

**Denyse M. Bridger**



## HEART OF STONE

...Rand reached for her and sat her astride his hips as he leaned back on the soft, warm grass. He pulled her down over him and into a kiss that left them shaking against each other.

Robin smiled, kissed him lightly, then eased back to gaze down at him. She tilted her head to one side, tugged at the waist of her T-shirt, and slowly eased it away from her skin and over her head to be tossed aside.

Rand's hands covered her bared breasts, strong fingers caressing firm flesh before his thumbs began brushing tantalizing circles around her nipples, making the already hard tips rigid with excitement.

Robin pressed herself tighter to him, her hips moving in seductive, rhythmic insistence while she leaned down and offered her breasts to his mouth. When his teeth closed over one aching nipple, she moaned, lost in the well-known madness of Rand's touch. The world spun as his arms encircled her waist and he changed their positions. Her legs parted to accommodate his weight and he thrust into her, the material of his pants straining against his erection. She arched in pleasure, her spine curling as he teased first one nipple, then the other...

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# HEART OF STONE

BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

HEART OF STONE  
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ISBN 1-59279-471-8  
Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## PROLOGUE

An undercurrent of rage and contained danger swirled like unseen mist, threading through and around the small group of people who stood at the open gravesite. The sky, heavy with smog and humidity, hung overhead in a depressing shade of steel gray. Rain threatened to make the day even more unbearable. The only real sound was the soft, incessant drone of a minister to whom no one really listened.

Jennifer Vincente watched discreetly as Major Randall Stone stared at the pale wooden coffin that had just been lowered into the ground. A coffin that contained the remains of Robin Bourne, the only woman who had ever been part of Stone's soul.

Rand was an old friend, someone Jennifer had once loved desperately. He was the kind of man women dreamed about from the time they were old enough to create fantasies about handsome heroes who swept them off their feet and made everything right with the world. The difference being, Randall Stone *was* a hero who had saved a

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great number of lives during the years in which he'd served his country. As a mercenary, he'd "unofficially" saved just as many, or more.

Determined not to focus on the funeral they attended, Jenn chose instead to study her friends and see them without bias. It was an exercise designed to take her mind off her own sense of loss.

Stone was a commanding presence, standing well over six feet tall, with thick, short, dark brown hair, and equally brown eyes. He was broad shouldered and long legged, with the rigid bearing of a man accustomed to keeping his emotions carefully contained. She knew from years of working with him that Rand was graceful, lethal, and a natural leader. The specialized team he'd drawn together could never have learned to work together and love each other if it hadn't been for his unshakable faith in each of them.

Lucky Cortland was directly across from her, and he smiled a little when she met his gaze. If anyone felt this loss as acutely as Rand, it would be Lucky. Cortland, like the rest of Randall Stone's team, was ex-military, a former captain, given a dishonorable discharge for not obeying an order that would have left a friend dying on an overseas battlefield. He was a weapons expert and, for some reason none of them, Lucky included, could even define, he'd developed a relationship with Robin Bourne that was as intimate as Stone's, if on a different level entirely. Lucky was six feet tall, had closely cropped black hair, and the most vivid green eyes she'd ever seen. It was impossible to gauge his ethnic origins, but whatever the mix, the result was stunning. It had been a real shock to the team when he'd opted for retirement the previous year and finally settled in Montana, where he had started the ranch he'd often talked about owning.

Jennifer's eyes shifted again, and zeroed in on Eddie Blake. Blake was the most mysterious of the team she worked with. He was soft-spoken, but a man of few words. Like his teammates, he was attractive, and deadly when necessary. The tears that shone in his sharp hazel eyes

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revealed more about his heart than anything Jenn had seen in the full five years since she'd first been introduced to him.

Next to Blake was D.J. Sommers. He'd been with the team from the start, but had opted for a real life a year ahead of Lucky. Like Cortland, he did still occasionally help them out when they needed his computer skills and explosives expertise. D.J. was a slight man, with shaggy brown hair and pale blue eyes that changed as often as the skies above them. His moods were unfathomable most of the time, but to anyone who got past the defenses, those remarkable eyes were the key to every thought he had. Robin had been one of the rare people given access to his heart, and she'd adored him.

Donald Brookman and his wife, Tricia, were on either side of Rand. The parents he didn't have, Jenn realized in that instant. Brookman had always given the impression of being a surrogate father to Rand, even when they fought over missions and disagreed vehemently on the way those assignments were carried out; the essence of a grieving father had never been as poignant as it was now, as he stood shoulder to shoulder with the statue that was Randall Stone.

Silence penetrated Jennifer's erratic reverie, and she saw the service had ended. Yet, no one moved. Everyone present was waiting for Stone to signal that this official gathering was now concluded. It happened a moment later when he tossed a white rose into the ground and turned away before the soft, muffled thud assured them it had come to rest on the shining lid of the coffin that was waiting to be covered with dirt.

As one, the small group moved away, drifting in varying directions as they headed for the row of vehicles parked along the wrought-iron fence that enclosed the cemetery.



# CHAPTER 1

*One week earlier...*

Robin Bourne shuddered as she glanced in the rear view mirror. He was still tailing her, and the constant presence was rapidly eroding her nerves. She'd been home in L.A. less than a week, and already the peace and contentment she'd experienced while she'd stayed in Montana with her best friend Lucky Cortland had been replaced by old fear and tension.

Rand had been gone much longer than expected, and Robin was feeling uncharacteristically alone and vulnerable in his absence. She urged the car to greater speed and tried not to notice the headlights that dimmed for mere moments, then came back into glaring focus behind her.

"Damn it, Brian!" she growled to the air, anger adding another layer of uneasy emotion to her turmoil.

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Brian Ethridge had been one of her clients for much of the past six months, and in that time, he'd been the cause of more than one fight with ex-Army Major Randall Stone. Before Rand had gone on his present mission, he'd talked to her about Ethridge and her assistant, Evelyn Barton. He'd unearthed a lot of information about their recent activities. The suspicions she'd been afraid to voice herself had suddenly been given to her by the very man she'd been hoping not to worry. Rand had been right, something that came as no surprise to her; he usually was when it involved things like this.

With Rand out of the country, Brian had stepped up his stalking tactics, and tonight she felt real terror when she saw he was still close on her tail.

"Go away!" she almost screamed. She leaned to the right, intent on retrieving the cell phone that was in her purse. A blur of silver crossed her path and she slammed on the brakes.

Over the roar of her heartbeat, Robin heard the unmistakable report of a shot being fired. Her car swerved and screeched to a halt. She heard a second braking vehicle and assumed it was the red Jag that had been following her since shortly after she'd left her office building. Controlling her panic with real effort, Robin unbuckled her seatbelt and reached for the door handle. She aborted the motion when she spotted a man walking toward her, illuminated in the stark white glow of her Prelude's headlights. Something about the way he moved put her in mind of Rand, and she waited, wary but not overly frightened.

The man was six feet tall, possibly taller, dressed in jeans and T-shirt, athletic and well-muscled—something that was quite evident as he strolled toward her. He carried a gun; it was in a holster under his left arm. She wasn't surprised when he bent and knocked on the window of her door.

Careful, she lowered the window a few inches, and he smiled.

"Ms. Bourne, I'm a friend of Rand's."

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Something in his eyes chilled her, and she didn't answer.

"We have to leave here, quickly," he went on. "You're in danger, and Rand wants me to get you to safety. Brookman will be in touch once we reach our destination."

"Who are you?" She relaxed only minutely when he used the names so casually. Not many people would know who Donald Brookman was, let alone that he was connected to Rand. Still, this man's face did not inspire immediate trust.

"Jason MacIntyre," he said and offered his hand. "Rand and I have been friends for years."

She brought the window down completely and shook his hand. "Where is Rand now?"

"He'll be in touch as soon as you're safe, Ms. Bourne—"

"It's Robin," she requested, distracted and unsure, even with his references to Rand. "Who fired the shot?"

There was a tiny hesitation before he answered. "I did," he admitted. "I wanted to slow down your tail. He's going to come to in a few minutes, so we need to move, ma'am," he suggested with calculated urgency.

"I want to talk to Rand."

"As soon as we're clear of the area," he promised. "Drive up the road about a quarter-mile, and I'll meet you in ten minutes." When she started to argue, he smiled, the effect less appealing than he probably hoped. "I need to check on your friend Brian."

"He's not my friend, Mr. MacIntyre," she shot back, tone acerbic.

He nodded and waited for her decision.

Robin rolled up the window and pulled back onto the road, then drove out of sight.

Behind her, MacIntyre watched, his smile turning into a grin. This had been a helluva lot easier than he'd anticipated. He walked back to the car he'd used to cut her off, and climbed in. He turned the vehicle

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toward the rail, then got out. He reached in, resettled a new driver in the seat, and released the brake. Sirens were already blaring in the distance as the car went over the steep embankment and burst into flames.

He nodded, satisfied, then spun on his heel and jogged into the night, following Robin Bourne...

\* \* \*

*Several days later...*

“How many messages do you think he’s got waiting for him?” Blake asked as they trailed after Stone.

Rand heard Jennifer’s laughter, and suppressed a smile at his team’s banter.

“Well, we’ve been gone three weeks, and he said to call in three days. By now she might not even be talking to him.”

“That don’t look promising,” Nick Holloway, a temporary team member selected for this particular mission, noted when they entered the military hangar and spotted Brookman waiting for them. On loan from the CIA, Nick had been an unofficial presence on many missions organized by Donald Brookman over the years. He’d worked with Stone’s team several times before, and was giving serious thought to making the move permanent.

“Listen, Brookman,” Rand began when they reached the International Security Director, who was their unofficial boss. “We’re tired, and I am *not* going anywhere for at least a couple of days.”

The rest of the team had stopped at his back; their muttered affirmatives echoed his assertion. When Donald said nothing, the silence settled, a strained, tension-laden quiet both ominous and unnerving.

“Brookman?”

Donald ran a hand over his silvery hair and looked Rand directly in the eyes.

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“She’s dead, Rand,” he said with no preamble or cushioning words.

“Who’s dead?” Rand responded automatically, his weary brain sluggish. But his body grew taut with contained panic. He knew already. He really didn’t want to know at all.

“Robin Bourne died three days ago,” Donald stated. “Her car went off the road. She was killed in the explosion.”

The silence held for several seconds.

“What?” It was an expulsion of air, disbelief the only emotion present in the whispered word. Rand’s smile faltered. His gut told him it was true, but his head wasn’t ready to accept it.

Behind him, he felt shock radiate from the other members of the elite mercenary team. Jennifer touched his shoulder, but he shrugged her off, not willing to accept the comfort she was clearly trying to offer him.

“What the hell are you telling me, Brookman?” Fury rose like a tide, blotting out the pain he wasn’t ready to face. “She was on her way to New York for that bastard Ethridge when I left. Is that where this happened?”

“She went directly from New York to Butte, stayed with Lucky for nearly a week, then came home. She was back five days before her death,” Brookman said.

“No!” Rand closed his eyes and rubbed them as his thoughts raced at warp speed. “There’s been a mistake—”

“Forensics gave them positive identification from dental records,” Brookman told him, visibly reluctant to impart the details. “When they couldn’t reach you, they contacted Lucky. He called me.” He reached into his jacket pocket and held out his hand.

Rand lifted the charred necklace from Donald’s palm. The silver dog tags with Rand’s name engraved into them; Jennifer had given them to Robin as a birthday gift, and she’d worn them from that night on, telling him that they made her feel just a little bit more his. That

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lack of feminist in her was one more complementary trait to Rand's chauvinistic nature. She was happy to belong with him *and* to him.

Rand's fingers closed over the tags, and he walked a few paces away from the group, pulling himself under control as he accepted his friend's news. He turned to stare at them, dazed.

"Lucky and D.J. arrived this morning," Brookman told them. "They're at the club."

Jennifer went to Rand's side. "I'm so sorry, Rand."

He nodded. He had no words.

"My car's waiting," Brookman interjected in a quiet voice.

"Who's in charge of the investigation?"

"Detective Eric Karmac."

"He's our first stop," Stone said, mentally distancing himself from the grief he knew he'd be living with for a long time. He'd grieve later, when he could tell himself he'd done something about her death. About the death of the first woman in much too long that he'd allowed himself to love and need.

Brookman gazed at the others, worry and uneasiness evident in his wary expression.

"We'll go back to the club," Jennifer assured him. Nick nodded his silent agreement.

"We're here for you, Major," Eddie said.

"Yeah." Rand smiled a little. "Thanks."

\* \* \*

"Robin's mother, Clara Shelton, is waiting for access to Robin's house," Donald said, once Rand had changed into civilian clothes and they were on their way to LAPD headquarters.

"Who the hell..." he began, then shook his head. "Never mind. Where's she staying?"

"Nowhere, yet," Brookman replied. "She flew in a couple of hours after Lucky and D.J. arrived. Lucky wouldn't grant her admittance to

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the house until you got back.”

Rand managed a small laugh.

“I gather Robin and her mother weren’t close?” Donald noted dryly.

“You could say that,” Rand responded with a hint of bitterness. “She hasn’t seen Robin since just after her father’s death. That was back in ’92.”

Brookman’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but he didn’t comment.

“And there’s been no contact since then? Is there any other family?”

Rand swallowed the threat of real tears as he fought to contain the raging emotions that battered his heart.

“A sister,” he answered after a few moments thought. “Aureena.”

“Should I find her?”

“From what Robin said, if Clara is here, Aureena won’t be far behind her.”

When Brookman would have asked more questions, Rand turned away and stared out the window.

“Later, Donald,” he whispered, his voice thick with too much pain.

The light squeeze of Donald’s hand on his shoulder was almost his undoing, and he closed his eyes for a moment as he forcibly put the grief aside to think about what he was going to do.

\* \* \*

Brookman wasn’t convinced taking Rand into the morgue was a course of action that would do anything but cause more pain to the younger man. But Rand wouldn’t be dissuaded from seeing what little remained of Robin’s body. Maybe it was the only thing that would make it real for him, Donald decided, and followed him into the cold, antiseptic room.

“This isn’t necessary, Rand,” Donald ventured for what he knew would be the final time.

“Have your people done the follow-up?”

Brookman shook his head. “Is it really necessary?”

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Stone smiled, an expression that was a world away from the casual devilment the shift in features usually conveyed. There was nothing, only the cold mask Donald knew hid the more lethal aspects of Rand's personality. *"...He's a stranger in so many ways. Like there are two different people living in the same body, and I only know one face in many..."* Robin's voice whispered the words in his memory, and he began to understand the statement with new clarity as Rand stared at the blackened remnants of the woman he had loved much more than he'd had time to realize.

"I want everything double-checked," Rand said softly. "Triple-checked, if necessary. I don't want any doubt, Donald," he finished as he turned to leave.

"Why—"

"Because I have to know!" he snarled before Brookman could finish the query.

At the police station Rand was given the reports to read, and he questioned Eric Karmac thoroughly on each piece of evidence the police had collected.

An hour later, they were headed for the Western Star Health Club. The health club had been established a couple of years earlier as a convenient cover operation for the government affiliated mercenary team. Rand had an apartment above the club, and his fortress-like command center was below ground. He conducted most of his life from the confines of the club, when he wasn't trotting all over the world for Brookman.

"What are you going to do about her mother?" Brookman asked.

Rand's eyebrow rose. "Why?"

Donald decided to wait for a few minutes, until they were inside the club and he knew if he'd have to make an announcement in front of Robin's family.

As (bad) luck would have it, both mother and sister were present,



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sitting well apart from the members of Randall's mercenary team. Clara's hostility seemed to be directed at Lucky.

"You must be Randall Stone," she said, rising from her seat the instant Rand came through the door.

"Yes, ma'am, I am," he replied, shaking her hand.

"I want to see my daughter's home, and I've been told that will be impossible without your consent."

Rand glanced at Lucky and resisted a smile when the other man merely shrugged.

"There may be a slight problem there," Donald interjected.

Clara's icy gaze moved. There was little resemblance between Robin and her mother, and the lack of warmth that emanated from the well-groomed, chic woman who glared at him was as striking as Robin's earthy, easy-going manner.

Aureena Shelton was a mirror image of her mother—tall, slender, fair. "What type of problem?" she asked, her annoyance clear to everyone.

"Robin's left very specific instructions on how things are to be handled, and who is to handle them," Donald told them, feeling the various levels of surprise his words evoked. "All decisions are to be made by the person she's left in control of her estate."

"And that would be?" Rand prompted.

"That would be you, Rand" Brookman said. "The will is straightforward, and the executor assigned."

"Are you telling us that Robin has cut us out entirely?" Aureena snapped.

"Of course she hasn't." Clara's voice rang with impatience. "We're her family. All the family she had."

"Wrong again," Lucky spoke into the lull, his smooth voice unexpectedly chilly. "We're Robin's family. Look around you, Mrs. Shelton. The people your daughter cherished most are right in front of

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you.”

Clara’s stare moved from face to face, seeing strangers who grieved more visibly than she ever would. Her look stopped on Lucky, and would have unnerved a lesser man. When Lucky simply stared back, she was forced to look away.

“I want to see the paperwork,” she said.

“It’s all here,” Brookman assured her.

Rand left them to fight it out. He was tired, and there were too many things he needed to look into. When he closed his office door, he looked around, feeling Robin’s presence in the room with him. His gaze went to the photograph on his desk, and he had to close his eyes to clear them of sudden haze. Eddie had taken the picture here in the office; Robin was seated between his legs, surrounded by the remnants of her birthday party.

Rand crossed the room and lifted the receiver off the phone.

A half hour later, the door to his office burst inward, and Clara Shelton stormed in.

“I want to see my daughter’s house,” she informed him, anger blazing from her entire manner.

“I can arrange that,” he said. Having just spent twenty minutes on the phone, gratefully accepting the comfort of his grandmother’s warmth, he could more readily appreciate Robin’s rancor toward her own remaining parent. Some of that hostility dimmed a second later when Clara picked up the photograph he’d been looking at minutes earlier.

“She loved you,” Clara murmured after a lengthy hesitation. She sounded surprised.

Rand nodded. “She’s... She was an amazing woman.”

Clara’s momentary softening vanished. Harsh laughter sprang from her as she placed the picture back on his desk.

“Robin’s capacity for indifference was her most amazing quality,

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Mr. Stone.”

“You didn’t know her very well, did you?”

“Quite the opposite.” She smiled bitterly. “I knew her too well. She was her father’s child from the day she was born, and, like Edmund, she cared for no one’s needs but her own.”

Rand shook his head. “I’m not going to discuss this with you, Mrs. Shelton.” He rose. “I’ll have one of my people take you to the house.”

“That won’t be necessary. Just give me a key.”

Rand smiled. “I’m afraid it’s not that simple, ma’am. The house has a security system. Without one of my team, you won’t be able to walk in.”

“What on earth did a man like you see in her?” Clara murmured, after a thorough and insinuating appraisal of Rand.

“Everything you didn’t, apparently,” Rand commented dryly. He didn’t give her time for further conversation. He returned to the main area of the club, Robin’s mother only a few steps behind him. “Jennifer, would you take Mrs. Shelton to the house and stay with her?”

“It’s Clara,” Robin’s mother said.

Rand ignored her.

## CHAPTER 2

*Present time...*

Jennifer stopped at the door to Rand's office, her stomach lurching with sickening intensity when she spotted what held his attention so completely. Sighing, she shook off the sense of loss and went into the shadowy room.

"How many times are you going to watch that?"

Rand's eyes flashed with annoyance when he turned to look at her. For several moments he made no other indication of having heard her. Then he turned, hit the pause button on the DVD player to mute the sound, and leaned back in his chair. He tossed the remote onto a pile of paperwork.

"I thought you were going to Paris," he commented.

"I am. This is where you can reach me."

The shrug he gave her in response was not reassuring. Genuinely

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concerned, she dropped the slip of paper on the nearest stack of work, then perched on the edge of his desk and looked closer at him.

“When was the last time you slept without dreaming about her, Rand?”

“The day we buried her. Since then, it’s been constant.”

“Let her go,” she whispered. “This isn’t what Robin would want for you. She loved you too much.”

“This proves she’s not dead.”

His certainty created a flicker of exasperation in her. “That doesn’t prove a damn thing, Rand. We haven’t been able to verify the disc’s dating. There were no fingerprints. No trace of anything that could tell us where it came from.” She paused, then added, “It might not even be Robin.”

Even she heard the lack of conviction in her last words, and Rand laughed.

“You don’t believe for a minute that I can’t recognize any part of her, Jennifer,” he said, his voice quiet. “Her face might not be in the picture, but I know it’s her.”

Jennifer knew he was right. She just didn’t like what that correctness meant.

“He likes to touch, but not to inflict pain,” Rand mused, turning the recording on again.

The comment took Jennifer back to a mission she would have preferred not to remember. Rand had once served with a man named Jason MacIntyre. He was, like Randall, a highly trained soldier, and had once been as tied to Donald Brookman as Stone and their team were. MacIntyre had gone rogue a couple of years back, and when Brookman had given Rand the nasty assignment of bringing him in, the entire mission had proven a mistake. Mac had planned a detailed trap, and they’d fallen into it. Most of the team had been captured and used to bait Stone.

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Rand had once owed the man his life. Despite the bad blood between them, Rand had shown Mac a mercy that would never have been accorded him had their situations been reversed. He made the difficult decision to let Mac disappear rather than let him face the wrath of both the government and the military. It had been one of the few times she'd ever see Donald Brookman genuinely furious with Stone, and it was not a pleasant memory. No more than the recollection of Mac's slimy come-ons to her during her time as his prisoner. Her mind pulled forth the memory, almost against her will...

*"...Some people like to do things to their captives... painful things... I like to touch... to inflict pleasure..." he murmured, leaning in to her.*

*Jennifer repressed the flinch of response, and met his eyes with a cool composure that she'd spent years acquiring.*

*"Do you sleep with Stone?"*

*She smiled. This was pretty much the conversation she'd been expecting to have with him. She let the pause lengthen, chose her moment for effect. "You're not prepared to believe me if I say yes or no, so why bother?"*

*"Because maybe I will believe you, if you give me the right answer, of course."*

*"Of course. But there is no right answer..."*

The words tumbled back into the forefront of Jennifer's mind, freezing her blood in her veins as she considered what they might have overlooked in Robin's case.

"Rand?"

It took a moment for his concentration to refocus, and he straightened in his chair when he saw the intensity of her gaze.

"Do you know where Jason MacIntyre is?"

Startled, Rand shifted until his elbows were on the desktop, and he was looking directly at her.

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“Why?”

“It’s possible...*just* possible, that he’s the one in this recording.”

“Why, Jenn?” Rand snapped at her. “What haven’t you told me before?”

“Something you said, about liking to touch,” she answered warily. “He used those words when he had us in his camp. He likes to touch, but not to inflict pain. He gets a kick out of humiliating women, and he does it by making his victim feel good, then watching her twist herself into knots because it did feel good.” She paused, then added, “I know because he did it to me, Rand.”

Rand shook his head, uncertain of precisely what he was attempting to deny. Part of him was rejecting the possibility that the woman he loved was in MacIntyre’s hands. Yet the more rational part of his mind sensed it could be true.

He reached for the phone, but the gesture was aborted when the man he intended to call walked into the office.

“I’m glad you’re still here, Jennifer,” Donald Brookman noted with a nod. “I’m afraid your plans for Paris are going to have to wait.”

Rand’s frown deepened, and after Brookman took a closer look at him, his gaze moved to the image frozen on the big screen television that was usually concealed behind a wall. He sighed.

“She’s dead, Rand,” he said quietly. “Let it go.”

“Let it go?” Rand repeated, voice icy with contained fury. “I will not *let it go*, Brookman. She’s alive, and I intend to find her!”

“We’ve been through this already,” Donald began, only to be stopped by the sheer force of Stone’s anger when the younger man rose and glared at him.

“Whatever you came for is going to have to wait.”

Brookman looked to Jennifer, and he must have read something in her expression because he turned back to Rand and studied him intently. “What’s happened?”

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“We may have a lead on what really happened to Robin,” Jennifer said, her voice soft, caution in her look and tone.

Rand didn’t so much as look at her; his eyes were still locked in silent combat with Brookman.

“Robin is dead,” Donald said.

Brookman’s decree was met with stony silence, and tension poured into the room, enshrouding the three people present.

\* \* \*

### *Private Island, South Pacific Ocean*

“Magnificent view, isn’t it?”

She flinched, the response instinctive, beyond her conscious control. His voice was becoming more terrifying with each day that passed, and now-familiar loathing coiled within her.

Robin Bourne pulled her emotions around her, making them a protective cloak to shield her terror. She nodded, but refused to look at him. “The view is spectacular,” she agreed.

“My own paradise.” He smiled. “Paradise Lost.”

One eyebrow arched, and she laughed bitterly. “An appropriate name for this particular hell,” she murmured. A brief pause met the comment, then she continued, “When is Randall supposed to be here?” They’d been playing this game for several weeks now, and she knew it was the one thing that would make him angry enough to leave her alone.

He sighed, then took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him.

“When are you going to stop asking me that?” Amusement was evident in his gaze, despite the thread of irritation in his tone.

“When you allow me to leave this place.” Her voice was devoid of feeling. “You told me Rand sent you to get me,” she reminded him in the familiar verbal fencing. “I believed you. You lie as easily as you



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betray, Mr. MacIntyre.”

His eyes sparked with real fury, and his mouth tightened.

“Rand thinks you’re dead, sweetheart,” he declared in a blunt tone. “He believes you died in a car crash being chased by that idiot who was so taken with you.” MacIntyre gave her a cold smile. “Ethridge is dead, too, by the way. Rand killed him.”

Robin felt ice form in her veins, and she wanted to laugh, the reaction one of near hysteria. Something in his eyes choked the response and she swayed.

“No,” she shook her head. “Rand wouldn’t do that. Anymore than he’d believe I was dead. Not without proof.”

“Think about it,” MacIntyre jeered. “Why wouldn’t he accept it? The police found your car, your body, and your dog tags.” He laughed when he added the last taunt; she’d been asking for the silver necklace since she’d regained consciousness. He’d told her the first day that it must have been lost on the plane.

“My...” She swallowed and tried again. “My body! How...?”

He shrugged. “Not difficult,” he assured her, sardonic humor glittering in his eyes. “A change of dental records, a dead body of the right age and size, and voila, you’re dead, Ms. Bourne.”

“Rand would know.” She shook her head in rejection of what her heart was already telling her was truth. “You couldn’t convince him,” she almost shouted in her fear. “He loves me!”

“Rand’s in mourning.” MacIntyre gave her a wicked grin.. “For now.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Would you like to see your funeral?”

Robin stared at him, stunned into silence. Her mind worked furiously to assimilate the shocking news he’d just told her.

“What?” she gasped, finally, the single word torn from her in spite of herself.

## *HEART OF STONE*

MacIntyre strolled into his study. She followed, if for no other reason than the hope that she might get a glimpse of Rand on the disc MacIntyre picked up from his desk. When he slid the video disc into a waiting machine and turned, she stood in the doorway, eyes riveted to the screen that came to life.

Robin hugged herself and held her breath as the recording began to play. It was grainy, taken from a distance, but the people and the place were undeniable. All the members of Rand's mercenary team were there: Tricia and Donald Brookman, the few friends she had from her work, even Daniel Rayne and his people from Legacy Designs. Her eyes went to the most prominent of the people gathered, and her heart twisted in her chest. She bit her bottom lip to silence the sob that rose in her throat when she saw Rand tossing a perfect white rose onto the casket that had just been lowered into the ground. His pain was tangible, reaching across time and space to tear at her heart. She ached for him, with him, and the screen blurred behind a curtain of watery tears.

"Randall..." she whispered, barely aware she spoke out loud.

"Who's the woman?" MacIntyre's voice penetrated the wall of agony that was building inside her.

Robin shook off the tears, determined not to let him see how deeply shaken she was by the monstrous farce she was witnessing. She looked again at the screen and her expression turned disdainful. The scene had changed, was now inside the Western Star Health Club.

"My mother," she informed him. "The other one is my sister, Aureena." She met MacIntyre's sharp eyes and tilted her head to one side. "Perhaps you should have taken her. She'd probably find you quite entertaining, Mr. MacIntyre."

He laughed. "Maybe, but Stone wouldn't much care if I grabbed her, would he?"

Robin's eyes widened at the words.

## *HEART OF STONE*

“This is about Randall?” She snarled inwardly at the idiocy of the observation. Of course it was about Rand.

“Rand owes me.”

A fragment of memory came back to her, and she concentrated, forcing her mind to work, to recall where she had heard this man’s name before he had kidnapped her off the streets of Los Angeles. It came, slowly, and she wanted to retch when she realized how stupid she’d been to trust him when he’d stopped her.

“You were the one he let escape last year, the one Donald was so angry about,” she said, really looking at him now. “Eddie said he’d been foolish not to kill you when he had the chance.”

MacIntyre grinned, obviously enjoying her shock.

“Blake was the one who should have been killed when the chance was there,” MacIntyre smirked.

“Randall doesn’t owe you a thing, MacIntyre,” she snapped. “He left you alive, and that makes you even. All you’ve done is give him a reason to come after you.”

“We still have an account to settle.” MacIntyre’s voice was eerily soft.

She nodded, slowly. “You’re right. Payment due on your side. He will kill you for this.”

He turned to the video player and shut off the frozen image, then replaced the disc with a new one.

“I want you to see the gift I sent to him a week ago,” he said, voice neutral, eyes watchful of her response.

\* \* \*

“I’ll look into it, Rand,” Brookman repeated for the third time. “But in the meantime, I need your help.”

“I don’t care. This is more important to me just now, Brookman.”

Brookman stared, unsure of how to respond to the flat refusal to compromise. He’d frequently had to persuade Rand of certain

## *HEART OF STONE*

assignments, and the game they played was as old as their friendship. But Stone had never outright refused to even listen to him.

“There’s more at stake here than what you want, Stone!”

Rand smiled, the expression devoid of pleasantness, as it had often been since Robin’s death.

“What I want is taking priority for once.”

Donald noted Jennifer’s discreet exit, and he went to take a seat on the sofa that ran along one wall of the office.

“Rand, you have my word,” he said with real honesty. “I will look into this. If there’s any way her death could have been faked, I’ll find it.”

Rand heard the sincerity and it tweaked at his conscience. He left his position at the desk and went to sit in the armchair adjacent to Brookman.

“Start with the car,” he suggested. “I’ve got the serial numbers and anything else you’ll need.” He waited for a minute, then added, “Is there any way we can check the DNA?”

Brookman considered it, then nodded. “I’ll find a way, Rand. I promise.”

Rand looked at him, and smiled, a real smile, not the forced change of expression that he’d grown used to displaying recently.

“Thank you.”

“Are you willing to listen to me now?” Brookman asked.

“Go ahead. But I don’t want to be out of the country for any length of time. I want us clear on that point.”

“I understand.”

\* \* \*

### *Paradise Lost*

“Why are you doing this to us?” Robin asked, stunned and disbelieving. She’d watched the tape, the one MacIntyre had sent to

## *HEART OF STONE*

Rand. It had sickened her, and enraged her. And, in her fury, she also knew how impotent her rage was. MacIntyre had wanted to upset her, to throw her off guard, and it had worked, very well.

He laughed, obviously amused by her disgust and anger. Then he walked across the room to stand before her. She tried to turn away, but he slipped his arms around her, and wrenched her back against him when she tried to bolt away.

"I told you, sweetheart," he whispered close to her ear. "Rand owes me. He took everything from me, and now I've taken the most important thing in his world from him. That's the way it works."

"But you haven't even told him I'm here." Robin forced herself to remain calm, detached from the revulsion that was coursing through her veins as his hands rose and closed over her breasts, squeezing with a gentleness that was almost pleasant despite her loathing of him. "If you want him here, why didn't you just tell him where to come?"

His arousal was becoming apparent, and she tried to ease away again. He pulled her more snugly to his body and she tried not to be aware of the hard ridge of his cock pressing against her buttocks.

"I want to be ready for him," MacIntyre said in a quiet voice. "My men aren't trained well enough to go against Rand and his team. When they are, he'll find us."

She closed her eyes and shuddered.

"When did you make that tape?" The thought of his hands on her while she lay asleep and naked made her skin crawl. Her voice was tiny, frightened, and she hated the quiver in it. But she waited for his answer, hating herself for needing to know something so ridiculous.

"The night we arrived," he answered, and spun her to face him. "You're going to come to me as willingly as you go to him," he stated with intractable certainty.

She laughed, a small, disbelieving croak of sound.

"I love Randall," she spat. "I detest you, Mr. MacIntyre."

## *HEART OF STONE*

MacIntyre nodded, then jerked her head forward and swallowed her objection in a brutal, probing kiss that went on for indeterminable minutes before he released her.

“You’ll change your mind,” he said with complete confidence. “I can wait.”

Robin stumbled backward when he let her go, and she ran, instinct taking her to the bedroom she’d been given weeks earlier.

## CHAPTER 3

“I have the information you need, Rand.”

Stone looked up, both startled and relieved to see the triumph on Brookman’s face. The team had arrived home the night before, weeks behind Rand’s chosen schedule. Still, the latest mission had been worthwhile on many levels, not the least of which was the rescue of a special, officially non-existent unit trapped behind enemy lines on the outskirts of Kandahar. Several of the men were acquaintances, and Stone’s personal needs had been over-shadowed yet again by his obligation to duty.

Dismissing his last mission from memory, he took the file Brookman was holding out to him and skimmed over the pertinent details. He had his confirmation of the most important point in barely ten seconds.

“Any idea who did die in the accident?”

“We’re looking deeper into the disappearance of Robin’s assistant,

## *HEART OF STONE*

Evelyn, but I think it's something of a moot point now. The likelihood of it being anyone else is slim."

"What about Mac? Any leads on him?"

Donald shook his head. "He's done an amazing vanishing act, Rand."

Stone nodded. "I'd expect that."

"I'm still waiting for some of my contacts to check in," Brookman stated. "As soon as I hear from them, I'll be in touch."

Stone smiled, but said nothing, and the meeting turned into a casual debriefing of the last mission.

\* \* \*

"Just another day in paradise," Robin muttered as she stormed into her room in MacIntyre's fortress-like complex. He'd been taunting her relentlessly today, and she knew why. He was restless, and training his men was becoming tiresome. He'd even taken to teaching her to handle a gun, something Randall had long wanted her to learn, but had never forced onto her when she objected. Her proficiency with the pistol was a source of amazement to her, and amusement to MacIntyre. And, because she didn't want to do it, Mac insisted she train with him. He took every opportunity to touch her, each time the contact was bolder and more overt.

Shuddering against the sudden shock of cold air generated by the air conditioning unit in her bedroom, a surprisingly decent concession to her discomfort, Robin flopped onto the bed and stretched out on her back as she stared at the dull gray ceiling above her. The rage that had driven her into another useless battle of wills with MacIntyre ebbed away like the tide of madness she now recognized it to be. He provoked her for the pleasure her outrage gave him, and she'd risen to the bait with glorious abandon yet again.

When her heart rate returned to normal, she sighed and decided to shower. The aches of the day were weighing on her limbs, and she felt



## HEART OF STONE

filthy after sweating in the inferno of the compound's target range for most of the afternoon. Water was not at a premium on the small island, and she'd often indulged in long, soothing showers when she'd first realized she was being held prisoner. Mac had stolen that enjoyment from her, too, when he'd shown her the tapes of her bathing. The camera was always with her, and she'd grown to despise Rand's one-time friend with a passion that was matched only by her unshakable belief that Rand would find her.

Setting her jaw, she peeled off khaki shorts, white tank top, and the ludicrous strip of silk and lace underwear MacIntyre had given her. Stepping under the spray, she groaned and reached for the soap. Her shower lasted less than ten minutes, and she was wrapped in a loose silk robe and lying on the bed again when tears began to build inside her. She ached with loneliness for Randall Stone, and part of her despaired of ever seeing him again. She often tried to ignore the doubts that plagued her, but as time passed, she was finding it harder to pretend she could wait for him to find her and still hang on to her sanity.

In her mind, she brought forth the image of him the night she'd met him. On a nearly deserted highway, he'd almost run her off the road when some teenagers had been chasing him, unaware of how dangerous their game might have been had they caught up with him...

*Stepping from her car, Robin's breath caught, and her eyes skimmed over him in rapid appraisal despite her determination to ignore the feelings this stranger evoked. He was tall, over six feet, she estimated. His hair was short, stylish, and deep, coffee brown. His eyes were almost as dark. His mouth was firm, sensual, and he was broad shouldered, well muscled, and casually arrogant in every motion he made. When her gaze drifted down the long length of his legs, a rush of dizzying excitement created a shiver that tightened her nipples, then darted directly to the sudden ache between her thighs. She wrenched*

## HEART OF STONE

*her gaze away from him and wished she had simply driven on to the safety of her beach-front home.*

That had been the beginning of a long and tumultuous relationship that was the joy and bane of her heart.

“Randall...”

The whisper of sound mutated into a sob, and she cried in spite of herself until exhaustion pulled her into merciful sleep...and dreams of the first time she'd been with Rand...

*Robin tried to control her body, something she'd never been challenged to do before. Rand's sensitive, knowing hands began to stroke soft, feathery caresses over her skin, making the ache inside her a bittersweet pain she never wanted to end. Her arms went around his shoulders, and one hand smoothed the dark silk of his hair, guiding his mouth to her breasts. She cried out, a throaty moan of pure elation when his tongue finally licked the swollen bud, tracing it repeatedly while his hands molded her hips and thighs. When he began to suck, her back curled in ardent eroticism. He repeated the seductive torment on her other breast, and her eyes closed, her concentration focused only on the blissful sensations Rand's touch was teaching her.*

*Time became infinite as he lingered and lingered at her breasts, drawing tiny, muted sounds of agonized pleasure from her. His name was a plea when he finally slipped lower in the bed and she lost the feel of his solid muscles beneath her hands. When his lips touched her inner thighs, she was certain her body was melting. She opened her eyes and watched in fascination as he drew closer to the center of her passion. His hands slid under her, cupped her buttocks, and lifted her hips off the bed. She choked back a cry of pleasure as his tongue probed into her.*

*Her hands tangled in his hair, and he stroked her soft folds with slow, arousing purpose. Her breaths were rapid and feverish now, and he pressed harder to her wet heat as her orgasm tore through her in*

## **HEART OF STONE**

waves.

*He continued to tease her, as excited by her shattering climaxes as she was. When he finally drew back, she was flushed and limp on the ivory bed linen.*

*Robin arched again as the last spasm of passion shuddered through her. She twisted toward him when he moved and stretched out beside her. She kissed his chest, felt the furious pace of his heart against her lips, and smiled. The lethargy was leaving her limbs, and she wanted to touch him, to taste and feel every inch of him.*

*She bent over him, kissed him with raw, blatant lust. The taste of her aroused body on his lips was alien, but stirred the hunger to greater need. She broke their kiss, and began a slow, deliberate exploration of him.*

*Rand's chest was smooth, contoured, and well muscled, as was the rest of him. Her hair fell like a curtain around them as she suckled and bit at his nipples for endless minutes. She moved, kissed the inside of his wrist, his palm, took each long finger into her mouth and sucked before moving to the pale, flawless hollows of his hips.*

*Wanting to torment him, she avoided his erection with studied purpose. Her head ducked between his thighs, and he hissed with pleasure as she began to kiss and whisper against him. He spread his legs wider, gave her easy access to every part of him. She didn't leave anything untouched, from his ankles upward. He finally caught the endless streams of her hair and his fingers tangled in the thick tresses, then guided her mouth over his pulsing cock.*

*For several seconds, neither of them moved. Robin's fingers drew patterns over his hips, then she began a steady, torturing rhythm over him. Rand's low moans of blissful satisfaction encouraged her, and she kept him hovering at the edge of orgasm, but didn't push him over into release.*

*Finally, apparently unable to bear it any longer, Rand pulled her*

## HEART OF STONE

*away and rolled with her, pinning her beneath him on the mattress. He kissed her, lips hard and crushing. He drew back with a gasp and groped for the packet he'd placed on the nightstand. Her hand on his wrist made him hesitate and he stared down into her dazed eyes.*

*She shook her head once, a tiny, curt motion.*

*"I wouldn't risk hurting you, Randall," she breathed, voice barely audible. "I can promise you we will not make a baby tonight." She waited, stared into his gleaming black eyes. "If that"—she indicated the condom with a flick of her gaze—"is still necessary, it changes nothing."*

*Trust. She was trusting him with her life. He seemed to understand that, and also to realize in that timeless moment that he was the first man to have known her like this in a very long time. He lowered his head, caught her mouth with his, and positioned himself comfortably between her thighs. He raised his head and held her face in his hands as he eased into her wet, tight heat. Robin's eyes closed, tears slid across her cheeks, and she clung to him.*

*His rhythm was slow and gentle at first, working them both into a frenzy that quickly became ravaging need. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and she clutched at him with a strength that surprised her. When her orgasm caught her, he rode out the wracking shudders with his own shattering release.*

*The room came back into focus gradually, and Robin's legs slipped away from their fervid grip on him. Her arms remained wrapped around his back and she kissed his temple, then his lips when he lifted his head from her shoulder and smiled down at her.*

*Rand moved off her, and collapsed beside her with a groan. He lifted his arm and draped it across his forehead, holding her to him when she curled into his side.*

\* \* \*

MacIntyre watched her on the monitor and smiled as she tossed

## *HEART OF STONE*

fitfully on the mattress, trapped in a dream world he'd grown intimately familiar with over the past weeks. She was dreaming about Stone again. That knowledge both amused and annoyed him. Robin Bourne was proving to be a great deal more stubborn than he'd anticipated.

A shift of movement arrested his full attention, and he laughed. She lay flat on her back now, and the sheer silk robe had fallen open, giving him a glimpse of luscious curves. She'd tuck herself into a fetal position soon, he figured, and leaned back in his chair, bored with the tedious exercise of watching her sleep.

His interest was piqued when the expected curl of her limbs didn't come. Instead, her hands glided over her stomach and came to rest on her breasts. For a moment, the only motion Mac witnessed was the quickening rise and fall of her breaths as she sank deeper into her dream. When she tugged open the robe and began to caress the ample swells of her breasts, his cock responded with a surge of lust. He rubbed the hard ridge of his erection. She was about to give him a performance he doubted Stone had ever been offered.

Robin's hands continued stroking until her nipples were thrusting, then she tugged on them gently as her hips began to move in a restless rhythm.

Watching her, Mac's imagination fed him the soft, satiny texture of her skin and the growing flush that would make its natural warmth even hotter. He unzipped his pants and let his erection free, while the woman lying oblivious on the mattress in another room spread her thighs and began a gliding probe into the exposed, moist folds of her flesh. The soft, low moan that filtered through the surveillance equipment stirred another jolt of lust in Mac's groin.

When Robin's fingers started a steady thrusting in and out of her body, Mac decided it was time to join her welcome or not. He pulled his pants into place and left his office/living quarters. He was in her room within seconds, the door locked behind him. He stripped off his

## *HEART OF STONE*

clothes and went to stand at the foot of the bed, enjoying the beauty sprawled before him in unknowing abandon, lost in her dream of Randall Stone. She was slick and wet now, her glistening folds swollen and sensitive to each tiny caress of her fingers.

Locked in her dream, Robin cried out, breathless and exhausted, her body clenching violently in orgasm as she hung on to Rand's image. The crest of the wave broke and she moaned as the shuddering euphoria began to build again with each deep, strong thrust of the hard body above hers. Her breasts felt heavy and achy, and she reached up to guide his mouth to a rigid, wanting nipple. The warm mouth that closed on her breast was eager to suckle and stroke, and she sighed as her fingers wound into soft hair.

The tickle of the short length of his hair against her palms finally wormed its way into her lethargic brain and she forced her eyes open and jolted back into full awareness.

The head bent to her breast, sucking intently, was fair, not coffee-dark. The man making love to her was not Randall Stone!

He thrust hard into her again.

"Get off me, you sick son of a bitch!"

But MacIntyre was inside her now, and he seemed intent on enjoying the experience. He grabbed her wrists and held her arms over her head, grinning down at the futile attempts she made to dislodge him.

"I liked you better a few minutes ago, princess," he whispered, voice hoarse with excitement.

Robin began to writhe in earnest, twisting desperately to get free of him.

MacIntyre let go of one wrist and his hand encircled her throat, squeezing until her eyes locked with his and held. As they stared each other down, Robin forced herself to stop struggling. When she was utterly still beneath him, she watched MacIntyre's rage blossom to

## *HEART OF STONE*

match the force of his lust mere minute before.

“Move, baby,” he snarled, “or this is going to get uncomfortable for you.”

She shook her head, and he laughed at her, the sound dark and malevolent.

“Suit yourself, sweetheart.” He pulled free of her and left the room.

Staring in dazed shock after him, Robin forced her breathing back to a normal cadence and pulled the disheveled robe around her shaking limbs. She closed her eyes and gagged with the intensity of her disgust...for herself mostly. She'd enjoyed the sex, thinking it was Rand. She should have realized right away it wasn't Randall who touched her. She felt as if she'd betrayed the man she loved by allowing such filth to enter her.

When she opened her eyes a few minutes later, she was electrified with another jolt of terror. Mac stood at the foot of the bed, smiling. He was naked still, and she couldn't ignore the rigid length of his thick cock, still shining with the wetness from her body. Bile tickled the back of her throat, and for a moment she wondered if she'd vomit. For just a second the room turned misty as sickness assailed her.

“I think we'll have some real fun now, princess,” he said with a leering smirk.

Robin's eyes dropped to the items he held in his hand and she shrank back at the sight of several exotic sex toys. His first invasion of her not satisfactory, now he was going to use the toys to rape her...

## CHAPTER 4

“Are you sure this is the place we’ve been looking for, sir?” Lucky sounded doubtful, and his sentiment was reflected in the eyes of his team-mates as they peered into the thick, lush growth of jungle that seemed to comprise the entire small island.

“You saw the radar,” Randall said as he shouldered his heavy backpack and settled it in place. “What do you think?”

Cortland conceded with a nod, and Eddie grinned at Jennifer behind their backs.

“Let’s go, people,” Stone ordered. “Double time, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover before dawn.”

He slipped on infrared glasses, and the dusky jungle was suddenly alive in a whole different way. Knowing his team would follow, Randall chose a path and began to hack his way into the heavy brush.

\* \* \*



## *HEART OF STONE*

Robin woke to the sound of complete silence in the main building of MacIntyre's complex. Normally men would be on the nearby firing range, and MacIntyre would be waiting on the edge of the bed to see if she'd submit to his passion without the aid of toys...and terror. He'd been permitting her the illusion of choice for almost a week. Tonight, his absence was a double-edged blade that sliced into her heart, overriding the very real relief with a sense of foreboding that chilled her to the core of her being.

Something was very wrong.

\* \* \*

Carnage.

There was no other way to describe what surrounded MacIntyre as he came into the clearing that had slowly gone quiet in a storm of noise. Bodies lay everywhere, his force decimated by the precision and skill of Stone's elite unit of commandos. He'd thought his men were ready to face the other team, and had paid dearly for the worst miscalculation of his long career. Now there was only one man left to face. Randall Stone.

"I'm coming in, Stone," MacIntyre shouted. "I'm alone."

"Where is she, Mac?"

"Not until we talk, Rand."

"Slowly."

MacIntyre obeyed the curt order and he approached them cautiously, hands spread open and held up. In the few seconds he had to assess the situation, he realized Stone had not been as bullet-proof as he'd thought a few minutes earlier. He was injured, albeit not seriously, and he was visibly tired. Mac's confidence reasserted itself, and he inclined his head in a mock bow of respect.

"We're gonna finish this, Stone," MacIntyre decreed. "You and me."

Stone eyed him coldly, then nodded.

## *HEART OF STONE*

Mac smiled in pure, macabre pleasure.

The first knife flew past Stone's ear, and he dove for cover. He was on his feet again in a heartbeat. "Everyone stay back!" he shouted.

Mac could see that Stone's team was on the verge of disobeying his order out of concern for his safety. But this fight wasn't about a mission or a threat to his friends. It was personal. It was about the past, and the future.

MacIntyre laughed at the rage in his old friend's eyes. Even staggering with exhaustion and pain, Rand Stone was the consummate soldier. Mac tackled him again before Rand could regain his breath. They went down in a tangle of thrashing limbs, MacIntyre pummeling his weakened opponent unmercifully. He'd had plenty of time to watch and wait for Stone and his mercenaries to reach him; he was ready for this battle.

After eternal minutes of frenzied fighting, MacIntyre finally had Rand pinned to the ground, and was raising a large rock over his head, fully intent on smashing Stone's skull.

The action was interrupted by a scream that had nothing to do with fear, and everything to do with absolute, mindless rage.

To the shock of everyone present, Robin Bourne launched out of the trees.

Robin flung herself at MacIntyre, knocking him clear of Rand's prone body. Rand's knife was on the ground, and she scooped it up as they rolled away from him. She was running on adrenaline now, and memory. The knife spun in her hand, a trick Lucky had taught her a lifetime in the past. She slammed it into MacIntyre's chest, hilt end landing squarely in the solar plexus. He gasped and dropped like a dead weight, his breath constricted for precious seconds. The knife spun again, and she smiled as she prepared to plunge the serrated blade into his chest.

A vise-like grip on her wrist prevented the action, and she tore her

## *HEART OF STONE*

gaze away from the man she hated to look into the face of the man she adored.

“Let go, honey,” he whispered, his fingers unrelenting in their hold on her arm.

“Randall?” There were tears in the single word, and she stared at him, just beyond comprehending that he was, in fact, real.

Rand slid his grip lower, slowly loosening her fingers from the knife hilt.

Robin stared at him, disbelief still making her doubt what she was seeing. He was dirt-streaked and gleaming with sweat, but it *was* Randall. Movement around them lifted his eyes from her for the briefest of instants. She heard quiet orders being given, then he was looking at her again, expectation and uncertainty wavering on his handsome features.

She watched him slide the knife into the sheath at his thigh, then he reached over to touch her cheek, the ball of his thumb brushing over the sloping curve of her cheekbone. The moisture in her eyes spilled out and she was blinded for several moments. Her breath came in a rasp of relief, and she groped, relaxing as she was engulfed in the strong, desperate hold of Rand’s arms.

When he didn’t vanish into another wishful fantasy, Robin opened her eyes and lifted her head from his shoulder, staring at him in wonderment. She touched his mouth, tracing the well-known curve of his lips with fingers that shook. She placed her lips to his, then shuddered and sighed softly when Rand’s hands held her head and he turned the experimental caress into something deep and evocative. Every part of her woke to the passion in his kiss, and the trembling that assailed her found a like response in his body. She wound her arms around his neck, pressed herself against him, and savored the taste of his tongue as it probed into her mouth, stroking and stirring desire to mindless need.

## *HEART OF STONE*

Time hung suspended as she fell in love with Randall Stone again, as quickly and completely as she had the night she'd met him. The pain, terror, and humiliation of the past weeks were suddenly distant as she clung to him, the lifeline to her sanity. She pressed closer, felt the steamy tropical heat recede against the storm of an even hotter inferno.

"God, Randall..." She was hardly aware of having spoken, and left the sweetness of his mouth to trail fevered kisses along his neck, tasting the tang of sweat and dirt, uncaring of anything but the feel of him. She claimed his mouth again, and buried her fingers in the damp silk of his hair, her hips pushing into him, asking...demanding...needing him with a desperation that made nothing else matter.

With an effort that was sheer discipline, Rand came up for air, dimly aware of the movement of his team around them. Robin stared at him. Panic widened her large brown eyes, then a shutter fell into place, a curtain of coldness that extinguished the fire that had been burning between them.

Rand wanted to hold her again, to thaw that impenetrable ice before it hardened into permanence. Her focus shifted, and he watched as a flicker of genuinely lethal hatred crossed her features when she spotted MacIntyre.

"We need to get movin', sir," Eddie said, scanning the area uneasily and glancing repeatedly at Robin.

Rand saw Lucky hand Mac over to Jennifer, then he approached. He touched Robin's shoulder. When she looked up, her expression was blank for a moment, then she smiled, really smiled.

Robin eased away from Rand and rose, the motion graceful. She looked at Lucky for a moment, then she let out a breath that was close to a sob. She stepped into his arms and closed her eyes as relief coursed through her veins. Lucky's arms tightened around her, held her almost painfully close, and she returned the embrace with the same ferocity.

"Lucky," she kissed him, her lips touching his cheek, and his

## HEART OF STONE

temple. "I can't believe you're here."

"It's good to see you, too." He lifted her head from his shoulder so he could look at her. "You're pretty damn gorgeous for a corpse."

"You're only saying that because you love me," she grinned.

He laughed, his smiling nod of agreement shared by Rand and the others.

"You're supposed to be retired, sweetheart." The teasing endearment was an old game...something that brought a small measure of comfort to Robin.

"I know," he stated with mock severity. "But how am I supposed to enjoy my new life if you can't stay where the major can look after you?"

"Any suggestions?" she asked with a quirky smile, her arm remaining tightly around his waist as the small group began to move out of the clearing.

"Robin?"

It was Eddie's voice, and she stiffened at the seriousness of his tone.

"Welcome back, darlin'," he said with a smile, then glanced at Rand before continuing. "Is the area booby-trapped?"

She looked at MacIntyre, whose mocking smile was an insult.

"Yes," she answered with false calm. "There's a detailed map of the island and his *modifications*." She smiled with exaggerated sweetness at MacIntyre, then looked at Eddie again. "He keeps it in a safe place at the house."

"How many guards?" Rand asked.

"Too many. Let me go alone."

Rand looked like he wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the request. And MacIntyre's surprise was comical.

"Before you dismiss me, Randall," she murmured in any icy tone, "consider your options. Like it or not, I've been stuck here with him."

## HEART OF STONE

My coming and going is pretty normal. The same can't be said for your people."

After a pause where she could tell Rand and the team were clearly uneasy with the idea of her behaving like a mercenary, she added, "You don't have a better choice. We'll never make it past the traps without his map. As soon as you set something off, the guards will be on you."

"What's happened to you?" Rand asked, staring at her.

MacIntyre laughed. "She's not the woman you lost, Stone." Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

"No," Robin snarled with unmistakable loathing, staring at MacIntyre. "But you'd better pray he can still influence me."

"Why's that, princess?"

"And spoil the surprise?" she replied, falling into the cat and mouse game they'd played since her arrival on the island. This time, though, she was the cat and MacIntyre was going to know how it felt to be the mouse. "Wait and see, *sweetheart*. Savor the anticipation."

In spite of the rainforest atmosphere of the island, a distinct chill permeated the air. The words were clearly understood by MacIntyre; he was uncharacteristically subdued by the taunting.

"Let me go, Rand," Robin said, swinging her attention back to him.

Stone's eyes sought Lucky, asking his advice. Robin's vision followed the silent byplay.

Lucky shrugged. Robin stepped out of her friend's arms and walked over to Eddie.

"Give me a gun," she demanded.

His eyebrows rose.

"Fine." She spun on her heel and started out of the clearing. Rand's hands on her arms made her whirl to face him. She broke the contact, shoving his hands aside and backing away a few steps.

"I don't take orders from you, Randall," she reminded him. "I'd be a lot happier if you'd stop treating me like an incompetent moron."

## *HEART OF STONE*

Guilt plagued her, making her erratic and angry at all the wrong people, but she couldn't seem to get it under control yet. Maybe later, when Mac wasn't smirking at her, his eyes threatening to tell Randall what had been going on since he'd taken her prisoner. Robin had never really hated anyone in her life, but that had changed in recent weeks. She hated Jason MacIntyre with a passion almost as intense as her love for Rand. But Rand might conceivably hate her once the truth came out... If that happened, all she'd have left to hold onto was her anger.

"Incompetent..." Rand sputtered. "What the hell's gotten into you, Robin? You're asking for a gun, and planning to stroll back into danger, and I'm not supposed to mind?" His voice rose, indignation blending with genuine anger. "Until ten minutes ago, I thought you were dead!"

"Give me twenty minutes, and I'll be back with what you need," she assured him.

Again, the detached cool was in her manner. So different from the heated passion with which she'd greeted him. So frightening because Rand had no idea what had been happening to make such a drastic change in her.

He could feel the unease of the Ops team, watching them unobtrusively as the silent challenge hung in the air between them. Against every instinct he possessed, Rand turned and indicated his jacket. Jenn tossed it to him. He caught the khaki-colored garment and reached into a pocket. A second later he placed the Beretta in Robin's hand.

"Twenty minutes, Robin," he murmured.

She disappeared into the heavy forest, and he stared after her.

"Sir, do you really think that was a good idea?"

"What was I supposed to do, Eddie?" he spat.

Eddie's expression remained placid in spite of Rand's rage.

"Want me to follow her?"

## HEART OF STONE

“Yes. But don’t.”

“What if she brings my men back, Stone?” MacIntyre smiled. “We’ve gotten...” He paused for effect, then made a show of choosing the word. “*Close.*”

Rand’s smile was deceptively calm. His fist wasn’t when he snapped a back-handed blow to MacIntyre’s jaw and sent him sprawling. MacIntyre hung onto consciousness for a few seconds, then he slumped into a heap at Jennifer’s feet. She looked down at him, sighed as she shouldered her rifle, and relaxed.

Rand turned to speak with Lucky, and discovered the pilot had vanished. Some of the tension eased, minutely, when he realized Lucky was covering Robin’s back, whether she was aware of him or not.

“What now, Rand?” Eddie asked.

“If they’re not back in twenty minutes, we’re going in after her.”

\* \* \*

In spite of his determination not to go after them, Rand followed less than five minutes later. It didn’t take him long to locate the trail they’d taken, and he had them tracked to the edge of Mac’s complex in short time. He was about to move closer when a hand on his arm had him lifting his gun and sighting by instinct. Lucky’s dark eyes remained impassive as his identity registered in Stone’s brain.

“How long has she been in there?”

“Less than ten minutes,” Lucky replied, voice hushed. “She knows what she’s doing, Major,” he added, as he surveyed the almost non-existent activity in the compound yard.

Stone snorted his opinion of that observation, and was genuinely startled when Lucky lowered his rifle and looked fully at him.

“Rand, I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but she *is* different.”

He was right. Rand didn’t want to hear that Robin was a changed woman. It would mean things he didn’t want to consider had happened



## *HEART OF STONE*

to her while MacIntyre had held her captive. Jennifer had talked to him at length about what Mac had subjected her to when he'd had the team members locked up in his camp as prisoners. Stone had also heard rumors for years whenever he'd served with Mac. He'd just never been able to find proof of his suspicions. Now the woman he loved had been one of Mac's victims, and he had a lot of guilt and anger to work through, quickly, before he could help Robin come to terms with everything.

"Where did she go in?"

The question became moot when movement at the corner of the house gave Rand his reply. As they watched, Robin casually exited the house, a roll of paper under her arm, and his gun tucked in her waistband in plain sight. She was stopped by one of Mac's men halfway across the yard, and Randall's muscles stiffened with tension.

"Easy, sir," Lucky murmured.

Rand watched as Robin scowled in response to something MacIntyre's soldier said to her. The subtle tones of their conversation drifted to him, but the actual words didn't quite make it.

Less than five minutes later, everything obviously smoothed over with the guard, she left the yard, and circled to rejoin them.

She didn't appear remotely surprised to see Randall waiting with Lucky. She passed Rand the map, and when he reached out to take it, she leaned up and kissed him.

\* \* \*

Robin was restless, and she was decidedly uncomfortable now that Randall had left them to reconnoiter the area immediately around their impromptu campsite.

Her anger had sputtered out as rapidly as it had ignited. Guilt was making her vacillate between melancholy and choking self-loathing. She wanted to be near Randall every minute, yet was insanely afraid that if she was too close, he'd somehow know she'd betrayed him, even

## *HEART OF STONE*

if it wasn't really her fault. Despair rose again, like a specter of impending doom, and she closed her eyes as tears and silent sobs shook her for several minutes before she forced them into submission.

So far, there had been no attempts by Mac's men to rescue him, a condition she credited to the general lack of organization on the part of his recruits. They were no doubt waiting for him to return and issue orders. It wouldn't occur to them just yet that his absence was cause for concern, especially when she'd told them it was MacIntyre who'd sent her for the map. They assumed he was hunting the intruders to his island. She'd implied as much. Her constant presence over the long weeks made her coming and going cause for little or no interest—just as she'd assured Stone it would.

"I need some air," Robin said when Jennifer stopped at her side.

Jenn's eyebrows rose and she smiled.

"Rand's headed for the river," Jennifer said, voice low.

"Thanks."

As she passed MacIntyre, he grinned up at her, the expression openly mocking. He'd already threatened to tell Stone what had transpired between them, and she knew the only way to avoid any potential misinterpretations was to tell him herself. She was desperately afraid to look him in the eyes and tell him she'd betrayed him.

Resisting the desire to kick MacIntyre as she went by, Robin feigned indifference and swept past him, ducking into the vegetation as she picked out the path Rand had taken.

She found him a few minutes later, and stopped, transfixed by the familiar and much missed vision of him. He was on the edge of a small pool, the sound of the nearby waterfall muted only slightly. As she watched, he put down his rifle and began to strip out of his gear. Everything was left within easy reach, but his intention to bathe was clear.

For several moments, Robin held her breath, only dragging air into

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her lungs when she began to feel dizzy. Rand was down to his pants, and she smiled when he dove into the water and surfaced a few seconds later well out into the pool. Drawn, she made her way down the gentle slope that would take her to the water's edge. By the time she stood on the bank, Randall was watching her.

"Why don't you join me?"

He held his hand out to her, palm up, the invitation repeated in his dark, smoldering eyes.

After only a heartbeat's hesitation, Robin unlaced her boots and went to him, shorts and T-shirt still clinging to her sweaty body. Rand's arms swept her close and held her. She was shocked to feel him trembling.

"Thank God I found you."

She clung harder to him, and cried for a very long time. When the storm passed through her, she lifted her head from his broad shoulder and saw the fire that had been ignited there.

\* \* \*

"They've been gone a long time," MacIntyre noted when the small group had been silent for awhile. They were trying to pretend they weren't edgy and anxious about the extended absence of Stone and Robin, but to a trained eye, the nerves were showing.

"Unless you'd like to go back to sleep, Mac"—Jennifer smiled—"keep it shut. I won't be as gentle as Stone was."

He laughed. "I'm in need of a tree."

Lucky's eyes rolled and he stood, grabbing Mac by the elbow and hauling him unceremoniously to his feet.

They'd gone only a few feet when MacIntyre's foot lashed out and caught Lucky by surprise. He went down with a muted curse, and Mac fled. As he'd expected, Lucky was only down for a second.

Mac headed for the river.

When Lucky caught him minutes later, he was standing rigid as

## *HEART OF STONE*

rock, looking down.

\* \* \*

Rand reached for her and sat her astride his hips as he leaned back on the soft, warm grass. He pulled her down over him and into a kiss that left them shaking against each other.

Robin smiled, kissed him lightly, then eased back to gaze down at him. She tilted her head to one side, tugged at the waist of her T-shirt, and slowly eased it away from her skin and over her head to be tossed aside.

Rand's hands covered her bared breasts, strong fingers caressing firm flesh before his thumbs began brushing tantalizing circles around her nipples, making the already hard tips rigid with excitement.

Robin pressed herself tighter to him, her hips moving in seductive, rhythmic insistence while she leaned down and offered her breasts to his mouth. When his teeth closed over one aching nipple, she moaned, lost in the well-known madness of Rand's touch. The world spun as his arms encircled her waist and he changed their positions. Her legs parted to accommodate his weight and he thrust into her, the material of his pants straining against his erection. She arched in pleasure, her spine curling as he teased first one nipple, then the other.

She raised her hips, pleading wordlessly, as her hands ran over the broad expanse of his back, smoothing tense muscles. She reached between them, her fingers tracing the ridge of his arousal, then moving lower, pressing with urgent abandon, inciting soft groans from him. She yanked at the snap on his pants, and he rolled away with a gasp.

Robin rose to her knees and shed her shorts, laughing when his eyebrow rose in faint surprise to see there was nothing beneath them. He'd left his T-shirt and boots near the edge of the water before he'd waded into the pool. All that remained were his dark pants and briefs, and she took them down the long length of his legs when he lifted his hips to give her the freedom to finish undressing him.

## *HEART OF STONE*

Robin's gaze stroked every inch of him as she stared, and Rand's blazing eyes held hers for indeterminate moments when she met his look directly. She moved again, and heard Rand's breath leave him in a hiss of startled pleasure when her mouth closed over him with sudden, fierce pressure. His fingers twisted in the waves of her hair and he held her gently, slowing her sucking rhythm. At last, he eased her away and pulled her up to meet his kiss.

She drew back with a gasp, smiled at him, then sat up, tossing her hair over her shoulders. She guided him into her eager body. When sensation exploded through her, she bit her bottom lip and her back arched. Rand's hands at her waist held her as he pushed deeper into her, and his name was a moan of elated pleasure that spilled from her lips without conscious awareness. For several moments she was motionless, enjoying the spasms of bliss that rushed through her veins.

When she finally began the slow, rocking rhythm that would sate their lust, Rand held her in place, hips rising to meet her with each thrust. Long minutes later, Robin cried out, shaking against him, her breathing strained and shallow. The convulsing muscles of her body pulled him over the edge and into his own shuddering climax.

When her breath returned, Robin leaned down to kiss him.

\* \* \*

"Is there a reason why we're standing here?" Lucky snarled close to MacIntyre's ear. His .45 was pressed to the back of Mac's head.

MacIntyre turned to look into Lucky's eyes. Cortland was surprised for a moment by the pensive mood that appeared to have subdued the renegade captain far more effectively than even Stone's fist had earlier.

"I think this is a private party, MacIntyre." He almost spit the words, then grabbed MacIntyre and dragged him away. He didn't doubt Stone and Robin would be rejoining them soon. The rendezvous with Brookman's chopper was less than two hours away now.

## CHAPTER 5

*Five months later...*

Robin glanced at the juice bar as she entered The Western Star Health Club. Debbie Ballard was serving drinks and chatting with the few early afternoon customers that milled about. Subduing the spurt of irrational, and inappropriate, anger, Robin drew in a deep breath and walked farther into the spacious main room of Rand's place of business. It took all her inner strength to appear calm, and not to run away from her decision to see him.

Debbie spotted her, and the smile on the perky blonde's face dimmed considerably. Robin was glad she wasn't alone in her uneasiness, and she completed the short walk to the gleaming bar.

"Where's Rand?" she asked, her throaty voice holding the tiniest of quivers as her nerves betrayed her.

"He hasn't come in yet," Debbie told her.

## *HEART OF STONE*

Robin's eyebrows rose. "He lives upstairs. He must be in."

"I haven't seen him, Robin. Honest."

She nodded, pleased. Debbie didn't know his secrets, even if she did know his body rather intimately these days.

"Thanks," Robin murmured and turned away, heading for the short corridor that would take her to his private office.

"He's not in, Robin!" Debbie said again, this time with an edge of annoyance to her tone.

"I'll leave him a note." Robin smiled, and continued her walk to his office.

Once inside, she went to the door that led into a hidden hallway. The lighting panel was already open, and she flipped the switch that would bring the numbered access pad into view. She keyed in her personal code and placed her thumb on the scanner, wondering if she'd be accepted by the system or set off an alarm in the basement. The bolt on the other side of the door slid aside with a muffled, hollow thud, and she pushed open the heavy metal panel and slipped inside. By the time she reached the foot of the stairs, she was shaking.

The basement command center was subdued and quiet, but most of the mercenary team was present. There was a mission looming, otherwise they'd not be hanging out in their headquarters. Jennifer, D.J., and Nick Holloway spotted her almost in the same instant. None of them said a word, merely nodded their acknowledgement of her presence. She glanced to her right and saw Rand, seated at his desk, alone in the small office he used for his more covert work.

Robin went to the office and entered without knocking. She closed the door softly and leaned on it for support, certain her legs were going to collapse because her knees were so wobbly they no longer felt adequate to keep her standing. The blinds were closed, and the illusion of being alone with him was so real she felt like they were the only two in the whole command center.

## HEART OF STONE

Rand looked up from his paperwork, surprise evident when he saw her. He leaned back and pulled off his glasses.

“Robin? What are you doing here?”

There was only polite, albeit shocked, inquiry in his tone.

Robin chewed her bottom lip for a moment as she contemplated an honest answer to his understandable confusion. Finally, she shrugged and hugged herself, the gesture unconsciously defensive.

“I wanted to talk to you.” She shook her head as soon as the words were out. “No, that’s not true, Rand. I *need* to talk to you.”

“About what?” he asked, suspicion coming into his low, rich voice.

This was it, she told herself. This was the moment she had planned and agonized over. She managed a single step forward, then halted. Her voice was refusing to cooperate, and she swallowed hard, her eyes pleading with him.

“Robin...” He tossed his glasses onto the pile of paperwork that littered the desktop. “This is not the best time to rehash our history.”

She nodded.

Rand stood and she backed up a step. The bang she gave the back of her skull was solid, and he winced. But he made no move to approach her.

“I c-came to tell you...” The words were barely audible, stammered in a voice that shook. “I shouldn’t have come here,” she said, after a few seconds of awkward silence. “I’m sorry, Rand.” When she turned to run, his hand on the edge of the door kept it in place.

Robin was suddenly drowning in him, every sense she possessed attuning to his unique and overwhelming physical presence. Her heartbeat screamed in her ears, deafening her, while her body awakened to the fierce, sizzling longing he had always roused within her.

Rand resisted the urge to spin her around and sweep her into his arms, to kiss her into senseless need for him. It wouldn’t have been



## *HEART OF STONE*

difficult, nor a one-sided need; Robin's presence was making him tremble like a boy in the throes of his first crush. He touched her shoulder and turned her around to face him again. His eyes drank in her features, caressing with invisible fingers every tiny, remembered nuance of her beauty. She was tanned and glowing with health, which meant she'd been outdoors a lot, and recently.

"Are you back in L.A. full time now?"

It was the last thing he wanted to say.

It was the only safe thing his mind offered.

"I went back to work a couple of weeks ago," she whispered, staring up at him. She swallowed with visible effort, then dragged in a deep breath. "I love you, Randall."

He blinked, stunned. Some distant part of his brain wanted to reject what he'd just heard, telling him it wasn't real, that it was just the voice of his innermost wishes.

"What?"

The breathless exclamation hung between them for a heartbeat, then she smiled.

"I love you." This time it wasn't shaky or whispered. Her voice was steady and firm. "I know it's been a long time, but I'm so tired of pretending I have a life without you."

The silence held for several minutes as he digested the last thing he'd been expecting to hear from her. He walked back to his desk and sat down on the edge of it, staring in shocked disbelief. To his disconcertment, Robin followed him, and stood in front of him, mere inches away.

"I made a mistake, Rand. I knew that the instant I walked away from you, but I was too proud to admit it."

"It's been months, Robin," he said, dazed and elated at the same time.

"I know." She smiled sheepishly. "I've been trying to find a way to

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casually run in to you ever since I got back. It didn't work. I thought we could talk at Eddie's funeral, but Debbie was with you. It didn't seem...like the right time."

"You went home with Brookman," he pointed out.

"No," she shook her head. "Donald took me home. There's a difference, and you know it."

The faint scent of White Diamonds filled his senses, and he resisted, forcibly, the desire to touch her. Her breathing was none too steady, either, he noted. She was dressed in the seductive mix of casual and elegant that he'd always loved on her. Robin was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known, and it had everything to do with her heart, and little to do with the careless beauty that made most men notice her the moment she came into the room. He'd been attracted to that sensuality, drawn like a moth to flame, but throughout the long and complex course of their relationship, he'd fallen totally in love with her spirit.

"Where were you for the last few months?"

He made his eyes lift from the enticing swell of her breasts, and the obvious strain of hardened nipples pressing against the smooth silk of her tank top. If she'd come here to seduce him, she wasn't going to have to work at it much to achieve success. Rand's jeans were becoming painfully tight in the region of his groin.

"Montana," she murmured.

Her answer extinguished some of the intense desire, and replaced it with a flash of real anger.

"You've been living with Lucky?" he snapped.

Robin was forced to back up a step when he stood suddenly, then put a few feet of space between them.

"I've been visiting Lucky," she corrected.

"For months," he shot back, unable to keep the accusation from his voice.

## HEART OF STONE

"I didn't come here to discuss Lucky," she told him, her voice soft. "Any more than I came to talk about your current sleeping arrangements."

"What do you want, Robin?" he asked, his eyes and voice pleading for an answer with which he could be happy.

She laughed, low and ironic.

"You, Randall," she all but purred. "I want you."

He shook his head, denying her without words.

For the first time, her composure cracked and she was afraid of what she'd done.

"Are you telling me it's really over, Rand?" Her voice almost choked on the question, and fear held her rooted to the spot, mesmerized by the guarded expression that had come into his brown eyes.

"I can't keep doing this, honey," Rand said after a lengthy silence. "Everything in my life is in constant change and turmoil. I need something that's solid. So far the only thing that hasn't disappeared on me is my team and my club."

She nodded, understanding the extent of the trust he was showing her to make such a revealing statement.

"I want to be the one you come home to, Randall. I've always known the dangers of your work, even if I'll never exactly understand just what the hell it is you do. Even with the danger, I didn't really think you'd die. None of you. Until Eddie was killed. I knew then that I needed to be with you, not just for a few months, or a few nights a week. I love you. *That* is the only thing that matters."

"We've been here before, Robin," he said, wondering why he was making this so hard for her. She'd finally come to him, telling him the things he wanted to hear, and he was fighting her every step of the way.

"I know we have," she agreed. "But not with a dead friend between us."

## *HEART OF STONE*

“This isn’t about me dying,” he amended softly. “It’s about trusting what we’ve built. You don’t seem to be able to do that.” He sat at his desk again and looked up at her before he went on. “When I thought you’d died last year, I couldn’t let go of you. I dreamed about you. I heard your voice when I was alone in a room. I saw you on the beach. Then Mac started taunting me with videos and hints about you being alive, and eventually we found you. Instead of making us stronger, you left me.”

“And you never understood why,” she said, thoughtful and sad in the same instant.

He waited, hoping she’d explain some of it to him now. It took what felt like an eternity for her to make the decision, and he almost regretted it when he saw the pain it caused her.

“Mac raped me, Rand,” she confessed, saying the words to him for the first time. Lucky had eventually gotten her to talk, and because of his acceptance and love, she finally felt ready to tell Rand.

The spark of rage in his eyes wasn’t reassuring, but she swallowed hard and moved to sit on the edge of the desk. “He said you’d forgotten me and moved on with your life. He wanted me to go to him willingly, but I kept refusing, so he forced me anyway. And when he finally reached the point I was sure he was going to kill me if I didn’t appear willing, I pretended...pretended that I enjoyed sex with him.”

It took Rand several seconds to digest what she’d revealed. That she’d slept with MacIntyre to survive didn’t matter a damn to him; something else mattered very much.

“You believed I’d forgotten you?”

She wiped aside the unwelcome spill of tears from her eyes and shrugged. “After a while I didn’t know what I was thinking or doing, Randall,” she admitted. “I don’t even know exactly how long I was on that miserable island with him. It seemed an eternity.”

“That’s why our lovemaking was so different at the riverside,” he

## *HEART OF STONE*

mused, his mind taking him back to the spectacular piece of paradise that existed on MacIntyre's island retreat in the South Pacific.

She peered intently at him. "You felt it, didn't you?"

He eyed her for a moment, then nodded, a slight smile curving his mouth.

"You've always been an exciting woman to make love to, honey," he whispered. "But only a fool wouldn't have felt the depth of your passion that afternoon."

"You made me forget, even if you didn't know it," she told him, eyes serious and glowing with love, as well as gratitude. "When you touched me, I felt pure and safe again."

"So why did you leave me when we got back?"

"He said he was going to tell you, show you. He videotaped everything. He put every miserable moment of my life on tape. He had favorites, of course," she said, voice a hiss of rage even after the long months of distance from the memory. "He used to make me watch them with him. It wasn't bad enough that he forced himself on me, but he had to make me watch him fucking me—and because I was pretending, it looked like I was enjoying it. I hated myself. I was sure you'd hate me, too, when Brookman's people found his tapes and they were shown to you."

Rand's head throbbed with the depth of his fury as he watched her face cloud with humiliation and confusion.

"You don't have to talk about this, sweetheart," he said gently. He realized as he spoke that he really meant it.

"The only thing I knew then is the truth I know now," she said, looking up into his eyes when he came to stand in front of her again. "I need you and I love you." She hesitated. "Do I still mean anything to you, Rand?" She was scared to death of the possible answer, but she had to ask.

For the first time since she'd come into the room, Rand permitted

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himself to touch her. His hands slid around her waist and he pulled her to her feet and into his arms, the contact sudden, hard, and demanding as he molded her curves to his hungry body. His mouth descended on hers, crushing with the intensity of his passion. Robin pressed herself tighter to him, opened her mouth to his, and surrendered to him, heart and soul.

The ringing of the phone interrupted the kiss as it threatened to suffocate them both. Robin gasped when his lips left hers, and she began to haul his T-shirt free of the waistband of his jeans, eager to feel his skin against her palms. She was only dimly aware of his curt replies to whatever was being said, then his attention was fully on her again.

Rand buried his hands in the thick fall of her hair and held her head, forcing her focus to steady as he looked at her.

“Brookman’s called off the mission,” he whispered, then kissed her. “Let me tell the others, then we’re going upstairs for a few days.”

“A few days?” She laughed softly, breathless with excitement.

“Maybe longer,” he said, hands smoothing over her from the contours of her bottom to the generous swell of her breasts. His thumbs lingered over the rigid tips, caressing them to greater sensitivity beneath the thin barrier of her top.

Her eyes closed and her mouth opened, lips parted slightly as she gasped with pleasure. Slender fingers encircled his wrists, and he grinned down at her when she guided his hands back to her waist, then upward again, under the lightweight tank top. Rand hooked his fingers in the shimmering material and quickly pulled it over her head. Silken, warm skin seemed to ripple beneath his caressing hands and her back arched, pressing her closer to his chest.

A discreet knock on the door interrupted the downward trek of Rand’s lips just before he reached the nipple he’d been seeking. He pulled Robin behind him so his big body blocked the view of hers. “Who is it?”

## *HEART OF STONE*

“Jenn.”

“Come in.”

Jennifer poked her head into the office, smile broad and teasing.

“I know you were probably going to tell us at some point, but was that Brookman?”

Rand nodded.

“We’re free to go?” she asked.

“For now.”

“How long are you going to be incommunicado?” she asked.

“A few days,” he answered, his voice a hiss of air between clenched teeth. Robin was caressing the back of his neck and rubbing against him, the motion of her hips almost feline in its grace and eroticism. His eyes flickered closed, then he opened them again, grinned, and shrugged. “Maybe more.”

Jennifer’s laughter was cut off as she closed the door and left them alone.

Rand locked the door, then turned back to the woman he loved.

“Robin...”

His voice trailed off as she unfastened his belt buckle and pulled his jeans open. Her hand slid into the loosened material, and he groaned when her fingers began to trace the hard ridge of his erection. The couch in the small office was going to have to do, he decided, and pushed her toward it as he peeled off his T-shirt and tossed it aside, then stopped long enough to get rid of his jeans and briefs. Robin’s skirt was a wrap around, and he grinned in surprise when he slipped it free and discovered she wore stockings and a garter belt, but nothing else under the length of material.

She straddled his thighs and lowered herself onto him, moaning softly as their bodies merged. Rand’s tongue began caressing her nipples, sucking gently at one then the other. She pushed harder, taking him deeper into her. His head lifted, and he pulled her into another

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searing, lusty kiss as their rhythm grew frantic with need. Before their passion peaked, Rand eased free and rearranged her on the worn sofa. Leather creaked and he lifted her hair and let it spill over the armrest as he stretched over her. He reentered her with a strong thrust that made her cling harder to him, and this time their desire consumed them and pushed them into an abyss of pleasure they hadn't shared in much too long.

\* \* \*

"You planned this, didn't you?" Rand murmured a long while later as he toyed with the lacy elastic of the garter belt. It was the only item of clothing she wore, aside from the silk stockings, and he found it incredibly sexy.

"Maybe," she whispered, kissing his throat, then pulling back just enough to meet his eyes. "Why don't we go up to your apartment?"

"You're insatiable," Rand said with a grin.

"Indulge me," she replied, her smile teasing and faintly wicked.

"We'll have to get dressed," he told her.

"Temporarily."

"Definitely temporary," Rand said, voice a low growl in his throat. He ducked his head and caught a nipple between his teeth, nibbling gently before he started suckling. Robin's soft sigh ruffled his hair and she moved restlessly under him, her body already aching again for him.

"Do you still own my house?" she asked.

His head lifted and he looked at her, the question in his eyes.

"We need time to talk, Rand," she offered in explanation. "Privacy. Correct me if I'm wrong, but Debbie probably has a key to the apartment upstairs, doesn't she?"

"No. Why would she?"

"Well, you two are..."

"Despite what you seem to think, I have never slept with Debbie. There's been no one since the last night I spent with you, Robin." He



## *HEART OF STONE*

watched her for a response.

“Why do you look so surprised?” he asked, when she stared at him but said nothing.

“When you two were together at the funeral, I...I just assumed...” She stopped speaking, absurdly embarrassed.

“Assumed what?” he prodded, smiling. “That I’d be hopping into bed with the first available woman I found?”

“I didn’t say that, Rand,” she retorted quietly. She tried to move away from him, but he wouldn’t allow it. He kept her pinned beneath him, and held her chin to make her meet his gaze.

“Are you trying to avoid talking to me about this?” he asked, his tone teasing.

“That would be a little difficult under the circumstances, wouldn’t you say?”

He bent and caught her mouth with his, turning what was meant to be a light kiss into something sensuous and provocative. His hands drifted over familiar curves, rousing and soothing at the same time. Robin’s limbs seemed to melt under him and she pushed her hips into his as her legs wrapped around his waist.

“I heard you tell Jennifer you were going to be incommunicado for a few days,” she whispered close to his ear when his mouth moved to her neck and his tongue began to stroke persuasively at the hypersensitive hollow near her throat. His muffled murmur of assent made her smile. “Let’s go away for a few days then, Rand. Rent a sailboat, and give ourselves some time alone?”

He pulled back and looked intently at her. “Do you know anything about sailing?”

“No,” she admitted with a slight grin. “But you probably do.”

He nodded, then kissed her forehead.

“You’re not leaving me again, Robin,” he said against her lips as he stared into her eyes.

## *HEART OF STONE*

“Never again, Randall,” she promised solemnly, and sealed the vow with a kiss that told him there was absolutely no trace of doubt in her sincerity. She’d finally found the greatest treasure she’d ever own, Stone’s heart. And for the first time in their long relationship, she trusted her love completely.

## DENYSE M. BRIDGER

Denyse is a native of Atlantic Canada, born in the country's Easternmost province, Newfoundland, and raised in Nova Scotia. A lifelong dreamer, she began writing at an early age and can't recall a time when she wasn't creating in some artistic form.

"My first published story was, oddly enough, a media based tale written for the TV series *Miami Vice*, first published in 1986. Up until that time I had never heard of fanzines and fandom. It's proven to be an immensely valuable training ground for professional writing in that it teaches discipline and attention to detail. There's no tougher critic than a fan who knows their show or movie down to the tiniest nuance, and they're not shy about telling you when you've missed the mark!"

An active interest in the American West has been a lifetime obsession, too. Cowboys have been a love-affair that began at the tender age of three, and eventually expanded to encompass an equally timeless passion for pirates, Greek Gods, and Ancient Egypt. The other side of the Old West intrigue is an affinity for Victorian England, particularly the 1885-1895 part of the century.

The American Civil War has also been a source of avid interest. "How can anyone not be moved by the tragedy that defines that conflict? There are endless stories of courage and honor, and each man and woman who lived through America's greatest turmoil was left scarred in some way. Those who rose above their losses and went on with the stoicism and utter bravery of eternal legends really have to inspire and humble anyone who reads about them."

At this point in her career, Denyse has had published in the vicinity of 400 stories and novellas, in almost any genre you can name. “The only thing I haven’t tried yet is hard-core science fiction, and horror. Since I don’t consider vampires as I write them to be the fodder of horror, I classify those stories as Dark Fantasy.” Many of her vampire stories have appeared in Margaret L. Carter’s anthology, *The Vampire’s Crypt*, and *Night To Dawn*, published and edited by Dawn Callahan. Her poetry has been published internationally.

Denyse has also been the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Fan Quality Award, which is given annually for excellence in fan fictions based on film and television. As of May 2004, there are four awards in her collection, and no less than a dozen nominations to her credit.

What’s next on the agenda? “I hope many more stories for AQP. A home for my ‘labor of love’ Greek fantasy novel. And more time to get all the ideas in my head down onto the written page...”

\* \* \*

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