," he remarked. "Sugar is the curse of the twentieth century. Empty calories."

"Life without sugar is no life at all," Delia said with a grin. "Sorry."

He glanced at Chris as he sipped tea. "Your mother is being held by some cronies of Tony Cartwright's," Seth said abruptly. "They've got her in a garage on the Manchester road, and they've just become desperate fugitives. Lady Harvey called a press conference twenty minutes ago to publicly blame the murder on Tony, via the press camped outside her manor house. Her story is that Tony killed and robbed the old man and then planned to say she did it because her husband was going to divorce her and she'd lose her inheritance. Tony got wind of it and snatched Tansy, who has friends in high circles in Great Britain, to use as a hostage. They plan to turn her over to the police in return for an airplane to fly them out of the country."

Chris cursed under his breath. "Do the police know about this?"

"Not yet," Seth said easily. "But they have access to the same sources I used to get the information and they'll find out what Tony's

up to very shortly. Meanwhile, Lady Harvey, having freed herself from her husband and her greedy lover is busily making plans to stash her inheritance in Swiss bank accounts before it can be enjoined."

"What about the inheritance tax? Surely she uses banks," Chris protested.

"She does—banks in the Bahamas. A sharp little lady, indeed, no loose ends except Tansy, and she's arranged things so that Tony will be taking care of that one." He finished his scone and leaned forward abruptly with the cup in his hands. "You know they'll kill her when they get what they want, don't you? His sort doesn't take chances."

Chris had already guessed that. His face set in grim lines. "Damn them all," he said in a deep, low undertone. "I never cheated or threatened anyone to get where I am, and I didn't inherit all that much to begin with."

Seth nodded. "I know." He pursed his lips and studied the younger man quietly. He looked hard. His eyes were like black coals. "I can tell the police all this, including where to find Tansy, if that's what you want."

Chris stared at him levelly. "There's an alternative," he guessed.

Seth nodded. "Myself, two men, you and Delia."

Chris glanced at Delia. "I'll go. She shouldn't. This isn't her fight."

She gave him her best glare. "I go," she said shortly. "It would be the best story I ever wrote!"

"Maybe the last, too," Chris said. He didn't like to think of Delia in danger.

"Tell him I can go," Delia said to Seth.

Seth shrugged. "You can as far as I'm concerned. You two will do my legwork for me while I set up the hit."

"You won't shoot anybody?" Delia asked.

"That's up to the captors. If they shoot, we shoot back," he said with finality. "I'm not risking my men's lives."

"I thought people in England weren't allowed to carry guns," Delia pointed out.

"Most people aren't. Some police and other agencies do." He met Chris's solemn gaze. "I'll clear it with the right people before I go in," he said. "I'm not an outlaw, in case that's what you were thinking. I always work within

the law whenever possible. Especially in this country," he added with a smile.

"All right then. Delia and I will do whatever you need. Name your price," Chris said. "I'll mortgage everything I own if that's what it takes to get Tansy back."

The other man studied him like a zoo specimen. "That's unusual these days, did you know?" he asked. "Most would rather have the money."

"Tansy's worth her weight in it," Chris said simply. "Even if she is a royal pain in the neck from time to time." He chuckled softly. "At least she's never boring."

Seth laughed. He put down his cup and stood up. "It's been a pleasure. I'll be in touch as soon as I've worked things out. Stick close to the hotel for the next day. I'll have to get a few things together and contact my men."

"Will do. But what about the payment?" Chris asked.

"The ransom, you mean?"

Chris frowned. "That, too, but I meant your fee."

"Oh, that. I'll settle for high tea at the Ritz, at your convenience," he said. "No skimping on the cream and butter, either," he added with a lifted finger. "First-class."

Chris looked at the man as if he were crazy. "High tea?"

Seth shrugged. "I love high tea. I can't get enough of it. I've already got more money than I like to have." He glanced at Delia and smiled. "These days I take cases only when they interest me. You're a dish."



"Thank you," she said, flushing.

He sighed. "I love blondes," he murmured. He glanced at Chris wryly. "Pity she didn't see me first." He nodded and went out of the room as silently as a breath of air.

"What a very odd man," Delia exclaimed when he was gone.

"I hope we can trust him," Chris murmured. "Although I don't really see that we have a choice. Tansy's safety has to be my first concern."

"What do you suppose he'll ask us to do?" she wondered.

He got up and went to the window, to stare down at the busy street below. "At a guess, he'll want us to go to the hideout posing as a couple of lost tourists. It might just work. While we've got them distracted at the front door, he and his men can go in the back."

Delia leaned forward with her forearms across her knees. "I just can't believe people would do something this vile for money."

"They might not, ordinarily. Lady Harvey seems to be playing both ends against the middle. No honor among thieves there, I'll wager." He turned back to her. "I hate to think of Tansy in such hands."

"I know." She got up and went to him, her gray eyes soft and compassionate as they met his. "But she's been in a lot of scrapes over the years. If anyone can come out on top, it's your mother. These guys are amateurs. Your mother is a professional troublemaker."

He forced a smile. "Yes, she is. But this is a new kind of situation, even for her. She's diabetic," he added worriedly. "I don't even know if she's got her insulin tablets with her."

"She doesn't take insulin shots?"

He shook his head. "For a while, she didn't even have to have pills, but she wouldn't leave sugar alone. Emotional upsets play havoc with her sugar levels, and she won't be eating properly as a captive." He slammed one fist into the palm of the other hand. "I'd love to get my hands on those guys for five minutes."

"We'll get her out," she said firmly. "You have to think positively."

He looked down at her through amused black eyes. "You're a tonic," he murmured. "A real tonic."

She smiled. "Thanks."

He reached out and touched her wavy blond hair lightly. "I haven't thanked you for letting me drag you into this." He was solemn all at once. "Listen, if this looks like being dangerous, I want you right out of it. I won't risk your life, even to save Tansy's."

She was taken aback by the unexpected, and touching, concern. She searched his face quietly. "You might not believe it, but I can handle myself,"

"Not if you get in the way of a bullet," he assured her.

She lifted her thin eyebrows. "Have you ever been shot at?"

"Several times," he volunteered.

"In the army?"

He shook his head.

"How, then?"

"I did a brief stint as a mercenary," he confided. "Back in my wild youth, right after I got out of the service. I was in before Desert Storm. The only service I saw was in Germany, where I hit as many nightclubs as possible. After I got out, I met up with some career soldiers who were hired for a little job in Africa. I went along." He shook his head. "One taste of the life was enough to convince me it wasn't worth the price it exacted. I saw things I'll never be

able to forget. When I came home, I went wild for a time. Life was suddenly short, and I was determined to squeeze every drop of pleasure out of each day."

That reminded her of the playboy he'd once been. "You didn't hold life very dear until then, did you?" she asked shrewdly.

He shrugged. "Not really," he agreed. "I didn't think very far ahead." His eyes were reflective as he stared out the window. "Looking back, it seems to me that I didn't have much grasp of the important things even after Africa. I lived from day to day and burned the candle at both ends. If it hadn't been for the wreck, I might never have strayed from that path."

"I'm sorry it took a wreck to wake you up."

He sighed. "That makes two of us." He put his hands in his pockets and jiggled his loose change. "Well, we seem to be stuck in the hotel tomorrow. What would you like to do to pass the time?"

"We could investigate the gym facilities," she offered. "I noticed on the way down in the elevator that they have a health club for visitors here."

"I had enough physical therapy after the wreck," he said. "I'll pass."

"They have a swimming pool," she said.

He looked uncomfortable. "I don't swim."

She glowered at him. "You're just making up excuses. I happen to know that you swim like a fish. You spent a month at that Italian actress's villa in Rome, and you swam with her every day."

His black eyes flashed. "Yes. I did. That was before the wreck."

"You mean you can't swim because of the injuries?" she asked, puzzled.

"I can't swim because of the scars," he said

through his teeth. "The wreck was so bad, the car had to be cut apart to get me out." He added, "As I mentioned earlier, I had internal injuries as well as external ones, and there are gashes on my stomach and upper thigh that I don't want anyone to see."

She looked up at him quizzically. "Not even me?"

He hadn't thought about her seeing his wounds. Delia wasn't like some women who would have turned away or averted her eyes. She wouldn't be intimidated by a few scars. When she looked at him, she wouldn't even see them.

"I haven't worn swimming trunks since the wreck," he murmured.

"It's time you did. A few laps in the pool will be good for you." She grinned at him. "You can teach me how to swim."

"You don't know?" he asked, aghast.

She shook her head. "There was never anyone who could teach me. Grandad can't swim, either."

"Didn't you take classes when you were in school?"

"Sure. All sorts. But not swimming."

"You should know how," he said seriously. "It might save your life one day."

"Then teach me how."

"I don't want to swim around people," he said doggedly.

"Okay. Let's wait until tonight, just at bedtime," she coaxed.

He stared at her uneasily. He didn't speak.

"Think about it," she added, and then let the subject drop.

They had a leisurely supper in the dining room. True to his word, Chris had bought her a lovely dress to wear. Delia had a huge prawn cocktail, followed by Beef Wellington with exquisitely cooked vegetables and homemade breads. The dessert table was almost her undoing. She sat and stared at it for a long time before she decided what to order.

Chris watched her with undisguised delight. She ate the same way she did everything else, wholeheartedly and without inhibition. When coffee was served, she sat back with a long sigh.

"The food here is just delicious," she said fervently. "I can't remember when I've eaten anything so wonderful."

"I can't remember when I've enjoyed watching a woman eat," he murmured dryly. "Over the years, most of my dates have fancied rabbit food."

She glowered. "I'm not eating bean sprouts and tofu until I break a scale," she informed him. "Food should be a permissible vice."

"Especially at your age," he agreed with a chuckle.

"You aren't that much older than I am."

"Not chronologically," he said. "But you're a lifetime behind me in other things." He smiled with pure cynicism. "You still have illusions. I lost mine years ago."

"I hope I never do," she murmured as she toyed with her napkin. "I think that one person can make a difference in the world."

"And I know for a fact that several million people have tried and failed."

She looked up into his eyes. "How did you get so cynical?"

"I lived in the fast lane," he said with an unfamiliar hardness. "You grow up pretty fast."

She searched his black eyes curiously. "Tansy was married five times, you said."

He nodded curtly. "Our father was much older than she was. But then, Tansy was about forty when I was born. Nobody thought she could get pregnant anymore—especially Tansy."

"Was she a good mother?" she asked.

He shrugged. "She wasn't around much. When Dad was alive, I have a faint recollection of how he took her with him most places he went on business. They spent a good deal of time in Spain with his rich relatives, or in England with hers. Logan and I were pretty much raised by a succession of housekeepers and governesses."

"Is your brother like you?"

"Oh, no," he said with a smile. "Logan's the solemn one. He was always responsible and mature. I was the gadfly. Maybe that's why Tansy and I got along so well. She saw herself in me." His eyes darkened. "After Dad died, she went wild. She'd always been outgoing and cheerful, but she collected and discarded men like paper napkins. After she divorced the last one, she seemed to enjoy creating scandals. Not that I can throw stones," he added in a soft, sensual tone. "I've done my share of headlining."

"She must have cared for your father a great deal," Delia observed.

He frowned and then laughed hollowly. "Amazing that you knew that at once. It took me years to work it out."

It occurred to her belatedly that many of his stepfathers might not have liked a ready-made family. "Those stepfathers, were they very hard to take?"

He nodded. "For me, more than for Logan. By the time Tansy remarried, Logan was out on his own. I wasn't. Eventually Tansy decided that a military school would be just what the

doctor ordered. I liked it, but I resented Tansy too much to stay there. I jumped ship after the first year and ended up in Spain with one of my father's brothers. Tansy let me alone. Eventually I wandered back to the States, just in time to register for the draft. By then, the military seemed as good a choice as any, so I enlisted."

"Nobody can say your life hasn't been interesting," she pointed out.

He chuckled. "It's been useless, for the most part," he replied. "Just lately, I've been feeling my age. Making money is nice, but I want to do something else." His eyes held a faraway look. "I want to build yachts. Racing yachts. It's been a dream of mine for years, but I've never had the commitment to try it. After spending time in Spain this summer, I've almost come to a decision. My friend who races in the America's Cup competitions has offered to go into partnership with me. I'm very tempted."

"You should follow your dreams," she said seriously.

He searched her face. "Do you know, I'm beginning to think I have a few of them left."

She smiled. "I'm glad."

The pool, as Delia had guessed, was deserted late at night. Since Chris didn't have swimming trunks, he had to buy a pair—but they were conservative, black with white stripes and as long as boxer shorts. Despite the scars that he was so self-conscious about, he looked good in trunks. His natural olive tan made his eyes and hair look even darker than they were, and his body was muscular without being exaggerated. Delia found him exciting and had to force herself not to stare.

She was wearing a one-piece canary yellow suit that outlined her hourglass figure very well.

"Not bad, Miss Larson," Chris drawled, giving her a sensual appraisal that made her knees feel weak. "Not bad at all."

"I could say the same thing," she murmured with a shy smile.

He moved closer, so that she could see the thin white scars that crisscrossed his abdomen and what she could see of his thighs. "Could you?" he asked with faint cynicism.

"If you think a few scars would put women off you, you're nuts," she said flatly. "You're devastating."

He chuckled. "Plain speaking, and here I thought you were shy."

"I am, mostly. But you're creating a problem that doesn't exist," she added. "The scars have faded so much that you have to look close to see them." She searched his eyes. "And it isn't noticeable that you only have vision in one eye," she murmured. "I'm sorry about the wreck. But you're still the man you were, aren't you?"

He moved even closer. "Am I? Let's see."

Before she could decide whether or not he was teasing, he bent and lifted her off the tile floor, holding her close to his warm body.

She gripped his shoulders hard. "You aren't going to toss me in?" she asked worriedly as he moved closer to the edge.

"I was thinking about it," he confessed.

"I'm afraid of deep water," she told him.

"Okay." He put her down at the steps that led into the shallow end of the pool. "Go at your

own speed."

She smiled. "Thanks."

She eased down into the cool water, feeling it absorb her like wet silk. She sighed and spread her arms, enjoying the feel of it, but still on her feet.

Chris moved close to her and lifted her arms around his neck. "I won't let you drown," he promised, and struck off to the deeper water. "You're an elemental person, aren't you?" he asked quietly. "You're sensual."

She laughed nervously. "I've never been called that before!"

He didn't smile. His eyes were locked with hers as he paused at shoulder depth, holding her lightly by the waist so she didn't sink. "I'm sure you've never given yourself much opportunity to find out. It's pure loss of control to let your senses go free." He brought her close. "But it's time you learned how sweet it is."

"I don't..."

His mouth covered hers, stopping the words in the back of her throat. She'd been kissed before, but Chris was a totally new experience. He nibbled at her lips, teased them with his tongue, savored them until they parted and began to respond shyly to the lazy insistence of his warm, hard mouth.

She made a feeble effort to save herself, pushing gently at his broad shoulders, but he didn't stop. If anything, he became more demanding. On a soft, harsh groan, his hands went down to her hips and pressed them firmly into the aroused contours of his own. He held the kiss, built it into something devouring and frightening.

Delia cried out softly as his hands became invasive, teasing under the elastic at her legs to find the soft skin of her thighs and hips.

He lifted his mouth. His eyes were black and his breathing wasn't quite normal. His hands lifted from her thighs, but they slid up and kept going until they found and caressed her high, firm breasts.

"Chris...!" she choked.

His thumb and forefinger tested the hardness of a small nipple while he searched her shocked eyes. He bent and kissed her at the same time that his hand slid inside the deep V of the bathing suit and found soft bare skin. His other arm impelled her even closer to his aroused body.

Delia was flying. She knew that if she lived to be a hundred, there would never be another moment like this, another man like this. He was experienced, but it wasn't his way with women that attracted her. It was everything about him.

The sound of voices broke them reluctantly apart. He moved his hands back discreetly to her waist and held her there, fighting for breath, as a party of people came out to the pool area and put down towels and drinks on nearby tables.

"What will you do," he asked softly, "if I suggest that we go back to my room and finish what we started?"

She smiled. "I'd suggest that you teach me how to swim instead."

He chuckled. "As I suspected. Well, dash my dreams to bits, why don't you?" he murmured. "I'll never sleep."

"You will if you're tired enough," she assured him. She moved back a little. "Come on. Teach me."

"This isn't what I want to teach you, you little blond witch," he muttered.

She grinned. "Sure it is! Just think, I might make it to the Olympics, and you could tell everyone that you taught me everything I know."

He let out a long, wistful sigh. "Okay, you win." He shook his head as he looked at her. "What raw potential."

She made a face at him. "Swimming. Teach me swimming."

"Would you believe that you're the first woman who ever turned me down flat?"

"There's a first time for everything," she assured him.

He shook his head and moved her into a position on her back. "We'll begin with floating," he said. "This will give you confidence in the water."

It didn't, at first. But as they went along, she began to feel less intimidated by the deep water beneath her. The pool was lighted, and there were lamps on long poles all the way around it. Chris seemed both relaxed and pleased with her company. A gorgeous brunette in the party of people nearby found him attractive and tried to flirt with him. To Delia's surprise, he cut her off abruptly and in such a way that she didn't try it again.

As they were going up in the elevator to their rooms, Delia studied him from the folds of her beach robe with curious eyes.

"She was gorgeous, you know," she told him.

He searched her eyes. "You're gorgeous," he replied, and he wasn't teasing. "Inside and out. After you, I don't know that I could look at another woman."

She caught her breath. "Isn't this sudden?"

He nodded. "Like lightning striking. You never see it coming. Then it hits, and your life changes."

"Changes, how?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure yet." He studied her oval face quietly. "I wouldn't have gone into the water if you hadn't insisted," he said. "I'm glad you did. I don't look as bad as I thought, apparently."

"Of course you don't," she scoffed. "You're still devastating to women, scars and all."

"I noticed," he replied with a speaking glance at her body.

She felt uneasy. "You aren't angry?"

His eyebrows lifted. "At what?"

"At me, for not wanting to go back to your room with you."

He only smiled. "I'm disappointed. I'm not angry." The elevator stopped and he caught her hand in his and held it until they reached her door. He turned to face her after she'd inserted the card key and opened it. "I like you the way you are, Delia," he said. "Old-fashioned hang-ups and all."

"I'm glad."

He bent and kissed her gently. "Get some sleep. I have a feeling we're going headfirst into the fire in the morning."

"You, too," she said. She reached up and brushed back a lock of unruly dark hair from his forehead. Her heart was in her eyes. "You need someone to take care of you," she said quietly. "You don't take care of yourself."

His fingers touched her cheek. "You might take on the job," he said softly. "There's a vacancy."

She smiled. "I'll think about it. Good night. Sleep well."

"You, too."

He gave her a long last look before he wandered off down the hall in his own beach robe, looking as elegant as he did in a suit. Delia watched him until he was out of sight. It

occurred to her that she was in love with him.

## *Chapter 5*

The day dawned rainy and dreary. Delia ordered breakfast from room service and sat down by herself to eat it. She was still elated from the night before and anxious to see Chris, to see if he regretted how far things had gone between them.

He rang the bell just as she was drinking a second cup of coffee. She went to let him in. His dark eyes approved the soft yellow suit she was wearing with a lacy white blouse and white high heels.

"You look elegant," he mused.

She liked the way he looked in slacks and a navy jacket with a roll-neck sweater. "So do you," she replied.

He closed the door behind him and pulled her close, bending to kiss her with tender warmth. "Good morning," he whispered.

"Good morning." She pulled his head down and kissed him back, melting into his tall, hard body with obvious pleasure.

"Morning is always the best time," he murmured against her mouth.

"Is it, really?"

He wrapped her up against him, loving the smallness of her in his arms, the way she clung to him. "I've avoided commitment all my life," he said at her ear. "Trust me to let a gorgeous little blonde waltz up on my blind side."

"I'm not gorgeous."

"You're gorgeous." He held her closer. "Don't think you're going to get rid of me when this is all over," he remarked, feeling her heart jump at the statement. "I'll be tenacious."

"What a lovely thought," she purred.

He drew in a long breath. "I suppose it will have to be orange blossoms and white lace, after all," he said. "You'll be a vision in white."

"Are you proposing?" she squeaked.

"Of course."

She drew back. "We don't know each other!"

"We'll get married and go from there." He searched her soft eyes. "We like each other, we're attracted to each other, and we have mutual elderly headaches to take care of." He shrugged. "It's more than a lot of couples have to start with. Where's your sense of ad-

venture? Don't you ever take risks?"

She was floored. She'd expected anything from him except a proposal. "You've had so many women in your life..."

"And now I only want one. You." He was dead serious. "We'll go at your pace. But at the end of the road, there's going to be orange blossoms and lace. Period."

She smiled slowly, feeling as if fountains of joy were rising up into her heart. "I can't believe it."

"Neither can I," he chuckled. "But there it is. All we have to do is rescue Tansy and get on with it."

Her face fell. "How can I possibly interview my future mother-in-law for a scoop?" she asked suddenly, horrified.

"You'll be kind to her," he said simply. "You're the very best person to do it." He sighed. "God, I hope she's all right. I hardly slept, worrying about her."

Just as he finished the statement, the telephone rang. He went past Delia to pick it up. He listened carefully, murmured something, and hung up.

"Seth," he explained when she looked the question at him. "I've got an address. We're honeymooners, lost and looking for directions." He grinned. "I told you I know how mercenaries work." The smile faded. "You do exactly as I say. I won't risk you, not even for Tansy."

She nuzzled against him for a few sweet seconds. "I won't risk you, either," she said softly. "Let's hope Seth knows what he's doing."

"Amen!"

The address was on the outskirts of London in what looked to be a shabby apartment house. Chris took Delia firmly by the hand and moved to the front door. There was a doorbell. He rang it. There was no answer. He looked at Delia, concerned, and rang it again.

The door suddenly opened. A young man in a leather jacket peered at them from behind it. "What yer want?" he demanded.

Chris drew Delia closer. "We're from America," he drawled. "Just got in from the airport and we're lost. Trying to find a cousin of ours, a...wait a sec." He drew a piece of paper from his pocket and read, "Billy Withers, 44 Truebridge Lane, London." He looked around. "This is Truebridge, but we can't find number 44."

The man looked irritated and impatient. "T'ain't no such number!"

Chris's face fell. "But we've come all this way! Are you sure you have no idea?"

There was a crashing sound in the back of the apartment. The young man scowled, turning toward the inside of the dark room. His hand went to his jacket. Delia never saw Chris move, but the next

minute, the young man was on the floor and Chris was standing over him with an automatic weapon. He cocked it with confident ease and leveled it at the downed man.

"Seth!" he called loudly.

There was another scuffle, another crash, and a familiar face appeared in the hall.

"Damn!" Seth exclaimed when he saw the man on the floor. "That was a neat piece of work," he murmured, grinning as he bent to drag the young man up from the floor. "Come along. Tansy's in here."

"Is she all right?" Chris asked quickly, drawing Delia's cold hand into his free one.

"She's a little rocky, but I gave her a pack of glucose. She's rallying."

Tansy was sitting on the edge of a ragged little cot, sucking on a glucose packet, looking



weary and almost defeated. She looked up and saw Chris and burst into tears.

Chris put the safety on the pistol and tossed it to one of Seth's men before he bent and gathered Tansy close.

"You idiot!" he muttered at her ear, holding her closer. "Dear God, you gave us a scare!"

"Which is nothing compared to what I got, my dear," Tansy sighed, clinging to her son. "My globe-trotting days are over. This is the absolute end." She lifted her head. "Did they find poor Cecil?"

"Yes, just after you vanished. Have you been here the whole time?" Chris asked.

She nodded. "They snatched me and held me until they got their money from Lady Harvey. I was a material witness and she told them to keep me here for collateral until she could get to her funds." She laughed hollowly. "I gather from what those goons said that she reneged and expected them to finish me off. They decided it might be better to hold on to me, because I could implicate her. She doesn't know that," she added. "But I was wearing a wire when she confessed that she and Tony Cartwright had planned Cecil's death."

Seth was suddenly all business. "What happened to the recording?"

"He had it." She pointed to the man on the floor.

Seth pulled out a nasty-looking knife. "Get them out of here," he told Chris.

Chris moved the women ahead of him and looked back at the nervous man on the floor, presumably the vile Tony. "He usually only takes a finger. For his collection," he added with a cold smile. "In your case, it might be an organ. A vital organ. If I were you, I'd tell him what he wants to know. In any case, I'll remove the ladies before you start screaming."

They were in the next room with the door closed before Tansy turned to him. "You enjoyed that," she accused.

He smiled grimly. "Yes, I did. After what he put you through, I'd have enjoyed slugging him even more, but I think our friend Seth will do what's necessary."

"Lord Bainbridge, you mean," she corrected.

"We met Lord Bainbridge," Chris said carefully. "He's seventy."

"He's sixty-five," Tansy stated. She jerked her head toward the door. "That's his son— his only son—a colonel in the SAS until he retired year before last. Now he's what the secret agencies call a problem-solver. Thank God he came after me. I don't think I could have made it another day. I'm so weak, son."

"We'll get you to a hospital and have you checked over, just to be safe," Chris said.

Tansy was staring past him at the pretty little blonde. "Who's this?"

"Delia Larson," he introduced. "She's eventually going to be your daughter-in-law when she makes up her mind that I'm serious about marrying her. But for the meantime, she's a reporter. I promised her an exclusive interview if she came with me to find you."

"She came right in here with you?" Tansy pursed her lips. She was impressed. "Brave girl."

Delia grinned. "That makes several of us. I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Deverell, and I'm very glad that we got here in time!"

Tansy shook the hand that was offered and smiled broadly. "So am I, dear." She lifted both eyebrows. "You're going to marry my son, are you?"

Delia sighed. "I think so," she mused. "Of course, he may change his mind now that we're all out of danger."

"He won't," Chris drawled.

"He's my son," Tansy said. "I taught him always to do what he said he would." She

seemed to slump. "I want a steak," she said. "And French fries and cherry cobbler and..."

"No cherry cobbler," Chris informed her.

She made a face at him. "Even the most rigid diet allows sweets occasionally."

"Not yours."

"Just wait..."

Chris put an arm around her and drew her close. "You can have mangoes and bananas and coconut."

She sighed. "My dear, you remembered!"

"How could I forget? The kitchen was always cluttered with mangoes," he told Delia. "She likes desserts, but fruit was always her favorite." He glared at Tansy. "This time, you're going where you can be found. No more adventures."

"Spoilsport!"

"You could have died," he retorted.

"Eventually we all do." She shook her head. "Poor Cecil. He and I were friends years ago. He wrote to me and invited me to visit. I hadn't met his new wife, so I accepted. But after I'd been there for a few days, I realized that not only did his wife not love him, but she was obsessed with getting her hands on the estate. He vanished one night, just after that shady man in there—" her head jerked toward the closed door "—came to visit Lady Harvey. She woke me the next morning and said that Cecil was dead and I was the prime suspect, because his will named me as executrix and chief beneficiary. Lies, of course, but I was too stunned to question her. Tony Cartwright hustled me out the door and into his car, and said he'd hide me. But that wasn't what he did. He and his cronies brought me here and held chloroform to my nose and mouth. When I woke up, I was locked in that room." She smiled wearily. "I thought I'd never get out alive. I heard them discussing what to do to me after her ladyship went public and accused Tony of killing her husband. He'll be the prosecution's best witness at her trial, unless I miss my guess."

"Not without that tape recording he won't," Chris said solemnly. "Speaking of which..."

He turned toward the door just as Seth came out, all dressed in black, with cold eyes. He had something in his hand—a tiny tape recorder.

"The evidence!" Tansy exclaimed.

Seth nodded. "Irrefutable. Tony's decided to become the state's own witness. One of my men is telephoning the police even as we speak. I'm going to slip out with my men before they get here." He put a heavy hand on Chris's shoulder. "You're a hero. I'm proud of you."

"I didn't do anything except disarm one of the henchmen," Chris argued.

"Well, I sure as hell didn't do anything," Seth remarked haughtily. "I wouldn't soil my hands with such filth."

Tansy went to Seth, stood on tiptoe, and kissed his lean cheek. "Thank you, dear."

He kissed her back and smiled warmly. "Come visiting again. But do it in a conventional way this time, hmm?"

"Behave yourself," Tansy directed.

"I'm the soul of discretion," Seth assured her. He grinned at Delia, glanced at Chris, and suddenly caught Delia around the waist, bent her back over his arm, and kissed her with exaggerated passion.

He let her up, breathless and flushed, and grinned wickedly. "You should have met me first," he repeated. He waved at the others,

went to gather his men, and went stealthily out the back door.

"Damned bounder," Chris muttered, staring at Delia.

"Don't you worry," Delia assured him as she smoothed down her hair. "He's very good—but you're better."

Chris's expression lightened. "Am I?"

She grinned. "Much."

Tansy burst out laughing. "And that answers that question, doesn't it, my boy?" she asked her son.

"Yes," he agreed with a warm smile. "I suppose it does."

They gave the tape recorder and the men over to the police when they arrived and gave statements as well. Tansy was taken to the hospital to be checked over. They kept her overnight and Delia stayed in the room with her while Chris wound up the details of their trip, returned the rental car, and got Tansy a seat on their flight back to Texas.

"It's been a very exciting trip," Delia told the older woman, "although I'm sorry for what you went through."

"It was an adventure, and it will improve with every retelling," Tansy assured her with a wicked chuckle. "You and I are going to get along very well, my dear. I can tell that we're the same sort of people."

"Well, not exactly. But you should meet my grandfather," she told the older woman. "He was a war correspondent."

"War correspondent?" Tansy frowned. "Your last name is Larson? Is your grandfather Herbert Larson of UPI?"

Delia blinked. "Well, yes."

"For heaven's sake!"

"You couldn't...you don't know him?" Delia asked.

"Know him!" Tansy caught her breath and laid back among the pillows. "I'm surprised that he's still alive, the chances he used to take!"

"You *do* know him!" Delia exclaimed.

"About forty years ago," Tansy said, "he and I were pinned down by Latin American revolutionaries when I was in South America, just after my first husband's death. Your grandfather got me to the airport and onto a plane bound for home. I never met a man with such grit, such fire. He was...superb."

Delia smiled. "He still is. He doesn't get around as well, and his sight isn't what it should be, but he's kicking." She hesitated. "He's diabetic but he won't give up sweets. That sounds familiar, too, doesn't it?" she added.

Tansy flushed. "Well, well."

"He and I live together," Delia continued. She stopped dead and frowned. "Oh, dear."

"Oh, dear, what?"

"I can't leave him," she said plaintively, staring at Tansy with huge worried gray eyes. "He'll die if I'm not there to make him take his medicine and keep him away from the sugar bowl!"

Tansy reached over and patted her hand where it lay on the coverlet. "You marry

Chris," she said firmly. "And let me worry about Herbert. I think I may have a solution to your problem."

Delia didn't believe her. But when they arrived back in the States, and found Herbert Larson sitting in a seat next to the concourse entrance at the Houston airport, she began to understand what Tansy meant.

The old man, silver haired and dignified, rose as the travelers came out of the airplane down to the concourse in the covered tunnel. He opened his arms and a happy Delia ran into them to be hugged firmly and kissed. Tansy came out of the tunnel after her and stopped as the elderly man let go of Delia and stood just looking at her. She was holding on to Chris's arm, but she let it go and moved slowly toward the elderly man.

They just looked at each other for a long moment. "You've got wrinkles," Herbert said abruptly.

"You've got flat feet," Tansy shot back.

"My granddaughter says she's going to marry your son."

"Too bad if you don't like it," Tansy said huffily.

He shrugged. "Looks like a nice boy," he mused, glancing at Chris with a faint smile. "I like it. Delia needs looking after. She's too soft to be a reporter."

"She's not too soft to be a political featur-

ist," Tansy said firmly. "It's what she likes to do best."

"She'll enjoy having kids and raising them more," Herbert Larson said. "She's a homebody, like my late wife was. No traipsing around the world getting into scrapes for Martha, no sir!"

"Well, let's hear it for Saint Martha!" Tansy said through her teeth.

Herbert raised an eyebrow and studied her closely. "Still jealous after forty years, hmm?" he taunted.

"Delia says you won't give up sugar," Tansy remarked, ignoring his question.

"She says the same thing about you. Trying to die?" he accused bluntly.

Tansy went scarlet. "I could ask you the same question!"

He shrugged thin shoulders. "I thought about it. Not anymore, though." His eyes narrowed. "I've just found a new lease on life. You like nightclubs?"

She nodded jerkily.

"Dancing?"

She nodded again.

He pursed his lips. "Maybe I'll give you a whirl, if you play your cards right. You never could do a tango."

"And you can?"

"I taught Valentino how," he bragged.

"You were in short pants when Valentino died," she accused.

"If I'd been old enough, I'd have taught him how," he said with a grin. He went forward and took her arm. "Come on, Grandma. I'll help you out to the car."

"You can drive?" she asked mockingly.

"No, but I hired a man who could. Nothing's too good for my granddaughter."

They walked ahead of the others, still arguing. Chris drew Delia close to his side as they walked, pulling luggage on wheels behind them.

"I think some of our problems are about to be solved. Apparently, they know each other."

Delia nodded. "And fairly well, from the look of things. Miracles never cease."

"I hope they won't kill each other before we get married."

She chuckled. "Oh, I don't think there's much danger of that." She slid her hand into his and looked up at him with her whole heart

in her soft gray eyes. "I can't wait to marry you," she added in a breathless whisper.

He squeezed her hand, hard. His dark eyes were expressive on her face. "Neither can I." He hesitated. "You don't mind the scars?"

She smiled and pressed close against his side. "Don't be silly."

His eyes closed briefly and his arm went around her, contracting almost painfully. It was like having every single dream of happiness he'd ever had come true. He could hardly contain the feeling it gave him to know she loved him.

"I love you, Delia," he said tautly.

She looked up into eyes that adored her. "I love you, too." She smiled impishly. "How soon can we get married?"

He searched her soft features warmly. "As soon as I can get a license. You're not about to get away from me!"

They were married by a justice of the peace exactly three days later, with Tansy and Herbert for witnesses. The elderly couple were holding hands, apparently having decided that fighting was less fun than exploring each others' personalities. In a relatively short time, they'd rediscovered the feelings they had for each other years ago, and they were inseparable.

Chris and Delia drove them back to Herbert's apartment before they drove to the airport to catch their plane to Spain. They were going to Malaga, on the southern shores of Spain, along the Costa del Sol, for an extended honeymoon. Delia, who'd traveled little in her life, was exuberant about the adventure of it. She couldn't wait to get there.

When they arrived and passed through customs, they took a cab to their hotel overlooking the blistering white beach and blue sea. The hotel was white stucco with gardens full of blossoming flowers. It was a dream of a place, with wrought-iron balconies and the smell of the sea air fresh and clean.

"The Rock of Gibraltar is very close by," Chris told her when they were installed in their suite, "and so is Morocco. We might take a day trip over there and explore the souq—the marketplace."

She turned from the window that led out to the balcony and stared at him hungrily, drinking in the sight of his long, lean body in white slacks and a red designer knit shirt. She was wearing a loose, comfortable crinkly cotton dress with tiny shoulder bows and little beneath it, because of the heat.

"Alone at last," she said with a soft smile. Her hands went to the shoulder bows and slowly undid them, letting the dress fall to the floor. Under it, she wore a white lace teddy that emphasized every sweet curve of her young body.

Chris caught his breath. He went to her, his hands slow and caressing on her shoulders. "You don't want supper first?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. Her arms went up and around his neck. "I want you first," she whispered, and drew his mouth down on hers.

The passion was explosive. She'd dreamed of being in his arms without fabric between them, and here it was happening, so naturally that she never thought to feel embarrassed. He eased her out of her clothing between soft, brief kisses that traveled the length of her body, each one more sensual and arousing than the one before.

She knew that he was experienced, but until now she had no knowledge of the reality of intimacy. He aroused her expertly, slowly, taking his time, soothing all her secret fears until she was dazed and shivering with the pleasure he gave her.

By the time he drew her carefully under him and eased down, she was eager and totally without fear or reserve. She lifted to meet the slow, sensuous downward thrust of his hips and laughed with pure pleasure when the tiny flash of pain was experienced and abruptly replaced by delicious sensations that rippled over her like waves.

His lean hands moved her, teased her, taught her, while his mouth devoured hers in the stillness of the cool room. There was a rhythm that she hadn't expected. It built the new sensations she was feeling into torrential spasms of pleasure that overwhelmed her unexpectedly and lifted her against him in a fever of submission.

She hid her face in his hot throat as the spasms broke against themselves, twisting her under his demanding body as she reached and reached and finally found the exquisite source of the tiny sips of fulfillment she'd only sampled.

He felt her go rigid, and at once, he drove for his own satisfaction, his mouth hard against her breast as he soared into the heights with her.

When he collapsed at her side, she was still shivering, and laughing through the little aftershocks of ecstasy that left her moving restlessly on the bed.

"So it's like that," she whispered, awed.

"It's like that," he whispered back. He smiled and rolled over, his face damp with sweat, his eyes blazing with love. "Was I worth waiting for? You certainly were!"

She chuckled and drew him down, so that she could kiss him with lazy enthusiasm. "Yes, you were," she murmured. "I'm sleepy."

"So am I. We'll have a nice nap and then we'll go and find the nearest seafood bar."

"I love seafood," she murmured drowsily.

"Me, too."

He drew her close at his side and pulled the sheet over them, because the room was cooling. His last thought as he slid into oblivion was that a lifetime of Delia wasn't going to be quite enough...

They called Tansy and Herbert the next morning to enthuse about the sights and sounds of Spain.

"I'm glad you two are having fun," Tansy said with laughter in her voice. "When you come home, we'll have another wedding."

"*What?*" Chris burst out.

"Herbert proposed," Tansy said. "And *this* time, I accepted."

He handed the phone to Delia. "You aren't going to believe this," he told her.

"What?" she exclaimed when her grandfather told her the news.

"Haven't you people ever heard that you can marry more than once?" Herbert asked with disgust. "For heaven's sake, she's a dish. No way am I letting her get away from me now!"

"Well, congratulations. Grandad," Delia said with love in her voice. "I couldn't be more pleased."

"Neither could I," Chris said loudly.

"You two enjoy yourselves. Tansy knows this little Japanese place downtown where they have that strange fish. Can't think what it's called. Anyway we're going there for a snack. You kids have fun. Talk to you soon. Bye!"

He hung up. Delia glanced at her husband with a frown. "They're going to a Japanese place to have a strange fish."

Chris went pale. "Not fugu. Please. Tell me it's not fugu."

"What's a fugu?"

He grabbed up the receiver and placed a call to Tansy's apartment. Herbert answered.

"If you eat a fugu fish, I'll hire a man to do nothing but follow the two of you around, full-time, I swear it!" Chris said harshly.

"Fugu? Are you daft, son?" Herbert sighed. "Tansy, what's the name of that fish?"

"Sushimi," she called back.

Chris went red. "Oh," he said.

"Fugu, indeed. He thought we were going to eat fugu fish!" he called to Tansy.

"He's on his honeymoon, Herb, what do you expect? Now hang up and come help me get into this dress. We'll be late for our reservation!"

Chris laughed until Delia was worried about

him. When he told her what was going on at the apartment, she only grinned.

"They'll be happy together," she said.

"Each of them alone is a handful. Can you possibly imagine what it's going to be like to have two of them conspiring?"

Delia grimaced. "I hadn't thought about that."

"Well, don't. Not now, anyway." He picked her up and kissed her gently. "We have six days of our honeymoon left, and we're not wasting a minute worrying about them."

"What are we going to do, then?" she whispered wickedly.

He chuckled as he turned toward the bed. "I'm glad you asked..."

So was she.